

CAN SCHOOLS REOPEN? || AMERICA'S BURNING HOUSE

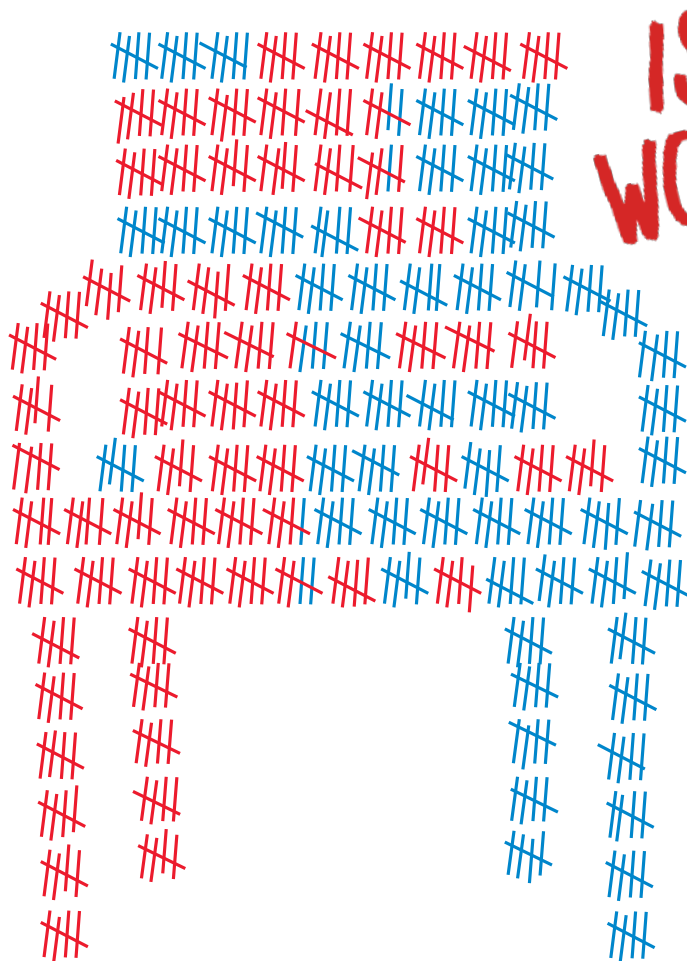
ZOË CARPENTER

MARCIA CHATELAIN

THE Nation.

SEPTEMBER 7/14, 2020

The 7,383-Seat Strategy



IS
WORKING

Democrats lost nearly 1,000 state legislative seats while Obama was in office. Under Trump, they've won back almost half. Can they close the gap this November?

JOAN WALSH

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Letters

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Workers Are Not Inputs

☞ Re “McDonald’s Has a Real Sexual Harassment Problem” by Bryce Covert [August 10/17]: Economic evolution over the past 30 years or so has created a world in which people are considered inputs for production in the same way potatoes are for french fries: They are fungible and easily replaced.

Whether the issue is sexual harassment, racism, or any other form of demeaning behavior, there is little incentive for McDonald’s or its franchisees to change their behavior or policies as long as the power structure is dominated by an employer, with little real power in the hands of workers.

With the economic disruption of the current pandemic, the time for organized labor to expand its shield for workers is now.

ADAM CHARNEY

Starving the Beast

☞ Re “Will the Left Get a Say in the Biden Doctrine?” by David Klion [August 10/17]: The only way that the US military monster will be cut down to size is a total financial collapse that will cut off the revenues necessary to support it. Neither party has any interest in reducing military expenditures. And we are not far from that collapse, like all empires that drown in their own arrogance.

MICHAEL ROBERTSON

Trump’s Disordered Personality

☞ Katha Pollitt [“An Unhappy Family,” August 10/17] continues to

seek a better understanding of Donald Trump, as we all do, but Mary Trump’s book about her uncle evidently falls a bit short. The diagnostic categories cited in her book do not fit nearly as well as narcissistic personality disorder. Theodore Millon’s chapter on it in *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV and Beyond* clarifies much for me about Trump, his chaotic administration, his incompetence with the Covid-19 pandemic, and what we should fear if a serious international conflict erupts. Anyone who reads that chapter will likely be enlightened.

GARY JOHNSON

Taking Back Control

Re “How to Define a Plague” by Sonia Shah [July 27/August 3]: Much of our media coverage, like the germ theory itself, tends to foster an anxious, passive victim mentality. It is good to be reminded of the ways we may take action individually and as a society and how we can lessen the impact of future outbreaks. As Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said, much that is distressing about this outbreak—the inadequacy of our health care system and the income gap, for instance—is not new; it is just showing up more clearly during this emergency.

Some of these things are within our control.

CHRISTIANE MARKS
CHATHAM, N.Y.

☞ Comment drawn from our website

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The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is published 30 times a year (four issues in February; three issues in March, April, June, and November; and two issues in January, May, July, August, September, October, and December) by The Nation Company, LLC © 2020 in the USA by The Nation Company, LLC, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018; (212) 209-5400. Washington Bureau: Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 546-2239. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Subscription orders, changes of address, and all subscription inquiries: *The Nation*, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505; or call 1-800-333-8536. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to Bleuchip International, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement No. 40612608. When ordering a subscription, please allow four to six weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. Back issues, \$6 prepaid (\$8 foreign) from: *The Nation*, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018. If the post office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. *The Nation* is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Nation*, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505. Printed in the USA.

Fight for the Post Office

Donald Trump's attack on the United States Postal Service is by design but not merely his design. Republicans and their corporate allies have been after the post office for years, undermining its ability to function and mocking its more than 600,000 workers in hopes of clearing the way for the

privatization of an agency that has, since the founding of the nation, provided essential infrastructure for American democracy. It is the role that the Postal Service will play in the 2020 elections that has Trump and his allies agitated now, but their targeting of it is nothing new.

What could be new, however, is the opening that Trump has created not just for the defense of the post office at this critical moment but for its expansion to address the challenges of the 21st century. Democrats should seize that opening and make the promise of the post office's renewal central to their fall campaign.

Trump's jarring pattern of saying out loud what others in his partisan cabal have been thinking was on full display August 13, when he revealed why he and so many other Republicans see the Postal Service as an immediate threat. The president trails in the polls, and the Republican hold on the Senate looks shaky. A fairly conducted election with a high turnout could upend their political power. They've sent plenty of signals that they'd prefer to make it hard for voters who are disinclined toward the GOP to cast ballots in fall elections that could be disrupted by Covid-19 outbreaks—and that are likely to see unprecedented levels of voting by mail. Explaining why he objected to emergency funding for the Postal Service, which has been stretched to the limit by the demands of this pandemic moment, he bluntly acknowledged, "They want \$25 billion—billion—for the post office. Now they need that money in order to have the post office work so it can take all of these millions and millions of ballots."

The blowback was so intense that Trump walked his remarks back a few steps that same evening, including suggesting that he might be open to negotiation. But that didn't change Republican antipathy. While Democrats in the House voted in May to get \$25 billion in emergency funding to

the Postal Service, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell continued to block action. And Trump's new postmaster general, Louis DeJoy, was busy slowing down—and physically dismembering—the agency. The crisis came to a head a day after Trump talked about holding up the money. *The Washington Post* revealed that the Postal Service had warned 46 states and the District of Columbia it could not guarantee that all ballots cast by mail for the November elections would arrive in time to be counted. Meanwhile, there were reports from across the country that curbside mail collection boxes and sorting machines in postal facilities were being removed.

House Oversight Committee members demanded that DeJoy, a major GOP donor and fundraiser, explain himself. Speaker Nancy Pelosi called members back from vacation to address the issue, and state attorneys general prepared to take action. These are necessary reactions, but there must also be a big-picture response that addresses the roots of the Postal Service's fiscal problems: a draconian congressional mandate that it fund pensions 75 years into the future and severe restrictions on how it can operate in competitive markets. Democrats have begun to embrace proposals to ease the burden on this enormously popular and vital agency. This fall they should go all in, with robust support for visionary reforms such as postal banking, which would allow post offices to provide basic financial services in underserved communities.

If it is a fight over the future of the Postal Service that Trump and the Republicans want, give it to them. People in rural towns and urban neighborhoods don't just want to vote by mail. They want to vote for a future that will keep the mail moving for generations to come.

JOHN NICHOLS FOR *THE NATION*

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The digital version of this issue is available to all subscribers August 25 at TheNation.com




1/3

Portion of Bangladesh that was underwater after torrential rains hit the country in mid-July

15.5M

People in India and Bangladesh displaced by flooding in August

82.5

Inches of rain that fell on Mumbai from July 10 to August 7

443

Rivers in southern China that have flooded since early June, affecting 37 million people

13M

Acres of Chinese cropland—about the size of West Virginia—that have been flooded this summer

630M

People currently living on land below projected annual flood levels for 2100 in a high emissions scenario

—Meerabelle Jesuthasan

Back to School?

We've squandered our chance to reopen safely.

On the second day of the new school year, a high school sophomore named Hannah Watters snapped a photo of the hallway at her school in the suburbs of Atlanta. Kids in backpacks were standing shoulder to shoulder. Few were wearing masks. “This is not ok,” she tweeted. Within four days, six students and three staff members reported new cases of Covid-19, and classes were moved online for the following Monday and Tuesday. Brian Otott, the superintendent of the county school district, maintained that it wasn’t possible to require mask wearing. Watters, meanwhile, received a five-day suspension—since rescinded—for sharing her photo online.

The story of school reopenings is a study in skewed priorities. For weeks, Donald Trump’s administration and Republican officials like Florida Governor Ron DeSantis have insisted on the necessity of in-classroom learning. But as the summer ticked by, the White House did little to ensure that in-person instruction would be safe; Trump’s leadership on the matter amounted to an all-caps demand issued via tweet in July: “SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!” Instead, his administration fixated on loosening restrictions on businesses, which meant giving up on controlling the coronavirus’s spread. As restaurants and hair salons began to bring back customers, cases in the South and Southwest surged, making school reopenings increasingly dangerous.

Within weeks of the school year beginning, more than 1,000 students and school staffers were quarantined in Georgia’s Cherokee County. So were more than 80 students in Tennessee’s Putnam County and over a dozen at an elementary school in Florida. A junior high in Indiana had to put students in quarantine just hours into the first day of school. In Mississippi, which started to reopen schools the same week the state led the country in per capita Covid deaths, more than 120 students and staffers in the Corinth School District had to be quarantined, as well as more than 100 students in Gulfport. Cases have been confirmed in at least 22 schools across the state.

What’s happening in America’s schools, as Dr. Anthony Fauci put it in late July, is an “experiment.” While the extent to which children and teenagers transmit Covid-19 is not fully known, it is clear that they are not immune to the virus: Cases among children jumped 90 percent between July 9 and August 6, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. And although Trump has argued that other countries have reopened schools with “no problems,” the state of the pandemic is far worse here. Of 13 countries analyzed by the Kaiser Family Foundation—including Germany, South Korea, and Israel—all but two had positivity rates below 4 percent when they resumed classes. In the US the rate was approaching 8 percent as school began to reopen, with some states—including Georgia, Florida,

and Arizona—topping 10 and even 15 percent.

Given these conditions, many teachers and some parents are balking. The American Federation of Teachers gave its 1.7 million members permission to go on “safety strikes” if they believe that their schools’ reopening plans put them in danger, and teachers in Michigan, Arizona, and other states are considering or have moved forward with plans to do so. In response, critics of teachers’ unions have accused teachers of extortion. Others say teachers should willingly put themselves in harm’s way just like nurses, transit employees, and other essential workers. But no worker should be forced to accept needlessly unsafe conditions. The fact that teachers’ unions appear powerful says less about their members than it does about the abysmal state of labor rights in other essential industries.

Teachers are regularly asked to cover gaping holes in America’s social safety net. In addition to education, the public school system provides meals for nearly 30 million kids, counseling and other forms of developmental support, and as we’ve recently been reminded, free child care. Now schools are also being asked to absorb the fallout from the Trump administration’s botched response to the pandemic. “The truth is that schools are not reopening in person because education is valued. Our leaders are turning to education to get people back to work in an economy collapsing by the minute,” one teacher wrote. The kinds of questions that cloud reopening are dizzying, from how best to control crowding in hallways and on buses to what to do about shared bathrooms and lunchrooms to how to properly ventilate buildings. “Do I keep my classroom door open to improve air circulation or close it to protect my students from an active shooter?” another teacher asked.

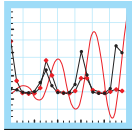
Resolving many of these questions is not impossible, but it’s expensive. Smaller classes mean more teachers, more space, and staggered schedules. Equipping schools with enough hand sanitizer alone will cost the average district \$39,517 a year, according to one analysis. Necessary protective measures for a district with 3,600 students will cost nearly \$1.8 million for the year—no small sum, considering that public schools are often so underfunded that many teachers purchase their own classroom supplies.

Congress allocated \$13.2 billion for K–12 schools in a relief bill passed in April. Now Democrats in Congress have asked for \$430 billion for public education, including \$175 billion for K–12 schools and \$50 billion for child care. Senate Republicans included \$70 billion in funding for K–12 schools in their \$1 trillion relief package released in late July. But the bulk of the money in the GOP proposal is contingent on schools reopening at least partially, which some education experts have described as a punishment for schools that decide they can’t do so safely. (Twenty of the largest 25 school districts are starting the school year with remote learning, according to *Education Week*.) A separate bill from Washington Senator Patty Murray that would provide \$175 billion has yet to be taken up by committee. Meanwhile, Trump, DeSantis, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos

(continued on page 8)

For schools, Covid-19 is a new crisis stacked on top of a very old one.

COMMENT



THE SCORE/BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

A Serious Plan

The Democrats' 2020 presidential primary race was obsessed with taxes. There was the public debate over how to pay for Medicare for All. There was also the insider dispute among experts, no less contentious, over the feasibility and desirability of a wealth tax. Yet, as was often the case during the primaries, these discussions rarely included the person who was leading in the polls for almost the entire race: Joe Biden, whose tax plan is a serious proposal to reduce the power and income of the 1 percent. The former vice president's bold scheme provides a useful reference for where the tax discourse among progressives should go next.

If this plan is fully implemented, it could significantly reduce wealth inequality.

According to the Tax Policy Center, Biden's plan would raise upwards of \$3.7 trillion over 10 years, similar to the amounts that would be raised by a wealth tax. And like the wealth tax supported by Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, the money would come entirely from those at the very top of the income distribution. The plan would do this by increasing the corporate income tax from 21 to 28 percent and the top marginal rate for those making over \$400,000 a year from 37 to 39.6 percent, reversing most of Donald Trump's tax cuts. It would also remove the cap on Social Security payroll taxes for those making above \$400,000, generating revenue for this vital program for low-income retirees.

But the biggest difference from the status quo is that the plan would increase taxes on capital income. Instead of giving a preferential lower rate to those who make their income from owning wealth rather than working, Biden's plan would tax the capital gains and dividend income of those earning more than \$1 million as regular income at the increased 39.6 percent rate. It would also close inheritance loopholes, including one known as step-up in basis, which allows elites to shelter increases in

wealth from taxation at death. Such tax rules drive the intergenerational transfer of wealth among the ultrarich. All told, Biden's tax plan would reduce the after-tax income of the top 1 percent by around 17 percent. The results would be concentrated among the top 0.1 percent, whose after-tax income would fall an estimated 23.4 percent.

For the left, there are three important questions that follow if this becomes the new baseline of the Democratic Party's tax agenda. The first is whether it is necessary to tax wealth directly rather than tax income from wealth. One advantage of Biden's proposal is that it would be easier to execute and would more easily survive a challenge in courts stacked with Trump-appointed judges.

Another is that as income taxes become more aggressive, they start to do the work of a wealth tax. As Greg Leiserson of the Washington Center for Equitable Growth explained to me, the line between wealth

and income from wealth blurs if that income is vigorously taxed. If Biden's plan is fully implemented, it could significantly reduce wealth inequality. On the other hand, if executed poorly or with weak enforcement, it would make the case for a wealth tax better than any proponent could.

There is also the question of whether we should be focused on taxing people broadly or concentrating taxation on those at the very top. Biden's plan forgoes the first option and aims its taxes at the very rich. For the time being, there is significant revenue to be raised with this approach, which would deliver more than enough to pay for free public college, universal day care, and a child allowance and to liberate many other aspects of our lives from the market.

Given low interest rates and a severe recession, there's no pressure on the left to make the case for broad-based taxation. To the extent that taxing the rich comes up in the context of austerity or a bipartisan bargain to balance the budget, it should be rejected. Interest rates have been low for decades, and with pressing political issues to address, the main focus should be on how to spend. The prospect of raising taxes on the rich, however,

should remain. Taxes don't just raise revenues; they also structure the income distribution. And raising taxes on the rich would help stop the economy from simply channeling income to executives and owners. Taxes are about determining who benefits from the economy, and for too long, that has been only the rich. A sharp increase in taxes, as the Biden campaign has proposed, would push back significantly against that. **Mike Konczal**

Biden's Plan to Tax the 1%

The proposal would raise \$4 trillion over 10 years.



Where most of that revenue would come from:

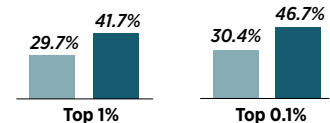
\$1.3 trillion by increasing the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28%.

\$962 billion by lifting the Social Security cap.

\$448 billion by taxing capital gains as ordinary income for millionaires.

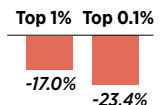
It would raise income taxes on the ultrarich ...

Average federal tax rate now and under Biden's plan:



... which would lower their net income.

Percentage change in after-tax income under Biden's plan:



Sources: Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center
Infographic by Tracy Matsue Loeffelholz

IN OUR ORBIT

Never Forget

Before George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, before Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, there was Emmett Till. Put on a Mississippi-bound train by his mother, Mamie Till, 65 years ago to visit relatives, the 14-year-old Chicago-born Emmett Till was beaten and murdered on August 28, 1955, for the crime of being young and Black, his mutilated body dumped into the Tallahatchie River. Mamie Till's defiant insistence on justice for her son—her refusal to accept the all-white Tallahatchie County jury's acquittal of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, the two men who dragged Till from his uncle's house—helped spark the 20th century's racial justice revolution. "Emmett Till was my George Floyd," said John Lewis, the late congressman whose legislative legacy includes the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, which allows for investigations of unsolved murders from the civil rights era.

To commemorate the anniversary of his lynching, the BBC World Service is rebroadcasting longtime *Nation* contributing editor Maria Margaronis's radio documentary "The Ballads of Emmett Till." As it recounts, Till's death was both a call to political action and the inspiration for songs, poetry, and prose. Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and many more have been drawn to tell the tale of this young Black life. With passage of the Emmett Till Antilynching Act still blocked in the Senate, the program couldn't be more timely.

—D.D. Guttenplan



Elie Mystal



DOJ v. Affirmative Action

How Yale became the latest victim of the department's plot to kill affirmative action.

The Department of Justice has not filed a single case to defend the Voting Rights Act during the Trump era. Other Republican administrations have mounted at least token defenses of the law, but Donald Trump's DOJ has not found even one instance of voter discrimination or suppression that it is willing to bring to federal court. And it has all but stopped conducting investigations into biased policing and greatly reduced the number of investigations into hate crimes and disability rights cases.

What has the civil rights division at the Justice Department been doing all this time? What has commanded the attention of federal law enforcement in charge of policing racial discrimination? Apparently, it has been preoccupied with white kids who can't get into Yale. The Department of Justice recently accused the university of civil rights violations over the school's use of affirmative action in college admissions. According to the DOJ, a two-year investigation revealed that Yale systemically discriminated against white and Asian American applicants to the university.

If this accusation sounds familiar, it should. The DOJ's claims against Yale are near carbon copies of allegations leveled by Students for Fair Admissions, a group led by the anti-affirmative-action activist Edward Blum against Harvard. SFFA's lawsuit against Harvard also used Asian American students—who almost certainly are discriminated against—as a front for a legal action designed primarily to make it easier for mediocre white students to get into elite universities.

SFFA lost its lawsuit in front of US District Judge Allison D. Burroughs last fall. She ruled that Harvard's admissions policy was squarely in line with constitutional principles, as established in *Grutter v. Bollinger*. That case, decided by the Supreme Court in 2003, requires affirmative action programs to be "narrowly tailored" in order to achieve the "compelling interest" of promoting diversity on college campuses. Burroughs ruled that Harvard's use of race as one factor among many was in keeping with Supreme Court precedent. The case is now pending appeal.

The Department of Justice offers no compelling evidence for how Yale's admissions program differs from Harvard's—or why it should fail the

same legal test Harvard passed less than a year ago. Eric S. Dreiband, the assistant attorney general for civil rights, said, "Unlawfully dividing Americans into racial and ethnic blocs fosters stereotypes, bitterness and division," which is a statement devoid of any relevant information about Yale's facially legal admissions priorities.

In its letter to the school, the Justice Department ordered Yale "not to use race or national origin in its upcoming 2020-2021 undergraduate admissions cycle." It's an amazing commandment when you think about all the other things Yale is still allowed to consider, according to the DOJ.

Yale can consider if an applicant is a legacy, a prince, or a celebrity. It can consider an applicant's gender or sexual orientation. It can consider whether an applicant can paint, sing, or dunk. But Yale is being ordered to put its head in the sand and ignore whether an applicant has faced systemic racism. Yale can look at whether an applicant is from Manhattan, N.Y., or Manhattan, Kan., but it must ignore if the applicant's ancestors are from San Juan, P.R., or Lagos, Nigeria.

The argument against affirmative action is never really about merit or fairness or any of the buzzwords conservatives use to mask their racism. It's always about promoting the chances of white kids over everybody else.

The Justice Department gave Yale until August 27 to voluntarily comply with its directive. Yale already indicated it will not comply. Despite the lack of a valid legal argument, the Justice Department is likely to sue the school.

Of course, offering valid legal arguments is not ever the point when it comes to the Justice Department under Trump and Attorney General Bill Barr (or former AG Jeff Sessions, for that matter). They're not trying to make a case; they're simply trying to get a case in front of a Trump-appointed judge or an appellate court stacked with Trump judges. And if they lose in



Yale is being ordered to put its head in the sand and ignore whether an applicant has faced systemic racism.



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the lower courts, well, there's always the Supreme Court.

I believe there have been enough votes on the Supreme Court to end affirmative action in college admissions since alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh ascended to that bench. I also believe that Justice Clarence Thomas, who dissented in part in *Bollinger* and has contempt of affirmative action because he thinks it made white people not take him seriously, will be able to keep himself alive on pure hatred until he is allowed to write the opinion ending its use. All Barr is trying to do is rush this case onto a court's docket before Trump is (hopefully) kicked out of office in January. If it gets onto a court's docket, it will likely be assigned a lawyer by the court even if Joe Biden wins in November and his Justice Department withdraws the complaint. At that point, Barr will have opened up another opportunity for some conservative judge to issue a sweeping ruling that would end affirmative action, throwing various university programs

into disarray, and wait for the conservative-controlled Supreme Court to sort out the mess.

No matter who wins, Asian American students will lose. Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority group in the country and have been for most of this century, but their representation at elite universities has not kept pace. It's not because Black kids are taking up spots. It's because many of the other factors that universities consider serve to disadvantage Asian American applicants. Geographic diversity favors white kids, school recommendation letters favor white kids, and most important, legacy status favors white kids. To use just one popular example, more than a third of those admitted to the Harvard Class of 2022 were legacies.

Trump's Department of Justice isn't trying to end affirmative action; it's trying to keep Black children out of elite colleges and universities. It has no problem with affirmative action for middling white students. ■

(continued from page 4)

have threatened to withhold funding from schools that don't reopen.

None of this is to dismiss the horrors of remote learning, which widens existing economic and racial chasms and is burdensome in the best of circumstances. While wealth-

ier parents are hiring tutors for at-home learning pods or microschoools, other families are struggling just to get online. Nearly 17 million children did not have high-speed Internet at home in 2018, and more than 7 million didn't have a computer in their household. Many of the families most bur-

dened by online instruction are also among those most at risk from the virus.

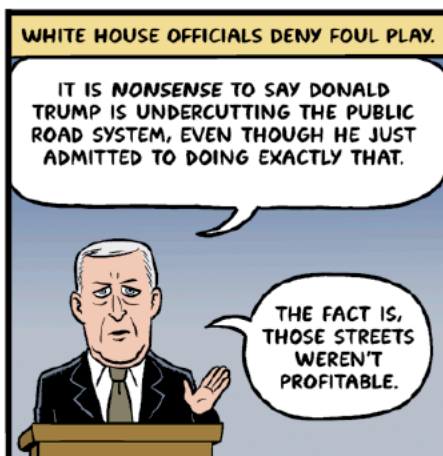
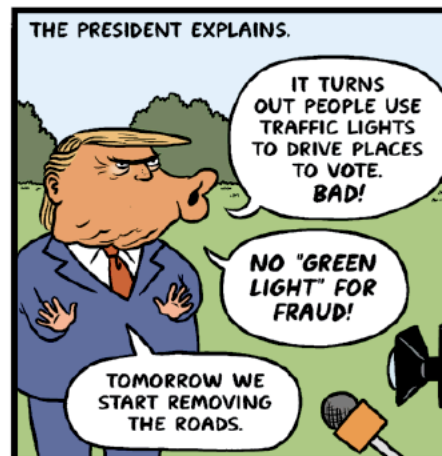
The chaos of early reopenings suggests that the most urgent question may not be how to safely resume in-person instruction for everyone but rather how to get families the services and support normally provided by schools. In the vacuum of national leadership, many districts are making their own plans. Some schools in Massachusetts and California are offering in-classroom instruction only to targeted groups of students for whom remote learning might be particularly challenging, such as young children, those with special needs, kids from low-income families, and those who are learning English as a second language. Indianapolis is opening learning hubs specifically for homeless students. Many cities and nonprofits like the YMCA are trying to fill the child care gap, offering students space for remote schoolwork. These efforts to reimagine instruction are not sufficient, but they could be expanded with an infusion of federal funds.

For schools, Covid-19 is a new crisis stacked on top of a very old one. Funding for public education has dropped precipitously since the Great Recession: In 2015 more than half of states were spending less per student than they did in 2008. Many of the equity issues that Trump and DeVos cite in their push to reopen schools are longstanding, exacerbated by funding schemes that tie school resources to the local tax base and by segregation. Both are political choices; neither will be resolved simply by reopening schools this fall. Other choices loom on the horizon as the virus decimates state revenues. The pandemic may have reminded Americans of how much they need schools and teachers. It's also made it clear that the country is a long way from making them a priority.

ZOE CARPENTER

COMIX NATION

JEN SORENSEN



Words Matter

“Shortly after I came from Europe to the US, a close friend gifted me a subscription to *The Nation*. I’ve been a faithful reader and, when I was able to, supporter of the magazine. We need *The Nation* now more than ever; its voice needs to be heard. I like to think I’ll help keep it up for the future. It still reminds me of my old friend.”

—Claudia Sole, Calif.



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TRUMP

Dirty Tricks

To retain power, Donald Trump is going to resort to every dirty trick.

Hence his campaign's efforts to help Kanye West get on the ballot in swing states, in the hopes that he will siphon votes from Joe Biden. Jared Kushner reportedly talks frequently with the rapper to discuss strategy.

Hence the ratcheting up of rhetoric against voting by mail. Trump has threatened to withhold federal funds from states that make it easier to vote by mail, and he admitted that he refused to sign off on desperately needed funding to shore up the US Postal Service because he knew it would inhibit voting by mail. He has even alleged that pets are being sent ballots in a nefarious animal-Democrat alliance to rob him of power.

Hence Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump Jr.'s recycling of Russian-troll-generated misinformation about alleged Bible-burning episodes among Portland, Ore., protesters.

Hence Donald Trump Sr.'s racist appeals to "suburban housewives," who he believes can be scared into supporting him if he tells them often enough that Biden wants poor Black people to move into their neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, the United States had its 20th consecutive week with more than 1 million Americans filing unemployment claims. Trump has no anti-poverty strategy and no desire to force the GOP-led Senate to negotiate with House Democrats to forge a relief package. What he does have, in abundance, is animus.

—Sasha Abramsky



Katha Pollitt



Canceling Margaret Sanger

Whatever the motive, the main winners here are abortion opponents.

I admit I took it a bit personally when Planned Parenthood of Greater New York took the name of the organization's founder, Margaret Sanger, off its flagship clinic in Manhattan in July. It will now be called Manhattan Health Center. What am I supposed to do now with the two Planned Parenthood Maggie Awards I've won for articles on reproductive rights? Life comes at you fast. Some news reports made it sound as if the change was related to internal struggles over racism; staffers of color have complained that they were disrespected and passed over for promotion, and around the time that Sanger's name was removed, Laura McQuade, the CEO of the New York affiliate, was fired amid accusations of racism. These were legitimate concerns. Of the 22 members of the PPGNY board, according to *The New York Times*, only one is Black. (Two are Asian, and two are Hispanic.) Especially given that Black women make up a large proportion of Planned Parenthood patients, that's pretty shocking.

Whether erasing Sanger was an olive branch to Black staffers or part of a deeper self-investigation, there's no question that the main winners here are abortion opponents. For decades, they've claimed that Sanger was a racist bent on Black genocide and that Planned Parenthood is carrying out that mission today. In 2016, Planned Parenthood released a historically accurate, fair, and complex statement refuting that absurd claim, but why would anyone pay attention to that now?

Never mind that the anti-choice movement has never done a thing for Black people and, like Sanger's old enemy the Catholic hierarchy, is closely allied with racist institutions like the Republican Party and white evangelical Protestantism. The bogus anti-racism of the self-described pro-life movement was on full display in 2011, when billboards appeared picturing an adorable Black child with the caption "The most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb." In other words: The biggest danger to Black people is pregnant Black women. It is truly painful that this canard about Sanger has now been given a stamp of approval by the very organization she founded.

For the record, Margaret Sanger was not a racist, as PPGNY board chairman Karen Seltzer asserts. As her biographer Ellen Chesler told me, she

was a progressive who believed in racial integration. She voted for Norman Thomas. She worked with progressive Black people—W.E.B. DuBois, for example, who along with Mary McCleod Bethune and Adam Clayton Powell Sr. served on the board of the Negro Project, a network of birth control and maternal health clinics Sanger established in Harlem and the South. In 1966, Martin Luther King accepted Planned Parenthood's first Margaret Sanger Award, and in his statement offered a vigorous endorsement of voluntary birth control.

Although she did not single out Black people, Sanger was, yes, a eugenicist. She thought people, especially poor people, often had too many kids to care for properly and that too many of those kids were born physically disabled (or in the language of the day, "feeble-minded"). She did not oppose forced sterilization.

In these views, she had a lot of company. Many intellectuals in the early 20th century—left, right, and center—went even further. That is, they traced social ills like crime and poverty to there

being too many of the wrong sort of people, a calamity that modern society, through science and social control, could prevent. Because of the Nazis, we think of eugenics as based on racism and pseudo-scientific notions of breeding a racial genetic elite, but it was more about ableism, based on the belief that poverty, crime, prostitution, and promiscuity were the result of inferior genes.

Avowed socialists like H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and even Helen Keller were eugenicists. So were liberal reformers like Havelock Ellis and John Maynard Keynes and traditionalists like Winston Churchill. Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, the architects of the Swedish welfare state (she was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, too), supported measures to help mothers and children, but they also enthusiastically supported sterilization of the "unfit." *Buck v. Bell*, the infamous Supreme Court decision that validated forced sterilization, was written by one liberal hero,



It's very painful that this canard about Sanger has now been given the stamp of approval by the very organization she founded.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, and approved by another, Louis Brandeis. As Chesler tartly observed, Sanger's name is more closely associated with this case than the men who decided it. Nobody is demanding that Brandeis University change its name.

But who knows? Maybe that will happen. At least for now, we seem uninterested in context or history or in weighing the bad with the good. The current wave of name changes and erasures and pulling down of statues doesn't leave much room for nuance, and maybe that's inevitable in this astonishing transformative moment. Still, it's one thing to get rid of Confederate monuments or for Yale to change the name of its Calhoun College. Confederates were traitors. Calhoun was a terrible person who did nothing but harm. It's another thing to read an entire heroic life through the lens of one fault. There won't be many heroes left if we do that.

I'll just come right out and say it: Margaret Sanger did more good for American women than any other individual in the entire 20th century. She is the person who connected birth control not just to women's health—something the Catholic Church has yet to grasp, although it controls one in seven US hospital beds—but also to our self-determination and sexual freedom. She was the key leader who really grasped the fact that without the ability to control our own bodies, women would never be free or equal or even just happy and well. She was more than a writer, an activist, a health provider, and an organizer, though she was all those things. She was a whirlwind of energy who changed our understanding of womanhood, sex, and marriage so fundamentally, we can barely picture what life was like before her. There are so many ways of forgetting where we have been. Planned Parenthood has just made doing so a little easier. ■

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Confederate
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SNAPSHOT /
ANITA POUCHARD SERRA

A Helping Hand

Yoli delivers supplies to people in lockdown in Villa 1-11-14, one of the most populous slums in Buenos Aires. Government aid has been slow to materialize, so community organizations are leading the fight to keep residents safe.

Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet

BIRTHERISM 2.0

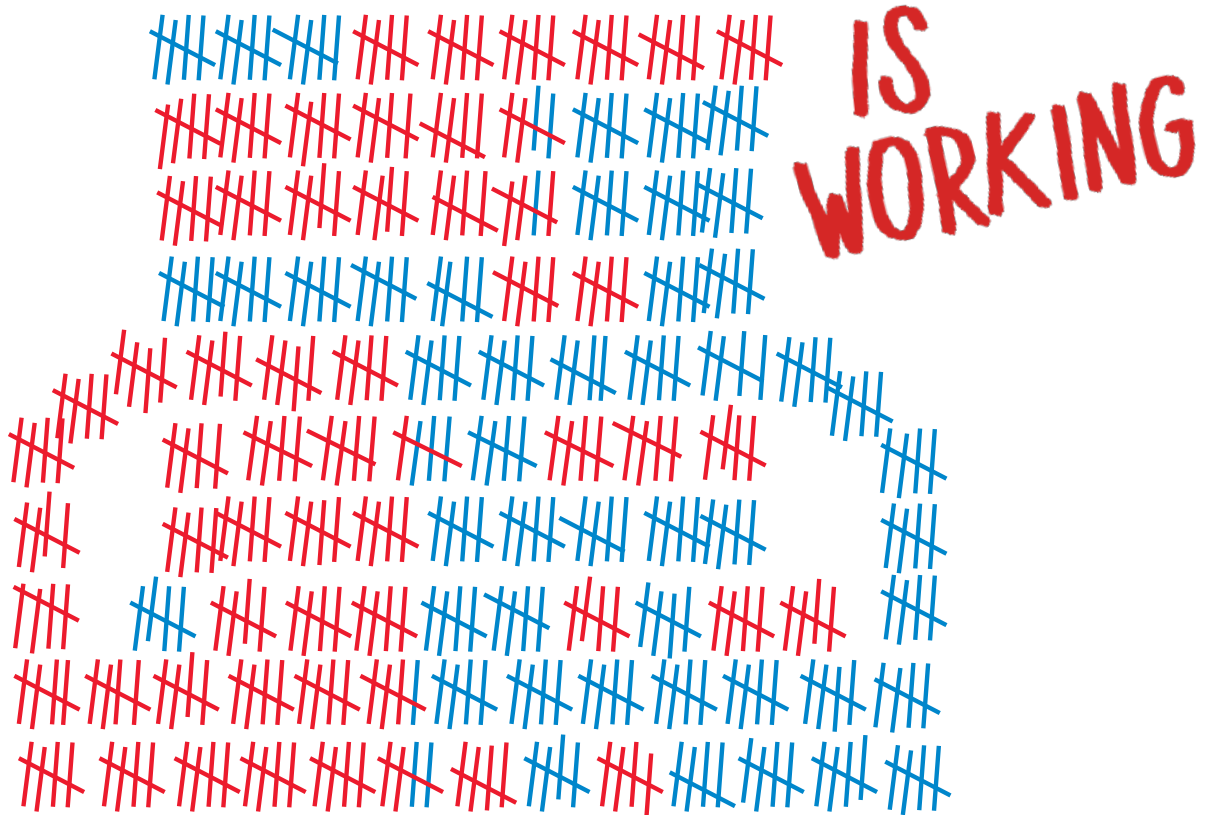
Trump spreads doubt about Kamala Harris's citizenship. —news reports

No citizen, though Oakland-born,
Hints Donald and his claque—
Just like Obama, culpable
Of being born while black.



The Nation.

The 7,383-Seat Strategy



Democrats lost nearly 1,000 state legislative seats while Obama was in office. Under Trump, they've won back almost half. Can they close the gap this November?

JOAN WALSH

FOR AT LEAST FOUR DECADES, GOING BACK TO THE DEVASTATING RISE OF RONALD REAGAN, PROGRESSIVES HAVE HEARD THE SAME REFRAIN every presidential campaign year: This is the most important election of our lives. In 2020, though, it's true. Really.

Not just because it's a chance to oust Donald Trump and undo the damage from 2016, says voting rights champion Stacey Abrams, who ran for Georgia governor in 2018. "2020 is also a redo and a redemption of the 2010 election," she says fervently.

2010 was the year, Abrams explains, that Republicans, stunned by Barack Obama's election in 2008, began their comeback. They didn't ignore federal races, by any means, but they began pouring money and energy into flipping state legislative chambers, which had been dominated by Democrats for decades. They were astonishingly successful, not only in 2010 but throughout Obama's two terms, eight sorry years in which Democrats lost 942 legislative seats. In 2009, Democrats controlled 27 state legislative assemblies and Republicans 14, with eight divided. (Nebraska's unicameral legislature is nonpartisan.) By 2017, Republicans controlled 32 and Democrats 14, with three divided.

In those years, Democrats' fortunes eroded at other levels: The party lost the US House in 2010, the Senate in 2014, and stunningly, Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016 with an Electoral College win, though she captured the popular vote. Abrams and other Democrats connect many of those losses to the states Republicans won in 2010, where they gained control over redistricting. In many states they gerrymandered state and congressional districts to disadvantage Democrats and passed voting rights restrictions. Those moves made it harder for Democrats to win state and congressional races and, ultimately, the White House. Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, three states that Clinton lost by a combined 77,000 votes and thus the Electoral College, saw Republicans gain state power and pass voting rights restrictions between 2010 and 2016.

The good news: In 2017 the resistance to Trump ran through state legislative races as Democrats won back 14 state seats in special elections, plus an astonishing 15 in Virginia that November (11 of them going to women, including five women of color). Learning the lessons of Virginia, a broad roster of national groups, some of them institutional and some the so-called resistance pop-ups—from a renewed Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (DLCC) to Indivisible, from Emily's List to Flippable, from former attorney general Eric Holder's well-funded National Democratic Redistricting Committee to scrappy Sister District—put admirable muscle into statehouse races in 2018. The result: They turned 380 seats from red to blue that November, flipping chambers in six states.

In Colorado, New York, and Maine, Democrats took over Senate chambers. In Minnesota they grabbed the House, and in New Hampshire they turned both. They made huge strides elsewhere in eroding GOP power, switching 16 seats in North Carolina's House and Senate, ending GOP supermajorities (which gave the legislature power to override the Democratic governor's vetoes); 14 in Texas; and 19 in Pennsylvania.

In 2019, Virginia Democrats finished their job, taking the House and the Senate. With a Democratic governor, the state returned to full Democratic control for the first time in over two decades. Counting those Virginia victories, Democrats have won back over 450 seats and 10 state chambers in the Trump era.

Now those groups and some new ones are trying to change more chambers to blue, especially in states where the legislature controls redistricting. But they need to learn the lessons of why state Democrats slumped after 2008, failing to rise to the GOP challenge, and surged after 2016.

Chief among them: You can't win if you don't play. Democrats in many states had long failed even to field challengers to many Republican incumbents. That's changed hugely since 2016. In this cycle, the DLCC has spent \$6.2 million to recruit candidates. Democrats also

This year, "Democrats aren't playing defense to hold any chamber they control, and they've fielded more candidates than Republicans have."

—Carolyn Fiddler,
Daily Kos

On the ground:

Volunteers with Sister District, one of several new groups focused on winning statehouses, canvassing in Virginia in 2019.

need a diverse slate of challengers, especially to turn out the people least likely to vote but most likely to be Democrats: so-called low-propensity voters, mainly people of color and younger people (who obviously overlap). Then Democrats need to target those voters, as well as run on issues and urgency that match the moment.

State-level Democrats are doing fairly well on all three fronts. Covid-19 and the national uprising against police violence "have really made people understand the power of state legislators and governors," says Catherine Vaughan, a cofounder of Flippable (now merged with Swing Left), formed in 2016 to focus on state races. Activists are also inspired by the sheer number of candidates running—including many women of color—who lost narrowly in 2018 and are running again.

"What's great is that Democrats aren't playing defense to hold any chamber they control, and they've fielded more state candidates than Republicans have," says *Daily Kos* communications director Carolyn Fiddler, a veteran of state legislative politics. "So far, this looks like it could be the inverse of 2010." On the other hand, the Covid pandemic has turned campaigning upside down, making field organizing all but impossible and fundraising tougher, too. "We're all just figuring it out together," says Amanda Litman, a cofounder of Run for Something, which recruits young Democrats to compete for state and local offices. "Anyone who tells



you they know what will happen in the states this year is full of shit.”

THE DIVERSE ROSTER OF GROUPS WORKING IN THIS space is spread across the country, but most share several top-priority states, where there’s a good chance to flip a chamber or where the legislature plays a role in redistricting decisions. Thus the four states that are seeing the most investment are North Carolina, where there’s a chance to shift the House and Senate; Arizona, where both chambers are likewise in play; and Texas and Michigan, whose Houses may be up for grabs. Fights are also underway to turn the Minnesota Senate, the Iowa and Ohio Houses, and both Pennsylvania chambers. Wisconsin and Georgia are getting attention, too.

And with a late, unexpected surge of first-time candidates, Florida has emerged as a fascinating laboratory for building Democratic infrastructure on the ground. Republicans hold a trifecta in state power—hapless Governor Ron DeSantis as well as both legislative houses—and they have botched the pandemic response beyond belief. Groups like Sister District, Forward Majority, and the DLCC are starting to spend money there to at least build a working Democratic Party in red areas, if not flip a chamber. “Running up the margins” in blue districts and preventing Republicans from doing so in red districts “can help Joe Biden win the state,” says Fergie Reid Jr. of 90 for 90, a group formed to honor his father, Fergie Reid Sr., who was elected in 1967 as Virginia’s first Black state legislator since Reconstruction, on his 90th birthday. (He’s now 95 and going strong.) It is one of the groups behind Virginia’s turnaround, by registering voters and recruiting Democratic challengers. Now it has helped inspire the late surge of Florida Democratic candidates.

For a lot of groups, North Carolina is the big prize. “This is a microcosm of Trumpism. It all started in North Carolina,” says Christine Bachman of Our States Matter, who is widely credited with focusing national activism on

Virginia in 2017 and is mainly working with the Tarheel State this year. In 2010 wealthy right-wing North Carolina businessman Art Pope helped bankroll an assault on state Democrats, working with Republican strategist Karl Rove and the notorious GOP Redistricting Majority Project, along with Charles and David Koch. The team won Republican control of both chambers of the state’s General Assembly for the first time since 1870. “North Carolina was the original red state laboratory, where they created all their extremist legislation and then spread it everywhere,” Bachman laments.

Jessica Post, who now heads the DLCC, was a junior staffer with the organization in 2010. She saw what went down in North Carolina and elsewhere around the country that November. “In 2010 the [Democrats’] focus was on maintaining control of Congress. The feeling was that top-of-the-ticket turnout would trickle down,” she says. The opposite happened. “Karl Rove did this in plain sight.” Indeed, in March 2010 he announced in *The Wall Street Journal*, “Republican strategists are focused on 107 seats in 16 states. Winning these seats would give them control of drawing district lines for nearly 190 congressional seats.” Post says, “We lost 21 chambers across the country that night. I remember crying on the sidewalk, saying I never want to feel this way again.”

But North Carolina’s Democratic Party leaders turned the tables in 2018, and Post and others say the state party has continued its rise this cycle, again recruiting candidates to run in every district, plus doubling fundraising since 2018, which was a good year. And several candidates who lost that year are stepping up to run again.

Educator Aimy Steele of Cabarrus County, just northeast of Charlotte, is one of them. An African American former principal who is married to a local pastor, she was driven to run in 2018 after the state legislature tried to lower class sizes from kindergarten to third grade not by increasing funding but by increasing class sizes in higher grades. She made a determined but underfunded challenge that year and came within 2,000 votes of winning. “I was devastated the night I lost, but the next day I said, ‘I’m not finished,’” she recalls.

She learned a lot from that first race—including that experts tend to want candidates to focus on people who vote routinely, even to try persuading wobbly Republicans, but to ignore low-propensity voters, who tend to be people of color. Steele defied them, targeting those voters and turning out thousands of them.

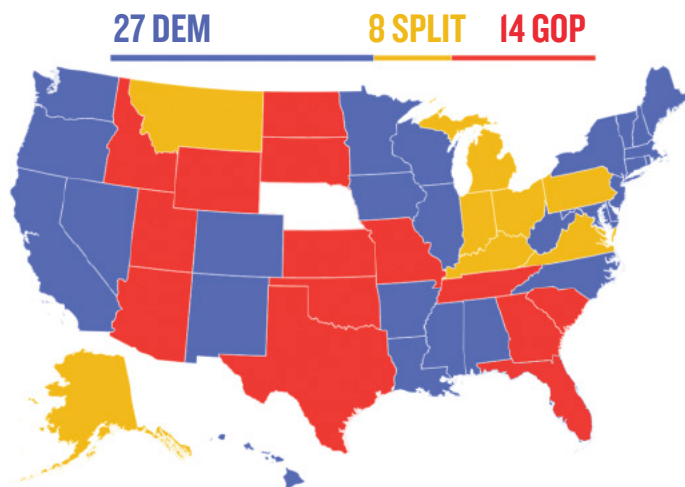
This time around, she has 12 new precincts, thanks to new and fairer North Carolina maps, which give her district more voters of color. That’s also more voters to introduce herself to, but she says, “I was principal of two schools in those precincts. People know me.” Being an educator is key to her appeal during a pandemic in

The Covid-19 pandemic and the up-rising against police violence “have really made people understand the power of state legislators.”

—Catherine Vaughan, Flipable

New leaders:
A Sister District captain summit in Oakland, Calif., in 2018.





Control of State Legislatures, 2009

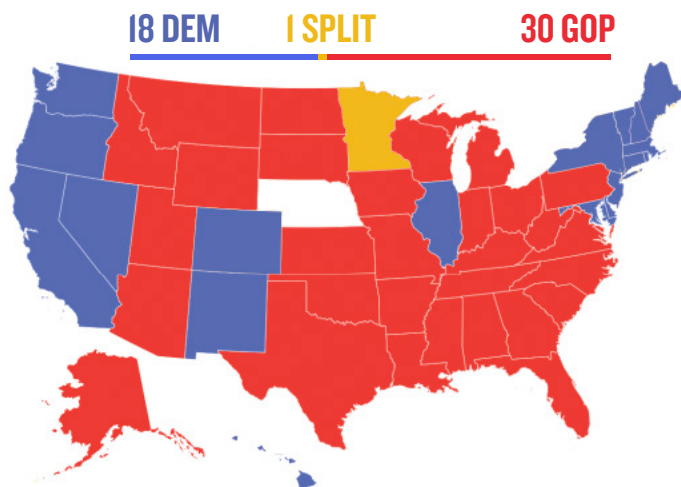
which elected officials, teachers, and parents are uncertain and sometimes divided over opening schools. Steele understands the tension.

“As if teachers already didn’t have an enormous amount of responsibilities that they’re not compensated for. Now they need to be qualified to take temperatures, to ensure that kids are safely socially distancing themselves and also provide avenues to make sure all the kids who stay home are learning, in addition to the kids who are at school,” she says. Parents are worried, too. But she has found constituents turning to her in the crisis—parents asking for help finding tutors, teachers asking questions about their safety. She has a spreadsheet matching teachers who want work, often extra work, with parents losing patience with their unexpected home-schooling adventures. She makes these family-teacher connections almost every day.

Run for Something’s Litman sees a version of that all over the country. “Candidates are acting as advocates for voters during [the pandemic]. They’re doing wellness checks. They’re connecting,” she says.

The other thing Steele learned was the importance of advocating for herself and raising money. Even in 2018, when the North Carolina House Democratic caucus was comparatively aggressive about challenging Republicans, her district was written off as hopeless, yet she got 47 percent of the vote. She says, “As soon as I decided to run again, I connected with the caucus, and I let them know, ‘Listen, I take this very seriously. If you’re willing to make an investment in me, I’m willing to run hard and run strong.’ And they said, ‘It looks like the race is going to be better this cycle. So we will go ahead.’”

Bachman is optimistic. “What we know as the resistance today started out as Rev. [William] Barber II and Moral Mondays in North Carolina in 2011,” she says. “That was the blueprint.” After the state’s GOP leadership began passing a barrage of right-wing legislation, including strict new voter ID measures, Barber and other religious and progressive leaders began weekly protests in Raleigh and partnered on voter registration drives. The activism culminated in Barber’s nationwide Poor People’s Campaign this year.



Control of State Legislatures, 2019

This time around, Steele is unapologetic about targeting Black voters in a district that’s 23 percent African American. “I told my team, we need to talk to all Black voters in the district. Because they need the person who is running for a position of power, who could possibly represent them, to look like them,” she says. Talk of low-propensity voters frustrates her. “I could be one of those voters. I could fall into the low-propensity category, had someone not convinced me of how important voting was.”

On this score, Steele says, the pandemic hampers her a little. (A lot of other second-time candidates of color say the same thing.) “Door knocking is my superpower!” she says. Bachman notes that “the resistance was really built on human contact—field organizing, reaching voters in person, knocking on doors—which makes this cycle all the more challenging, given that Covid has stripped our candidates of those tools.” (Canvassing with volunteers also costs less than paid media campaign features.) “It’s just very sad,” Steele admits. “Last time, people told me, ‘Nobody ever knocks on our door.’ I’d say, ‘Hey, I will!’ We just had so much fun on the doors. It’s cramping my style.”

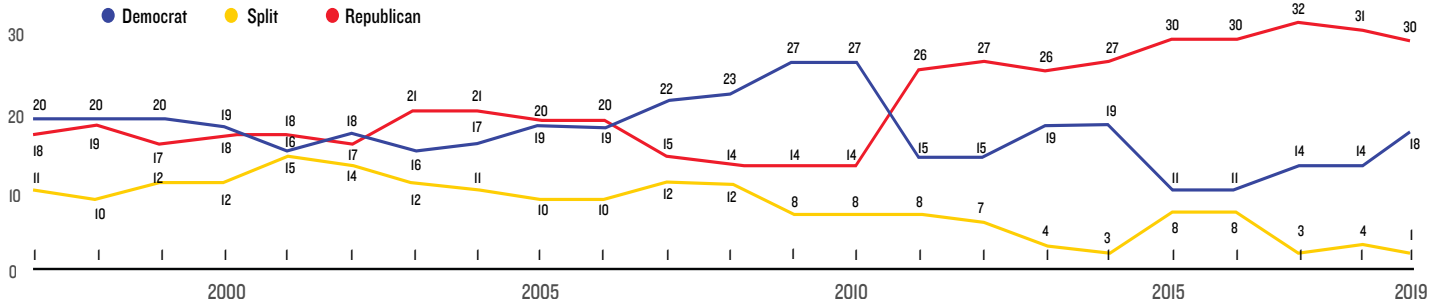
On the other hand, unlike many other states with Republican-controlled legislatures, North Carolina has a Democratic governor, Roy Cooper, who gets high marks for his handling of the pandemic. He is also on the ballot in November, which should boost Steele. “Our governor is favored highly with his handling of the coronavirus, so knowing I’m in his party, that’s a help.” So much so that her opponent, Kristin Baker, has boasted about working with Cooper while downplaying the “R” next to her name.

“I told my team, we need to talk to all Black voters in the district. Because they need the person who could possibly represent them to look like them.”

—Aimy Steele, candidate, North Carolina legislature

THAT’S NOT THE CASE IN TEXAS, WHERE GOVERNOR Greg Abbott is increasingly reviled for his pandemic management—which is partly why Democrats are increasingly optimistic about their chances to win the nine seats they need to turn the state House. There are nine House districts held by Republicans that were won in 2018 by Senate candidate Beto O’Rourke, whose run is widely credited with reviving the state’s withered Democratic infrastructure. He lost to Senator Ted Cruz narrowly, but Democrats picked

Control of State Legislatures, 1997–2019



up an astonishing 12 seats in the House that year.

Run by a bumbling GOP trifecta in the age of coronavirus, ruby red Texas is unpredictable this year. Biden even leads Trump in a few polls there. “Governor Abbott has taken all the ownership of Covid and has refused to believe science,” says second-time Texas House candidate Joanna Cattanaach. “We have refrigerator trucks outside hospitals in Dallas County now.”

The net approval rating for Abbott’s response to Covid has slipped 21 points since June, when 56 percent of Texans approved and only 36 percent disapproved; he is now underwater, with 47 percent approval, 48 percent disapproval. “He’s really made himself the face of the pandemic,” Cattanaach says, sounding bewildered. Not only did Abbott open businesses too soon, the public health data shows, but he also discouraged face masks and social distancing and even blocked localities from imposing stricter requirements.

Like Steele, Cattanaach, a journalist turned community college instructor, thinks being an educator particularly helps in this race. “Abbott put together a task force on reopening the schools with no teachers on it,” she notes. She says people are asking “if there will be grief counselors when we open up the schools, because people will die. I’m hearing about teachers rushing to make wills.”

Also like Steele, Cattanaach was given no chance of winning her race two years ago, but she came even closer, within 220 votes. This time around, she’s getting more local and even national support. She’s backed by Sister District, the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, and major labor unions. She says, “My message is, ‘Trust me to take care of your kids. Let me clean up this mess in Austin.’ And that’s resonating.”

Like so many women who have run for office in the Trump era, Cattanaach, who is Latina, says she returned from the first Women’s March “and just felt like I’d yelled and screamed but I had to do more.” In 2017 she saw that the Texas House was considering a “religious liberty” bill that, among other things, would let state-funded foster care and adoption agencies, largely controlled by Christian charities, discriminate on religious grounds—potentially locking out non-Christians, people in interfaith marriages, or LGBTQ parents. A former foster child, she pitched local writers, “Do you want to get the perspective of a foster care child on this one?” It was a winning angle and helped launch her campaign. (A version of the bill eventually passed.) If

“The line used to be that I’m too liberal for this district. Not anymore.”

—Joanna Cattanaach, second-time Texas legislature candidate



Kathy Lewis: She is running for the Florida legislature for a second time.



Amy Steele: She wants to be part of a blue wave in the North Carolina legislature.

elected, she would be the first former foster care child in the Texas legislature.

This year, some hope that a presidential election, which always gets more voters to the polls, could help boost Texas turnout—but maybe not at the state legislative level. “We have to avoid down-ballot drop-off,” Cattanaach says. That’s always a challenge in state legislative races, even in the hyperenergized Trump era. “In 2018 our candidates underperformed Democrats in the same congressional district by about 4 points,” Forward Majority cofounder Vicky Hausman warns. “It’s a real problem.”

“This is where having an obnoxiously unique name could help me,” Cattanaach jokes. Like Steele, she believes her race will come down to mobilizing those less likely to vote, not persuading those on the fence. “We’re encouraged by the digital market and reaching young people that way. I’m seen as a progressive new voice. The line used to be that I’m too liberal for this district. Not anymore.”

KATHY LEWIS, WHO’S RUNNING A SECOND TIME FOR Florida’s Senate District 20, encompassing the Tampa–St. Petersburg area anchored by Hillsborough County, didn’t hear she was too liberal for the district in 2018. Mostly she didn’t hear anything, especially from Democratic Party leaders.

Like Steele and Cattanaach, Lewis, who is African American, was driven to run in 2018 by experience. The mother of an adult child who is autistic, she jumped through the hoops of Florida’s health care system to get her child approved for services, only to wait four months without getting any help. After a long struggle with multiple bureaucracies, she wangled the care she needed for her daughter—and decided to run for the state Senate against entrenched GOP incumbent Tom Lee.

“Everyone,” including many state Democratic leaders, “said we were crazy,” she recalls. “No one would vote for us. But the party had somehow miscalculated how much this district was changing.” She garnered an unexpected 46.5 percent of the vote, winning 52 percent in populous Hillsborough County. In 2020, Lee resigned, and suddenly the party had an open seat to contest. According to several reports, Democratic leaders approached at least two others to run, even though Lewis filed almost immediately after Lee’s announcement. “They said later they didn’t know I was on the ballot,” she says, sounding unconvinced.

If Democrats recruited two alternative potential can-

didates for Lee's seat, they neglected a whole lot of other districts. That's where 90 for 90 came in. After the group's Virginia successes, it moved on to other states, helping recruit candidates where party leaders seemed unable or uninterested. In Florida the Reids reached out to Janelle Christensen, the energetic head of the state Democrats' environmental caucus. "They explained the advantages of running in every district, and I said, 'Hey, I'm convinced,'" she says. "It's not necessarily that they're going to win, although they could, but they can cut the margins in red districts for Biden and educate people on our issues." She says she could fill maybe 10 challengers' seats with folks close to her caucus. "But when I got started talking to them, they talked to their friends, and we recruited 36." 90 for 90 also worked to help with the unlikely candidates' state election filing fees, which are \$1,800 each.

Other national groups, including the DLCC, have since jumped into Florida. "The conventional wisdom is there's no path to winning the Florida House. We have a contrarian view," says Hausman. As in Texas, there are districts that appear flippable, especially the 13 GOP-held seats that were won by either Clinton in 2016 or by gubernatorial candidate Andrew Gillum in 2018.

Still, many people feel the state party is under-supportive of its new insurgents. Inexplicably, challengers have had trouble getting access to VAN, a privately owned list of local voters, with names, addresses, and phone numbers, who have voted or might vote Democratic. "It felt like the party was constantly trying to reinterpret the rules for who qualifies [to get VAN]," Christensen says. "But even once you get it, most of the numbers are bad. Nobody's even been trying in these districts, in some cases for decades. They're useless for anyone coming in trying to organize. If all we did in these races is build a list of interested Democrats in VAN, that's something."

Sister District cofounder Gaby Goldstein, whose group is also working in Florida, says that's a common problem in red states, many of which it has targeted since its founding in 2016. "In some places, we have to lay the basic groundwork because VAN is garbage. Many Democratic voter lists are garbage," she says. I have heard this a lot in red states and districts over the last four years. There have always been stalwart Democratic activists in the reddest places, but a lot of state parties have let the infrastructure "wither away," Goldstein says.

Lewis eventually got access to VAN. There are gaps in its data, but this time around, she's more confident anyway. "You know what? With the coronavirus, we have local people who don't have health care. They can't access unemployment insurance. They know Florida is a mess," she says. She adds that after hearing her story in 2018 about fighting with the state to get services for her daughter and hearing it again in 2020, people tell her, "Kathy, I didn't understand last time, but now I see exactly what you were saying."

Unfortunately, local party leaders still don't seem to understand. Lewis benefited from a widely seen Zoom call in July led by Hillsborough County Democratic leader Ione Townsend with local Black leaders. When

one asked about the party's lack of support for Lewis her second time around, Townsend replied, "It's not high on our list because of where the polling was. What we do is, we prioritize based on our overall goals. White, Black, brown—it doesn't matter who that candidate is, it's where they fall on our election priority list."

Angela Birdsong, a Hillsborough Democratic activist who ran for county commissioner in 2018, responded, "I just think any Black woman in the race right now stands a chance and should be given a little more money than you might think they need. I just feel that you should give them more money!"

Lewis, like other women of color running for office this year, believes the widespread American revulsion over George Floyd's murder and the movement to end police violence buoy her campaign. For one thing, it has gotten people focused on the role of state and local leaders in reforming police departments. Here's where electing Democrats can matter—if not always enough. Colorado, which elected a Democratic trifecta over the past few cycles, did away with qualified immunity for police officers in June; New York, which completed a trifecta in 2018, enacted other criminal justice reforms. "We now have a Black Senate leader, Andrea Stewart-Cousins, and a Black Assembly speaker, Carl Heastie," the DLCC's Post says of New York. "That's truly made a difference."

Lewis talks about another benefit. "I have had at least five white strangers call me out of the blue when George Floyd died," she says. "They somehow found my website and said they were looking to support an African American woman running for office."

"I'm always raising alarms that this field isn't well resourced. The vast majority of donors are focused on federal races."

—Vicky Hausman,
Forward Majority

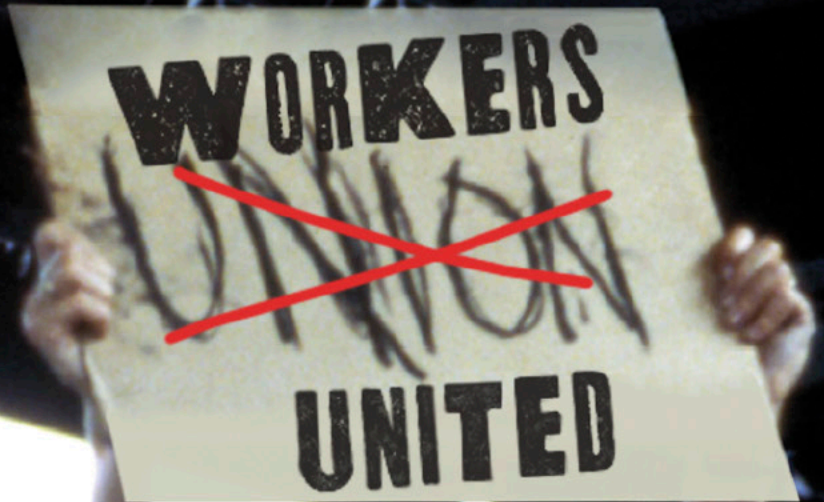
Not done yet: In 2018 it was widely assumed that Joanna Cattanaach had no chance of winning a seat in the Texas House. She came within 220 votes and is running again this year.

BUT NOT ALL VOTERS AND, SADLY, NOT ALL DEMOCRATIC leaders feel the same way. The surge of Black women running for office since Trump was elected is unmistakable. In North Carolina four Black women are running in statewide races, which Democrats believe will buoy Black turnout statewide. All over the country, an unprecedented number of women, many of them women of color, are stepping up. But some people worry these women and other state-level Democrats are not getting the support they need.

(continued on page 26)



THERE IS POWER WITHOUT A UNION



Target workers
are taking
on bosses
themselves. Is
this the future
of radical
organizing?

P.E. MOSKOWITZ



CHRISTIANSBURG, VA., RESEMBLES MANY OTHER TOWNS IN THE UNITED States. There's a small city center surrounded by strip malls, and the vast sprawl is where most economic activity occurs. Given that these corporate landscapes now dominate the country, maybe it's appropriate that this is where a radical labor movement is taking shape.

In the basement bedroom of his parents' small brick house along a hilly Christiansburg back road, Adam Ryan, a 31-year-old part-time sales associate at Target, has amassed a tool kit for revolution: a megaphone, research reports and fliers, and hundreds of books—biographies of Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx, histories of Jim Crow and capitalism, and guides about organizing workers and the benefits and limits of unions.

This room has become an unlikely organizing center. Ryan wants to help build a workers' movement that does not rely on unions or nonprofits to educate or organize and instead trains the workers to do it themselves. The problem, according to him and others doing similar work, is that the big traditional unions have had their missions whittled down. They no longer fight to have workers at the levers of power, preferring to bargain for better conditions at specific companies. That has alienated radicals like Ryan. They don't want just a better contract. They want a worker-controlled future.

Ryan is guided by the belief that nearly everything good for workers will not be accomplished by paid organizers, nonprofits, or lobbying groups but will have to come from low-paid workers.

The result is Target Workers Unite, a group that Ryan created in 2018 and has had involvement from Target employees across 44 states. There are currently about 500 TWU members, and that number is rapidly growing through the Covid-19 crisis as workers struggle to pay their bills and deal with managers who have underplayed the disease's threat and with a corporation that has, like many of its ilk, refused to give employees comprehensive paid sick leave.

"Folks are becoming more agitated," Ryan told me. "I think that leaves us with a good basis to organize our coworkers. I'm hoping that's the good thing that can come out of all this, that we come out of this more organized and unified as workers—as essential workers."

TWU was birthed partly out of his frustration with the organizing that the unions were doing with retail workers. Before moving back to Christiansburg, Ryan was living in Richmond, Va., and held a string of restaurant and retail jobs. At each, he tried to organize workers, but he said the unions didn't lend enough support.

With the Industrial Workers of the World, Ryan said, he felt they were just telling him, "Let's run everybody through the organizer training and then tell everybody to just go organize their workplaces," without much continued support.

And he said it seemed the big groups, like the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), had too much of a top-down approach: They come in, help you get set up, help negotiate your contracts, then leave. For Ryan, there wasn't enough of an emphasis on politicizing workers. Many unions, he said, want to smooth over the worker-boss relationship. He wants the opposite; he wants to agitate it.

As the protests in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd spread, Ryan tried to talk to his fellow Target employees about how issues of labor, racism, and

policing are related. Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, where Target has its corporate headquarters and where the company has formed a close relationship with the police. But many of Ryan's coworkers have pushed back on his attempts to show the links. He said some of his colleagues are so accustomed to labor organizing being siloed from issues of race that he has found it hard to convince them that the fight for higher wages and the fight against the racist American justice system can be one and the same.

"We need to be pointing out how these things are connected," Ryan said. "[The mainstream] unions ignore all those connections."

It's not that he is anti-union. He's not against joining one in the future, but he said trade unions have lost their way. Gone is the anti-capitalist rhetoric of the early and mid-1900s, during which unions supported workers seizing factories. Now unions represent the police Ryan would like to organize against.

FOR THE PAST 100 YEARS, US LABOR LAW HAS LEFT many workers out of unions altogether. Contractors, who now make up 20 percent of the American labor force, typically can't join. That has led to a long history of workers finding different paths to organizing. The number of worker centers—where laborers can learn about their rights, meet one another, and obtain legal services—ballooned in the 1990s and early 2000s. There are also dozens of alliances that aren't unions but fight for workers' rights in similar ways. The National Domestic Workers Alliance has won wage increases and helped enact legal protections for domestic laborers. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has organized tomato farm laborers into a hunger strike, eventually winning wage increases across the industry.

For now, TWU is a little more anarchic. There's no nonprofit status, no outside donors, just rank-and-file Target workers organizing themselves, largely through the Internet.

Ryan concluded this was the best tack after trying and failing to unionize workplaces in Richmond. In 2017, just as Donald Trump was taking office, Ryan moved in with his parents, Republicans with a love for Fox News and the Christian Broadcasting Network. He set up his basement as a communist haven and got to work.

He applied for a job at the local Target. He needed the money, but he also saw it as an opportunity to salt—



"Folks are becoming more agitated. I think that leaves us with a good basis to organize our coworkers."

—Adam Ryan, founder, Target Workers Unite

Targeted: On May 1, Target Workers Unite organized a sick-out to protest the lack of safety measures and better protective equipment during the Covid-19 pandemic.



become an employee with the goal of organizing the workplace. He works about 20 to 25 hours a week and makes around \$12,000 a year.

Ryan drives the few miles from his parents' home to the suburban strip where Target is the centerpiece of a shopping center that's reminiscent of thousands of others. This one also has a Home Depot, Petco, and Chick-fil-A.

Shortly after getting the job, Ryan began agitating. His colleagues had complained about a manager who sexually harassed his employees. Ryan and a few other workers gathered testimonials and planned a ministrike. Ryan stood outside the store with a small group of supporters. Local unions arrived to show solidarity, and the media covered the demonstration. A few weeks later, he got news that the manager no longer worked at the store. It became a blueprint for organizing against Target: Magnify the gap between what the company preaches and how it acts.

"They're so focused on their public image, and the amount of attention we're able to get on it was enough to force them to concede to our demand," Ryan said.

For that reason, he said, he isn't too worried about retaliation. In fact, the more public he is, the better; privately complaining about a store isn't considered protected concerted activity by the National Labor Relations Board, but organizing out in the open is.

THE STATS ON LABOR ORGANIZING ARE GRIM. JUST over 10 percent of the country's workforce is in a union—a 50 percent decrease since the '80s. In retail, only 5 percent of workers are organized. The reasons should be familiar to most *Nation* readers: union busting, right-to-work laws, and labor unions hobbled financially to the point that they cannot effectively organize outside their remaining strongholds.

The legal structure of unionization in the US also shares much of the blame. There are so many loopholes in worker protection laws that it's relatively easy for employers to get away with firing people for organizing. During the Covid-19 pandemic, employers like Amazon have cited vague employee policy violations to get away with what is clearly union busting.

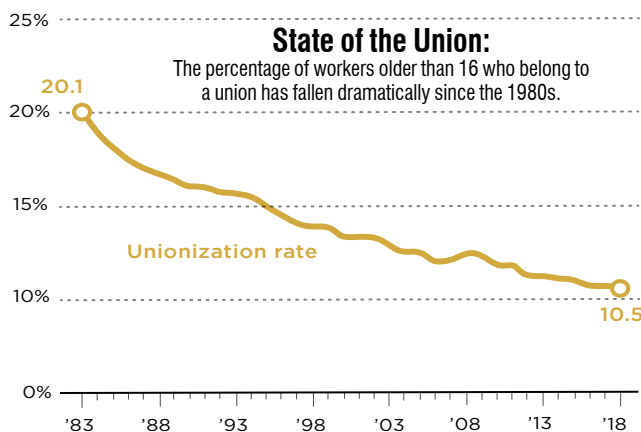
Kate Andrias, a law professor at the University of Michigan, told me that for several decades the Supreme Court and the National Labor Relations Board under Trump have consistently interpreted laws in favor of corporations. "I don't think it's the case that it's impossible for workers to engage in successful concerted action in a hostile legal regime," she said. "But it certainly doesn't help that the laws frequently fail to effectively protect collective action."

But to Ryan and others, there's another problem: Many Americans simply do not want to join unions. Recent labor campaigns have failed by large margins. In 2018 the UFCW attempted to organize a Target on Long Island in New York. Nearly four out of five employees voted against it. Last year employees at a Volkswagen plant in Tennessee rejected unionization for the second time. Organization United for Respect at Walmart, a unionization campaign funded in part by the UFCW, also couldn't draw enough support to make a dent in the company's million-strong workforce.



"There's a whole generation or two of mistrust or suspicion... that these unions will not be able to do anything for them."

—Dan Graff, Notre Dame



"There's a whole generation or two of mistrust or suspicion or at least resignation that these unions will not be able to do anything for them," said Dan Graff, the director of the Higgins Labor Program at the University of Notre Dame. "It's kind of a vicious cycle. The labor movement gets smaller. Unions then look less able to do anything. And it's hard to escape that."

Most people in the labor movement are loath to criticize unions. But a big part of Ryan's pitch to workers is that skeptical workers are right: Unions haven't been doing enough. Decades ago, most of them abandoned radical acts and strikes in favor of contract negotiations. He points to a UPS contract negotiation in 2018, during which workers voted against the contract but the union ratified it anyway.

"They don't organize workers to develop their capacity to be leaders," he said. "It's up to the paid staff and the internationals to determine all that for them. We're not a formal union, and we're not really seeking that at this point.... We got the right to organize. We got the right to strike. What more do we need to do what we want to do?"

At the same time, corporations have gotten better at persuading their employees to remain nonunionized, and Target is among the best. Instead of firing organizers—as Amazon appears to be doing—the company has become expert at doing just enough to placate workers. When the Fight for \$15 campaign to raise the minimum hourly wage was gaining traction a few years ago, Target was one of the first big corporations to announce a gradual increase in pay, garnering praise from many outside the company. But then to offset the higher rate, Target began cutting hours and health benefits, which received much less attention than the increase. Ryan and other Target employees see this strategy on a micro level, too. If employees complain about anything, Target encourages them to work out the issues through management or call the employee hot line. (Target did not respond to requests for an interview.)

"Many workers get taken in by this," at Target and other companies, said Gordon Lafer, a professor at the University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center. "They're scared to be activists, because they're scared to lose their jobs, so they hold off on collective action while giving the boss a chance. This can go on for a long time and suck the momentum out of collective action."

But many labor experts think this is changing. Over the past few years, dozens of worker groups have gone on strike without the backing of unions—teachers in West Virginia, gig laborers for Uber and Lyft, graduate students at the University of California at Santa Cruz. And Americans are increasingly sympathetic to labor. After bottoming out in 2009, support for unions has risen. Last year nearly two-thirds of Americans surveyed by Gallup said they had a favorable view of unions—one of the highest levels of approval in 50 years. Simply put, workers are fed up and taking action.

Sharon Keel is one of those workers. She has worked at Targets in three states for a total of 13 years and currently works in Christiansburg with Ryan. When she started, she found she had little to complain about but little to be enthusiastic about.

Her hours were OK, and she had health insurance. Management never applauded her work, but she could make ends meet. Then Target cut her hours, making her ineligible for health insurance. She hadn't gone to a doctor for five years, until March of this year, when she turned 65 and Medicare kicked in. Then something seemingly insignificant made Keel reconsider her relationship with the company. A few years ago, as she marked a decade with the company, she heard that it gave employees a \$50 Target gift card for 10 years of employment. It didn't give one to her because her years had been officially reset to zero because of a short employment gap between stores.

Things have gotten worse since then. This year Keel's father died, and she couldn't afford to attend his funeral in Alabama. Target used to give employees paid time off for funerals and a sympathy card. It does neither now, she said. The gift card, the sympathy card—they're small gestures, but they convinced her that the company she'd worked so hard for did not care about her. "You're just a number," she said.

She began attending TWU meetings. She told me she now tries to persuade her fellow employees to join, too.

"I grew up [in Detroit] seeing the AFL-CIO, and I just thought that was the best thing ever," she said. She idolized Norma Rae, the union agitator played by Sally Field in the eponymous 1979 film. "Because, I mean, that was how I felt, that that would be me."

Ryan bought Keel a poster of the movie. It hangs on a wall in her trailer on the outskirts of town.

FEAR IS A MOTIVATOR. THE FEAR OF RETALIATION hasn't lessened, but the fear of everything else has grown—and that's an opportunity for organizers. Ryan and countless others have seized the opening provided by the coronavirus crisis to galvanize workers. He answers questions and posts information for Target workers on TWU's private Facebook page nearly every day. There, workers have detailed how Target hasn't provided adequate protective equipment, how customers appear not to care about how close they get to employees, and how staffers dread going into work each day. They don't have much of a choice. Target won't pay for time off for employees unless they provide a doctor's note that says they were required to be quarantined or they get a positive coronavirus test result, forcing workers to choose between missing pay if they exhibit any symptoms and getting others sick.

"It's stressful," one worker said. "If I get sick, I can't go home." Another said he felt a constant low-grade panic working there during the pandemic. "We can be sick. Some could die. But we all need to eat and pay bills."

Each week, Ryan has been leading video meetings, teaching Target workers their basic labor rights and encouraging them to organize in public and with TWU.

Workers from other companies are also beginning to organize with TWU, including at Shipt, a business that



Art for change:

A drawing by a TWU member advertising a sick-out for hazard pay and improved personal protective equipment.

delivers goods from Target and elsewhere that, like the rest of the gig economy, relies on independent contractors. Willy Solis, a Shipt delivery person, said organizing gig workers is hard because they are by design dispersed and much of what they say to one another can be surveilled by the company. Nonetheless, thousands of Shipt workers have reached out to Solis wanting to organize since the Covid-19 crisis started.

Despite the rapid growth of TWU, it's still tiny—a few hundred members in a corporation that employs 368,000 people. But Ryan draws inspiration from the largely successful wildcat teachers' strikes in 2018, not only because they were started by workers without the blessing of their union and snowballed into a national movement but also because he sees them as a necessary escalation. When I spoke with him in March, he predicted that more militant actions were not far off. Sure enough, two months later, the country erupted over a series of police killings.

"The pandemic is the straw that broke the camel's back," he said.

Andrias said this new wave of labor action is likely to continue. "I think we're in a moment of crisis where workers are organizing despite all the obstacles," she said.

Little legacy of labor organizing exists in America's corporate sprawl. But taking what he has—books and research, online organizing, and most important, the increasing anger of the working class—Ryan believes he can help create something lasting, an ever-growing group of self-trained organizers devoted to building labor power.

From his basement bedroom, Ryan thought back to what helped get him into organizing: Occupy Wall Street. That, he said, reminded Americans that class still existed and that the working class needed to fight. Since then, he's seen Black Lives Matter, the Bernie Sanders campaign, wildcat strikes across the country, and the ongoing uprisings against law enforcement. In Ryan's eyes, it's only a matter of time before all of these movements coalesce into something larger, perhaps a general strike, something TWU wants to be ready to help organize.

"Workers are organizing and resisting, but it's still very underdeveloped, and it's still very weak, and especially in places like where I'm at...we're having to rebuild all that from scratch," Ryan said. "But there's definitely a moment, and there's definitely going to be something that shifts beyond it. It isn't just going to stay like this forever. I don't think we're going back to an old normal. That's done." ■

"I think we're in a moment of crisis where workers are organizing despite all the obstacles."

—Kate Andrias, University of Michigan

P.E. Moskowitz is the author of The Case Against Free Speech: The First Amendment, Fascism, and the Future of Dissent and How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Future of the Neighborhood.

THE COLOR OF CONTAGION

The pandemic has intensified racial disparities. We have to address them without reinforcing them.

PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS

State of emergency: Intensive care beds at a temporary hospital in New York City's Central Park.

AS OF THE FIRST WEEK OF AUGUST, THERE HAVE BEEN AT LEAST 160,000 DEATHS IN THE UNITED STATES from Covid-19. There is data indicating race and ethnicity for approximately 90 percent of these deaths; in age-adjusted numbers analyzed by the American Public Media Research Lab, the widest disparities afflicted Black, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Latinx populations. Black mortality rates range from more than twice to almost four times as high as for white people. Among Indigenous people, the rates are as much as three and a half times as high and are two times as high for Latinx people. The death rate for predominantly Black counties is six times that of predominantly white ones.

It is telling that all racial groups marked as minorities in the United States, including Asians and Pacific Islanders, are more likely than whites to die from Covid. And the true picture may be much worse. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention weights its calculations in ways that omit areas that have few to zero deaths—which, coincidentally, happen to be largely white. According to an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, this weighted counting “understates COVID-19 mortality among Black, Latinx, and Asian individuals and overstates the burden among White individuals.”

On the basis of these statistics, a federal committee advising the CDC is reportedly considering who should be put at the head of the line upon the release of a vaccine. There is relatively little disagreement that “vital medical and national security officials” (as they were described in a recent *New York Times* article) would be first, as well as others considered essential workers—however unclearly that’s defined. (Teachers? Poll workers? Grocery store clerks? Housekeepers? Mortuary staffers? Bus drivers?)

More contentious is whether especially vulnerable populations should be fast-tracked—and in particular whether those identified as Black or Latinx should be prioritized. The controversy centers on the use of race and ethnicity as proxies for all the prejudices and vexed social conditions that render raced bodies as more susceptible to begin with. One may wonder, in other words, why minorities’ disproportionately lower survival rates couldn’t be more accurately attributed to homelessness or dense housing or lack of health insurance or inadequate food supplies or environmental toxins or the ratio of acute care facilities to numbers of residents in the ghettoized locations that have become such petri dishes of contagion.

This is not to suggest that the discrimination suffered by Black and Latinx people is simply about class. In a nation shadowed by eugenic intuitions, race is its own risk. American prejudices about color and race are rooted in powerful long-term traditions of anti-miscegenation and untouchability. The propinquity of dark bodies—sometimes merely eye contact—incites anxiety and a fear of social contamination that operates a bit like the bestowing of “cooties” among children. Even to doctors, color can be an unacknowledged source of revulsion if they have grown up in all-white environments; it can operate affectively and aversively, like stigmatizing witchery. One can understand why racially prioritized

Patricia J. Williams is the university professor of law and philosophy and the director of law, technology, and ethics at Northeastern University.

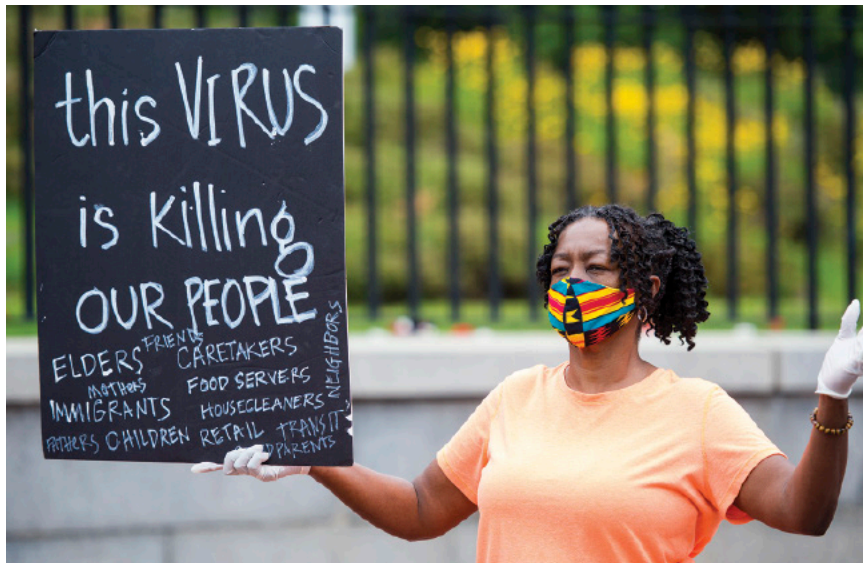
vaccinations may be attractive to some as an attempted reversal of that acculturated sorcery and its death-enhancing consequence.

THERE ARE SURELY NO EASY ANSWERS TO MANAGING scarce resources when dealing with a disease whose tragic boundlessness is still revealing itself. Regardless, I am convinced it will not end well to build public health architectures that use race or ethnicity to signify innate vulnerability—or, for that matter, invulnerability. There is already global panic about which of us will live or die. One might anticipate vaccine eligibility by race turning into an unseemly competition over blood. How, precisely, would race or ethnicity even be determined? By how you look? Who you grew up with? Your name? Your neighborhood? Would the whole thing end up being an economic boondoggle for sketchy DNA testing companies?

There are so many absurd assumptions about embodied racial difference abroad in our land. “They” can’t swim because their bodies don’t float. “They” can jump higher, thanks to an extra muscle in their legs. The imagined Black body has a smaller brain, a bigger butt, a longer penis, saltier blood, wider feet, thicker skin, extra genes for aggression. Nor is this just ancient history. To this day, the spirometer, a machine to assess breathing

There are so many absurd assumptions about embodied racial difference abroad in our land.

The vulnerable and the dead: Protester Alice Gaskins joins a memorial procession for essential workers who have suffered or died from Covid-19.



function in asthma treatment, uses different scorings for black and white patients, based on a more than 200-year-old assumption that slaves had a biologically unique lung volume.

Even now, American medical students are taught that Black people have greater muscle mass than whites. This is a fiction that dates to the days of slavery, yet it informs how kidney disease is treated today, for creatinine levels are used to measure kidney function, and greater muscularity can increase the release of creatinine in blood. But rather than assess individual patients' muscle mass, most hospitals rely on an algorithm that automatically lowers Black patients' scores below the level measured—thus delaying treatment in some instances by making all Black people appear healthier than they might be.

A test developed and endorsed by the American Heart Association weighs race in determining the risk of heart failure. The algorithm automatically assigns three extra points to any “nonblack” patient; the higher the score, the greater the likelihood of being referred to a cardiology unit. Yet there is no rationale for making race a lesser risk factor for heart disease in some people, and the AHA provides none. Needless to say, Black and Latinx patients with the same symptoms as their white counterparts end up being referred for specialized care much less often.

Many dangerously unscientific beliefs about racial difference are baked into present-day pharmaceutical titrations and point-based algorithmic calculations, altering the diagnosis of everything from the incidence of skin cancer to diabetes to the likelihood of developing osteoporosis to tolerance for pain. Underserved, too many Black patients go unnoticed till they're at death's door with “sudden” or “aggressive” versions of common diseases. With endless irony, that is when those neglected bodies may become the exception that proves the rule of “genetic difference.” Medical historians like Harriet Washington, Dorothy Roberts, Lundy Braun, Troy Duster, and Evelyn Hammonds have been complaining about such stereotypes and biases for decades, but perhaps it has taken the convergence of Black Lives Matter, a global health crisis, and a diverse new generation of outspoken medical professionals for this topic to finally be taken seriously.

I raise these stereotypes in order to consider the medical consequences of such epistemic foolishness, particularly at a moment when Covid-19's disparate toll on Black and brown bodies has directed attention to underlying conditions. Careful observers will point out

Black and Latinx patients with the same symptoms as their white counterparts end up being referred for specialized cardiology care much less often.

Scientific racism:

An illustration from an 1830 book based on a lecture on facial angles by the Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper. In the 18th century, medical science was distorted for the purposes of racial classification.

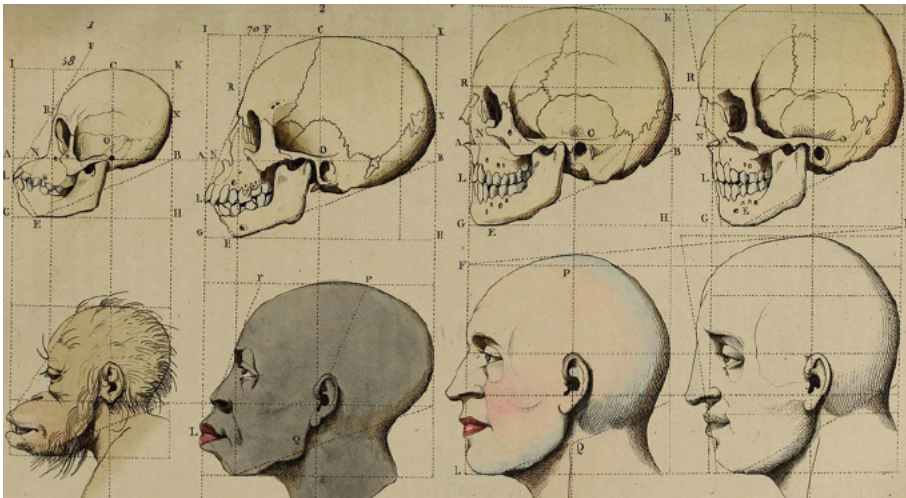
that underlying conditions are not the same as innate predisposition: There is no known human immunity to this coronavirus. Our universal susceptibility to it is underscored by the virus being labeled “novel.” But it bears repeating that underlying conditions like stress, age, diabetes, asthma, crowded living conditions, and having a risky job are factors directly accounting for greater rates of infection. This much is not a mystery.

Attention to the fate of people of color, in particular, is both overdue and double-edged: It highlights inequities but also risks reinforcing them as somehow innate. If the US rates of infection are wildly off the charts compared with other nations', we do not generally blame it on the innate or underlying conditions of a peculiarly American biology; we know these numbers are the product of poor policy decisions. Just so, disproportionate deaths in communities of color must not be attributed to an imagined separateness of Black or Latinx biology. Yet that is the risk when, as just one example, half of white American medical students believe in medical myths about race.

Amid a welter of misguided fantasies, we forget at our peril that the traumas and social factors disproportionately affecting people of color are also driving death rates among whites, even if not to the same degree. Trap white people in crowded, poisoned contexts devoid of public assistance, and they die too.

THE PROPOSAL TO USE RACE OR ETHNICITY AS A MARKER of vulnerability to Covid-19 does one kind of work in the context of vaccine prioritization. But how it might intersect with the procedures that govern triage in hospital settings is not yet known. Recognizing the risks of bias in such emergency circumstances, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights issued a bulletin on March 28 restating a federal commitment to protecting “the equal dignity of every human life from ruthless utilitarianism.” Under the Americans With Disabilities Act and the Affordable Care Act, people “should not be denied medical care on the basis of stereotypes, assessments of quality of life, or judgments about a person's relative ‘worth’ based on the presence or absence of disabilities or age.”

Discrimination against those with loosely defined disabilities is quite common. The University of Washington Medical Center, for example, has argued for “weighing the survival of young otherwise healthy patients more heavily than that of older, chronically debilitated patients.” The reconfigured overlay of race as a debilitating, resource-consuming morbidity risk worsens the situation. Disability rights advocates have been working hard to push these concerns to the front burner, urging Congress to ban triage based on “anticipated or demonstrated resource-intensity needs, the relative survival probabilities of patients deemed likely to benefit from medical treatment, and assessments of pre- or post-treatment quality of life.” On July 22, the advocacy organization Disability Rights Texas filed a complaint with the



Department of Health and Human Services against the North Central Texas Trauma Regional Advisory Council for its use of a rigid, point-based, algorithmic scoring system that can automatically exclude from intensive care people with a range of pre-existing conditions and disabilities without resort to an individual assessment. Other states have begun to reexamine their crisis rules in response to such concerns.

Perceptions of disease and deviance and feelings of disgust have always enabled the timeworn constructions of embodied difference to be carried forward. When Donald Trump speaks of “the China virus,” he not only gives the disease a race and a place; true to his outsize colonial imagination, he gives it distance. It’s over there, not here, well removed from the conceptual possibility of our susceptibility. If we are afflicted, it is not just the illness that debilitates us but our anger that we have been invaded by “them.”

It is this form of displaced animus that emerged in spikes of anti-Asian prejudice that arose in the wake of outbreaks of smallpox in San Francisco. The epidemic was blamed on the residents and culture of Chinatown in the 1800s, a pattern that culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Anti-Semitic nativism targeted Jews after bouts of typhus in 1892. Mary Mallon, better known as Typhoid Mary, was an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid fever; her arrest in 1907 on public health charges galvanized anti-Irish sentiment in New York City, depicting them as immigrants importing unsanitary and slovenly habits. When the AIDS epidemic started in the 1980s in the United States, some people told themselves it was a disease conveniently localized to the bodies of gay men. And when the Zika virus was carried from equatorial regions by mosquitoes riding the waves of climate change, New York City health officials began spraying insecticides by zip code (focusing on neighborhoods like East Flatbush, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, and Brownsville in Brooklyn, as well as the neighborhood in upper Manhattan once known as Spanish Harlem), as though those pesky, identity-politicking insects could simply be redlined.

Instead of coming together around our shared vulnerability, time and again we have created a set of golems to stand in for the virus, divisive demons that direct our fears of inherent virulence, murderous voraciousness, and leechlike parasitism. Asians. Aliens. Anarchists. Reporters. Media. Social media. Dr. Anthony Fauci. California. Chicago. “That woman” who is the governor of Michigan. People who wear masks. People who don’t wear masks. It is not by accident that Trump’s targeted rhetoric to white suburban housewives so neatly suture race, riot, and disease as a way to channel the existential fear to which we are all so vulnerable right now: If you can keep “them” out of your neighborhood, everything is going to be all right.

A MERICANS ARE NOT RAISED TO BELIEVE IN THE ENTANGLEMENTS of a common fate. The very notion of public health has been undermined by ingrained brands of individualism so radical that even contagious disease is officially regulated by the vocabulary of “choice,” “freedom,” and “personal responsibility.” Many of us live in bubbles of belief that conceptual walls will protect us from things that are not easily walled off: Guns will bring peace, housing discrimination will bring bliss to soccer moms, segregated schools will serve up stable geniuses, and owning an island in the Caribbean will seal us off from child molesters, Mafia dons, and domestic abuse.

These comforting bromides are akin to naive beliefs that disease invariably marks people’s bodies in visible ways. “Surely we’ll be able to see it coming.” “You’re fine if don’t have a fever.” “You can’t spread it if you’re not coughing.” “You won’t give it to anyone if you’re asymptomatic.” Well before this pandemic hit, we Americans were blinded by the walls of our private bunkers. Yet the sense of entitlement that supposes disaster will strike over there but not in my backyard guarantees an amplification of misdirected resources and relative disparities from which everyone will suffer eventually.

I don’t have an answer for any of this, although I truly wish I could think my way to a happy ending. So I read and study and reread those statistics about how ethnic minorities, Black people, Black women are dying at higher rates. I am not an epidemiological statistic, yet I have no doubt that my body will be read against that set of abstracted data points. I—and we all—will be read as the lowest common denominator of our risk profiles at this particular moment. Not only are we no longer a “we,” but I am also no longer an “I” in the time of the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, Covid-19 makes snacks of us. The fact that there may be variations in death rates based on age or exposure or preexisting immunological compromise should not obscure the epidemiological bottom line of its lethality. Covid-19 kills infants; it kills teenagers; it kills centenarians. It kills rich and poor, Black and white, overworked doctors and buff triathletes, police and prisoners, fathers and mothers, Democrats and Republicans. We can divide ourselves up into races and castes and neighborhoods and nations all we like, but to the virus—if not, alas, to us—we are one glorious, shimmering, and singular species. ■

The very notion of public health has been undermined by ingrained brands of individualism.

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SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

(continued from page 17)

“I’m always raising alarms that this field isn’t well resourced,” says Hausman. “The vast majority of donors are focused on federal races. But the Koch brothers’ infrastructure is still there. The dark money is still there.” The Republican State Leadership Committee crushed Democrats in 2010; since then, the DLCC has held its own, occasionally beating its GOP rival in fundraising. The RSLC’s rhetoric is silly: Its Right Lines 2020 campaign exhorts, “Socialism starts in the states. Let’s stop it there, too.”

Though, by all accounts, Republicans have failed to recruit competitive up-and-comers and savvy challengers, they still have access to dark money, as *The Guardian* reported in June. This year the RSLC is raising more money (it outraised the DLCC in the second quarter), and it’s getting money from giant corporations. Its top five donors are Chevron, Dominion Energy, the tobacco giants Reynolds and Altria, and the private railway company BNSF.

Meanwhile, Democratic state House and Senate caucuses have improved in supporting a broader range of challengers, but it’s not enough, many outside groups say. “Caucuses get a lot of money from incumbents, so they’re focused on protecting them,” Vaughan of Flippable says, accurately. Since the Virginia elections in 2017, which I covered intensively, I’ve heard that from challengers who weren’t getting support—some of whom won anyway.

“I am a little worried about the GOP making a late play,” admits Fiddler of *Daily Kos*. “They’re going to have lots of money. But they really haven’t done the candidate recruitment they’d need to do,” the kind they did to rustle up challengers to incumbent Democrats, especially in 2010. “So I’m not sure. What do they have to work with?”

Geri Prado, the vice president for state and local campaigns for Emily’s List, agrees. She’s optimistic, with a few reservations, given the pandemic. “Some of our candidates’ individual fundraising is being hard hit, plus they’re having to invest more in absentee voting,” she notes. But she says that support from large institutional players like the DLCC and Emily’s List, combined with some of the more progressive state Democratic caucuses’ cooperation (however imperfect) with outside groups, will continue to improve and give Democrats an advantage this year.

Stacey Abrams says the party has certainly strengthened its state legislative infrastructure since 2016. “The DLCC is laser focused now,” she says, while praising Holder’s National Democratic Redistricting Committee “and a lot of donors and outside activist groups.” But “the lack of participation by voters of color in 2010 was so problematic, Republicans were able to gerrymander.” She, like a lot of people I spoke with, continues to worry that those voters are still being missed by some state outreach efforts.

Even in Virginia in 2019, Bachman observes, “Democrats keep underperforming,” at least partly because outreach to voters scored as less likely to vote was sometimes undervalued when it came to door knocking, media buys, and direct mail. Virginia Democrats took control of both chambers but won only two state Senate seats, fewer than expected. “Given the nature of the 2016 election, the voters who stayed home skewed to Democrats,” she adds. “It couldn’t be more clear that the path to winning more seats is getting lower-propensity voters, particularly lower-propensity voters of color, engaged with our message and turning them out.”

That’s especially true, Abrams says, since 2020 is another census year, with participation threatened by the pandemic and Trump administration malfeasance. “If we do not have adequate participation by voters of color in November,” she warns, “gerrymandering will be worse than we’ve ever seen.” ■

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Books & the Arts



THE BURNING HOUSE

How federal housing programs failed Black America

by **MARCIA CHATELAIN**

The reenergized movement against anti-Black violence ignited by the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, among others, has inspired the reading public to turn to texts that can explain exactly how we got here. Reading lists abound with everything from histories of slavery to self-help guides on white privilege and allyship. Yet few engage with the histories of urban inequality and policing that shed light on how reporting

*Marcia Chatelain is the author of *Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America* and *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*. She teaches history at Georgetown University.*

someone using a possibly counterfeit \$20 bill at an urban corner store set in motion the public execution of a Black man or how a series of alleged suburban break-ins emboldened neighborhood vigilantes to murder a jogger or why a deadly police raid authorized by a controversial no-knock warrant is entwined with a city's rapacious gentrification plans.

The nation's rootedness in slavery and the way white Americans have galvanized the privileges afforded them are critical to understanding the problem of race in America, but so too is the history of housing and racism in American cities. Property and racial inequality have been bound up together so tightly and for so long that we often miss the relationship,

and yet we cannot understand police brutality in the United States without it. When the king of a gentrified castle doesn't care to take up arms to protect his home, he can turn to the police, to private security, and to real estate agents to keep undesired neighbors and groups away. This form of white supremacist violence is often indirect and receives less attention, but it is violence nonetheless and keeps communities of color—in particular, Black communities—economically depressed and segregated.

Recent books like Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law* and journalistic examinations like Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Case for Reparations" have helped raise awareness about the racist history

of real estate in the United States by reminding us of the intimate relationships among housing, racial inequality, and today's racial wealth gap. But some parts of the story are still neglected. We are just beginning to confront, for example, how fixtures of the inner city—the fast-food restaurants, the payday lenders, the cash-for-homes fliers—are all outward signs of the physical and financial exploitation that was routinized in the post-civil-rights years and has undermined Black advancement, despite the passage of laws that were supposed to ensure equal treatment in housing. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor shows in *Race for Profit*, we are also only beginning to reckon with the complex network of bankers, real estate agents, and federal agencies that used the rhetoric of equality to obscure a set of race-to-the-bottom schemes that sought to extract as much wealth as possible from poor Black Americans.

In *Race for Profit*, Taylor provides new insight into many of these processes, examining one of the most exploitative attempts to bring the Black urban poor and working class into the fold of homeownership. Histories of Black urban life have focused on public housing, housing discrimination, redlining, and the rise and fall of tenants' rights movements, but Taylor's book shows us how tens of thousands of Black people were manipulated by the federal government and unscrupulous bankers and real estate agents through a program of predatory lending that claimed to empower Black homeowners but ultimately pushed them into greater financial insecurity. Agencies like the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) may have been founded "to transform low-income renters into low-income homeowners," Taylor writes, but they ended up squeezing poor Black homeowners while creating lucrative financial instruments for lenders and real estate interests.

Rather than create a nation of homeowners, the housing programs of the Great Society, which relied on public-private ventures that almost always benefited the private interests, only helped to intensify racial disparities. Taylor's book offers us a warning about the dangers of these public-private programs, which have become ever more common in our neoliberal age. It also reminds us of just how deep the roots of inequality and violence in our cities are—that even the efforts to create more black homeowners were stymied by racist stereotypes and a federal government determined to shrink its presence in the life of the poor.

Race for Profit

How Banks and the Real Estate Industry

Undermined Black Homeownership

By Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

University of North Carolina Press.

368 pp. \$30

A rich economic and policy history, *Race for Profit* begins and ends its account of housing inequality with people—those deemed either powerful or powerless in their times. There are the presidents, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, who may have diverged on civil rights but who agreed on the importance of private sector responses to public problems and, as a result, doomed efforts to remedy long-standing forms of racial inequality in American cities. There are the powerful bankers, insurance executives, and real estate traders who benefited from these private sector solutions, as well as the often well-intentioned but wrongheaded administration officials, especially George Romney, the Republican governor of Michigan who became Nixon's HUD secretary. And in crisp and empathetic detail, Taylor also discusses the Black people who were cynically given predatory loans to purchase dilapidated houses and who eventually fought back.

Although most of Taylor's study takes shape in the late 1960s and early '70s, she is careful to discuss the larger arc of this history, too. Her first chapters explore how housing became an outward sign of citizenship and belonging for Black Americans in the United States and how, in the wake of the Great Migration, efforts to challenge this citizenship and belonging manifested themselves in a variety of insidious real estate practices. As Taylor shows, these practices were about reinforcing the racial order, and in doing so, they were also about supporting racial capitalism: With Black renters generating sound profits for landlords, there was little interest to change the status quo.

To tell this story, Taylor opens her book decades before the declaration of the urban crisis in the mid-1960s, with the history of Black migration to Northern cities in the first half of the century and the development of the suburbs after World War II. As she shows, this Black population growth sparked white fear, which inspired, in turn, a wave of regressive policies as well as the increasing criminalization and hyperpolicing of Black communities by many cities. From there, Taylor traces how the growth of this urban white panic calcified redlining and inspired the drafting of racially restrictive covenants, which led to the rise of the suburbs as well

as efforts to take the wealth from cities and direct it to those new developments.

By the early 1950s, Black veterans had returned home from the war and saw no racial progress offered in exchange for their service. The civil rights movement was ascendant, and more Black leaders started to mobilize around the issue of housing. Activists applied considerable pressure in the North as well as the South, demanding that the federal government intervene to create better housing for Black people and later to prevent the further segregation of American cities. Yet despite new anti-segregation laws and local anti-discrimination ordinances, finding affordable housing remained a challenge. As Taylor shows, for all the old slums cleared and new shopping districts christened, for all the highways extended and mixed-income developments opened, housing options for the poor remained limited.

In fact, all this development often led to fewer choices, as these urban renewal programs simply razed cheap but necessary housing for the poor and limited the expansion of public housing, which could have provided some relief. Although some hoped that Supreme Court decisions like 1948's *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which ended racially restrictive covenants, and 1954's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* would revolutionize housing practices, inequality seemed only to worsen in these years. By the end of the 1960s, "it was becoming clear," Taylor writes, "that transforming the law was different from transforming the attitudes of the federal agents charged with enforcing the new laws or of those...private agencies where the new policies would be implemented."

A glimmer of hope came in the late '60s. Johnson's massive War on Poverty and Great Society programs had begun to wrestle with the links between race and economic oppression, and soon Congress passed the Fair Housing and Housing and Urban Development acts. By creating the Office of Fair Housing and HUD, the acts empowered the federal government to enforce equal protection laws in the area of housing; they also created the Government National Mortgage Association to guarantee mortgages to low-income buyers. Although Johnson seemed to take an approach similar to Franklin Roosevelt's by using the state, through an alphabet soup of agencies, to create programs and expand the workforce, he did something that FDR often did not: He delegated much of the work to the private sector. "Subsidies, tax relief, and government guarantees," Taylor writes, were what Johnson relied on "to reverse course and

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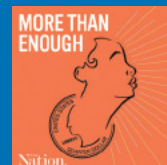
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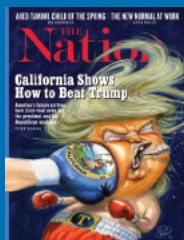
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House Hunters

Under the spindlework arch of the wraparound porch, no one ever thinks they'll expose the original hardwood for its kindling. But no one ever likes the wall-to-wall carpets, the disco granite, the open concept concept. For every wish for *character*—the toilet, sink, and clawfoot tub a demolition green—there is an equal desire for *move-in ready*, for a home's lines to be as clean as a bowl. At the bay window, a buyer draws imaginary curtains when she says she wants to feel the outside when inside. Another wants to start a family, so descends the narrowing acreage into the basement she'll make a cave. When one ascends the budget, the other makes to slash her throat with her index finger and the ruin I imagine spills evenly across the split-level stairs. On the couch eating cereal, I see myself flash on the screen gone black between cuts, and soon I too want to gut the entryway for its potential, want to carve the suites until what's left is a plat of bones and my stomach full.

JANINE JOSEPH

help stem the urban crisis." But instead of turning the tide, these generous handouts to the private sector just made matters worse.

Describing the early years of these programs, Taylor is careful to document how much of their problems were structural. The motivations behind the various initiatives were, for the most part, noble. Section 235 of the HUD Act, for example, sought to encourage homeownership for poor families by providing mortgage subsidies to lenders that offered these families loans despite their inability to meet credit requirements. Section 237 sought to assist poor families that were once ineligible for FHA-backed mortgages because of their income and credit scores; the families could now get this FHA backing after they attended a series of counseling programs and complied with a set of rules. Section 221(d)(2) allowed people receiving public assistance to obtain

FHA-backed mortgages and extended the repayment period to 40 years, which made the payments more affordable.

Yet from the outset these programs, hobbled by constant mismanagement and neglect, never fully got off the ground. They were also swiftly taken advantage of by private interests. The mortgage debt acquired by first-time Black homeowners was soon viewed by banks as "oases of new investment opportunities," Taylor writes. Lenders and insurance companies, now under growing scrutiny for their years of financing and building segregated housing, tried to rehabilitate their image while feasting off their slice of a potential \$50 billion market.

Through the early '70s, the vulnerability of these programs became more pronounced as interest rates climbed and white suburbs continued to bar Black homeowners. Burdened with predatory loans and without other support, many low-income borrowers lacked the funds to maintain houses beset

by poor plumbing, faulty wiring, and other problems and soon defaulted on their loans. Rather than solve housing inequality, these public-private ventures ultimately enabled redlining to exist after it was deemed illegal. To make matters worse, when some of those participants defaulted, federal agencies and the media depicted them as undeserving welfare recipients recklessly living a life of excess while enjoying state benefits.

The HUD Act began with a rather ambitious idea: It called for building stock and eradicating racial discrimination in housing by 1978. Almost as soon as it was passed, however, housing advocates recognized how unlikely it was that these goals would be accomplished in little more than a decade. Nixon's reelection in 1972 made it clearer how little chance the FHA and HUD programs had to achieve their goals by any date. Under his so-called New Federalism, the same states that had long denied Black people basic citizenship rights were granted more authority over local housing policies. Not surprisingly, rather than seek to mitigate widening racial inequality, these states sought to extend it.

Romney's appointment as HUD secretary in 1969 marked a brief moment of optimism for housing advocates. While Nixon demonized Black activists and city dwellers and offered vacuous Black capitalism initiatives in response to calls for Black freedom, his choice of Romney led some to believe that HUD had been given a green light to continue in its ambitious aims. Having governed Michigan during the 1967 Detroit uprising, Romney departed from the rest of the Republican Party in championing federal measures to ensure Black equality and in challenging white hostility to civil rights, especially when it came to suburban housing.

When Romney took over HUD, however, he found himself caught between LBJ's failed public-private programs and Nixon's lack of interest in seeing any of them through, let alone improving them. Romney also could not let go of his racist ideas about Black fitness for citizenship and homeownership. He could be calm and levelheaded in his appeals for compassion for the dispossessed, but he could also be alarmist, warning the public that Black radicals might adopt the tactics of the Vietcong if the federal government didn't take measures to resolve urban tensions.

Taylor guides us through the litany of programs that Romney tried to implement, including Operation Breakthrough,

which sought to remedy the public housing crisis by building homes in the efficient, assembly-line style of the Motor City. But he discovered that the racism of the suburbs and the deteriorated state of the cities made finding locations for this new public housing next to impossible. Romney next looked to Project Rehab, a plan to repair and restore existing houses, but many were in a decrepit condition, and the costly fixes made them unappealing to homeowners and banks, so he soon abandoned this effort as well.

Having failed to build or rehabilitate urban housing, Romney turned to overseeing the well-chronicled Open Communities plan to integrate the suburbs, which collapsed in the face of opposition from their residents and little provision from the federal government. Each failed attempt offered Nixon and Congress an opportunity to strip HUD and its leader of more power. By the time Romney left Nixon's cabinet, the department was mostly gutted.

Taylor is fair and clear-eyed when she describes Romney's travails at HUD, but she also rightly holds that as "the outermost liberal edge of the Nixon administration," he still did much to undercut attempts to "combat racism in the dissemination" of his own programs. Romney collected no racial data on their implementation, so he could never definitively name the discriminatory practices that were rampant across the FHA and that effectively blocked housing opportunities for its participants. He also allowed lenders to flout requests for data on their practices and ignored the concerns of Black HUD employees about discrimination within the agency. The Congressional Black Caucus and the Urban League questioned the quality and delivery of services to Black clients.

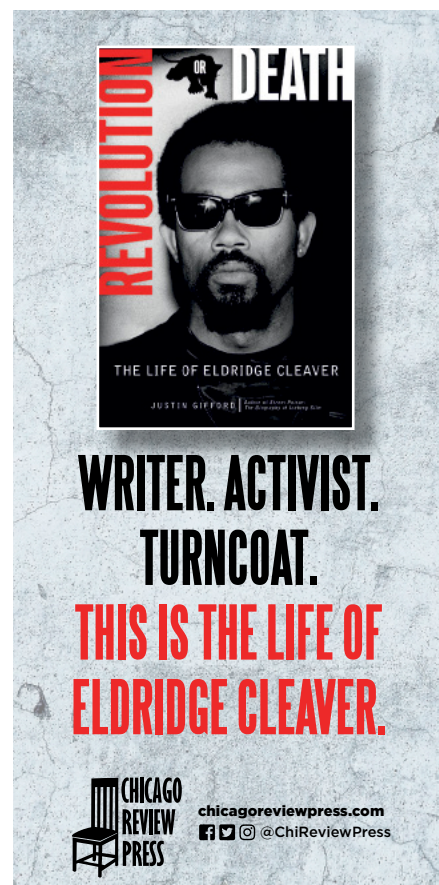
The disasters in HUD's national and local offices, which were regularly investigated for mismanagement and inefficiency, were mirrored by the calamities in the individual houses that fell under the purview of its programs. In Taylor's descriptions of the faulty boilers, constant chills, and the dangerous, sometimes life-threatening experiences of their residents, she evokes the depraved conditions depicted in *Native Son* and other Great Migration-era texts, reminding us how little had changed from the first half of the century. The houses proved to be a cruel joke on Black Americans who believed they were finally being welcomed into the circle of American homeownership and prosperity but were moving into homes that were in states of dangerous disrepair.

In its attempt to usher in a new era of fair housing, the FHA opened not only the housing market but also employment in the agency to Black Americans. But when Romney brought the FHA under the control of HUD, tensions between the agency's old faithful and the new HUD officers soon erupted. Meanwhile, HUD's efforts during and after Romney continued to prove inadequate, especially in the face of white resistance in the suburbs, where residents refused to accommodate low- and mixed-income housing.

The powerful real estate industry also created obstacles, as developers looked to simply repurpose segregated urban spaces instead of building homes in undeveloped suburban ones. To address these quandaries, Romney shifted his focus from building to rehabilitating houses in the communities in need, but these efforts proved to do little more than breathe faint life into slums. As Taylor notes, "The poorest people eligible to participate in the FHA homeownership program lived in proximity to housing that was in the lowest, often substandard condition."

Real estate profiteers play a starring role throughout this grim affair. Real estate agents posed as landlords and were in cahoots with appraisers, who were friendly with contractors, who were sometimes investors in the banks that handed out predatory loans. Discussing the long history of property appraisals and their racist pseudoscientific underpinnings, Taylor illustrates that the problem wasn't just with the lenders; more profoundly, it was also with the entire logic of the market for mortgage-backed securities, a many-headed monster that fed on volume and was stuffed with graft and fraud. Even if the HUD subsidies were unattractive to traditional lenders, bankers and brokers found ways to profit from discount points and fees and unregulated ways to resell the mortgages.

Taylor's book also highlights Black families—in particular, those headed by Black women—that found themselves squeezed by these unscrupulous practices. The tales she compiles are often gut-wrenching. We meet Alice Mundy, who purchased a house in Detroit for \$9,750, even though it was acquired a year earlier by a local development corporation for just \$3,000. Soon after moving in, she discovered a rat infestation and holes in the ceiling. After calling the city for help, she was fined for the house's poor condition and ultimately lost it because she could not



afford the penalties. A Detroit real estate company purchased a house below market rate and then sold it the same day to Sally Fordham for a \$3,500 profit. What she found when she moved in was horrifying: The house lacked a working furnace, and poor plumbing caused human waste to pool in the basement. Fordham sought help from local Legal Aid attorneys, who merely advised her to stop making mortgage payments and search for other housing options. Such woes were not hers alone: More than 40 percent of Black mothers who owned homes in Detroit and were receiving Aid to Families With Dependent Children saw their homes fall into foreclosure in a similar fashion.

Although women nationwide who received AFDC funding had only a 3.5 percent foreclosure rate, media reports often implied that many of the Black women who lost their homes through FHA programs were on welfare, helping create the insidious image of the welfare cheat, which served to enhance racist stereotypes and helped hasten an end to programs like AFDC. As Taylor documents, rather than being informed of their rights and responsibilities as the recipients of housing assistance, these home buyers were often given only counseling that furthered these stereotypes. Instead

of ending the sale of dilapidated houses to poor families, the federal government issued pamphlets like “Housekeeping Job Sheets for Use With Aspiring Homemakers” and “How to Keep a Stove Clean.” Needless to say, housing inequality worsened under these circumstances. As Taylor writes, the tremendous “downward pressure on the quality of [the] housing” that Black people could secure made it nearly impossible for FHA mortgage receivers to find themselves in a safe home and with the resources to maintain it adequately.

Good intentions and bad outcomes run throughout Taylor’s narrative. Whether it was Romney’s desire to see some type of racial integration in American suburbs or the efforts of Milwaukee-based FHA program director Lawrence Katz, who supplied Black women with sometimes helpful (but often infantilizing) tips on homemaking, white liberal politicians proved incapable of seeing or overcoming the limits of the public-private programs that created greater segregation. In the absence of substantial government funding and responsible oversight, these programs were guaranteed never to succeed.

Some of the most powerful parts of Taylor’s book examine how Black homeowners came together to fight back. Black women in Seattle collectively sued HUD for its failure to ensure that the properties sold to them met “the requirements of all state laws, or local ordinances,” as stated in Section 235. This provision was routinely ignored as contractors collected fees for services never rendered and repairs never made. Eventually Congress updated the legislation to allow reimbursement for “damages in the amounts that [home buyers] had paid to have repairs done” after purchasing these homes.

Likewise in the early ’70s, a set of Black homeowners began to testify before Congress and turn to other movement tactics, including mounting picket lines outside local FHA offices. Homeowners offered interviews to investigative journalists and risked being further embarrassed or made to feel ashamed for their living conditions. From Kansas City, Mo., to Paterson, N.J., their stories were eerily similar: These home buyers were poor, Black, and desperate to find a place to live. They owned houses that were certified as safe by HUD affiliates but were a nightmare of neglect and disrepair.

By the mid-’70s, the federal experiment in encouraging Black homeownership had collapsed. A deflated Romney announced

in 1973 an indefinite moratorium on any funding for housing assistance programs or construction of low-income housing nationwide. Although he had tried to prevent such an extreme measure, he was unable to prevail against Nixon’s desire to keep the US government from intervening to foster meaningful change in housing. As Taylor sums it up, “Nixon’s decisive victory over McGovern provided a political mandate to move away from federal involvement in cities.”

Even after Watergate forced Nixon out of office, the ghosts of his New Federalism continued to haunt both the Republicans’ and the Democrats’ approaches to poverty. Gerald Ford signed the Housing and Community Development Act into law, which further removed Washington from the management of housing programs. The legislation provided for “‘no strings attached’ revenue sharing and block grants that were touted as new, innovative tools that would transform ‘urban renewal’ into ‘community development.’” With states allowed discretion over what funding for housing would look like, Black home seekers found themselves subject to the whims of localities that were more likely to protect suburban homeowners and the value of their property, especially given the decade’s economic instability.

The failures of HUD also set the stage for our current housing crisis by creating a path for the convergence of “neoliberalism and neoconservatism,” Taylor writes, around “the demonization of working-class and poor Black people in cities to undermine the legitimacy of a welfare state perceived to be prioritizing the care of ‘undeserving’ African Americans.”

This meeting of the center left and center right in both parties not only resulted in smaller government for the poor, tax breaks for the rich, and a colorblind approach toward policy; it also helped create more draconian measures for welfare recipients and regulations on access to public housing under Bill Clinton’s massive welfare “reform” measures in the 1990s.

Housing inequality remains a pressing issue in the struggle for racial justice in the United States. According to the Census Bureau, Black families have lagged the general population in homeownership for the past 70 years. From the post-World War II era to the start of the Reagan years, Black homeownership rates rose from 35 to 44 percent. These rates remained relatively steady from the 1970s to the 2008 financial crisis, which

hurt Black homeowners the most because they were more likely to hold shaky subprime mortgages. Nor did they enjoy the benefits of the post-recovery housing market, because they tended to own cheaper homes in neighborhoods considered less desirable. In fact, nearly a decade after the crisis, there remains a 30 percentage point difference in homeownership rates for white and Black Americans. This gap exacerbates the vulnerability of Black people to foreclosure and worsens the wealth gap, as well as drives further criminalization and police brutality when Black city dwellers attempt to move outside racially homogenous neighborhoods.

Today, with short-term eviction relief due to the Covid-19 pandemic set to expire and low interest rates fueling increases in home prices, advocates for affordable housing may look to Taylor’s book as they prepare themselves for another looming calamity. What is still unclear is whether the fair housing planks of Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign or the leadership of Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman on housing issues will inspire a wider commitment by the Democratic Party to address this crisis. As the cries to cancel rent become louder, progressive leaders must focus more and more of their energy on creating policies that keep housing affordable for all people.

Over the past few years, on the anniversary of the Fair Housing Act’s passage, a pundit or observer would invariably ask why, in light of the long-standing legislation against housing discrimination and the supposed growth in economic opportunity for Black Americans, the Black homeownership rate was still at pre-Housing Act levels. In response, some cite the lack of generational wealth transfer among Black Americans and ongoing lending discrimination, but few consider that it might be due to the very system of racial capitalism that exists in the United States.

James Baldwin’s and Martin Luther King Jr.’s warnings that Black Americans should be cautious about integrating into a “burning house” seems an apt metaphor here. What we need is a new housing system altogether. As the 2008 crisis reminded many Americans, as long as housing is tied to a for-profit system that mercilessly exploits vulnerable families instead of empowering them and as long as values rise and fall relative to racist perceptions of what is a good or bad school district and who makes good or bad neighbors, housing inequality will persist—a burning house, indeed. ■



THE GUARDIANS

Does “the Resistance” actually want more democracy or less?

by SAMUEL MOYN

It is one of the virtues of an extraordinarily vicious presidency that it has led some to openly confess their preference for elite rule. Even those who vigorously promoted elements of aristocracy—or oligarchy—once used to feign devotion to a democratic creed. Now, alongside the regular suggestion that Donald Trump threatens democracy, some are willing to say he proves its bankruptcy. “Voters know in the abstract what they ought to know,” conceded Jason Brennan, the author of *Against Democracy*, after the last presidential election. “They just don’t actually know the things they think they should.” When the people chose Trump, Brennan concluded, it proved the need for “epistocracy,” a kind of update to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato’s contention that the wise should rule.

Like many members of the self-anointed “Resistance,” Eric A. Posner was shaken by Trump’s election. Best known as a skeptic of international law who agreed that

George W. Bush was justified in pushing its boundaries in the War on Terrorism, Posner became an unexpected ally of those decrying Trump’s propensity to smash norms. Having made his reputation as a scourge of progressives, the legal scholar became a leading critic of the miscreant in chief. But Posner’s new history, *The Demagogue’s Playbook*, reveals he has not so much changed his mind as found a propitious moment to defend his belief that elites should control politics and that American traditions of dethroning them suggest what happens when democracy goes too far. For Posner, too, Plato was right: Democracy unleashes the base passions, and it is therefore to be expected that in the resulting disorder and tumult, people will turn to a tyrant for a modicum of order.

The Demagogue’s Playbook tells how politicians throughout the history of the United States have drawn on democratic legitimation while upending the elitist designs of the American founders and the normal functioning of the government. “For Plato,” Posner writes, “pretty much any popular leader in a democracy was a demagogue.” While he acknowledges that

America should remain, in some sense, a place where the people rule, he still insists that our experience with Trump makes clear the eternal worth of Plato’s insight—and the need to save elite control from democracy. His attempt to do so, however, shows the reverse is true: What the Trump era proves is that we need more democracy in America, not less.

A leading law professor at the University of Chicago, Posner is a gifted scholar. The son of Richard Posner, the founder of the law and economics school that sought to wreck the premises of the redistributive and regulatory state, Posner fils spent most of his early career building a withering attack on international law. In part, he chose the topic because there were few other fields of law for him to turn the family’s demolition business on. In part, he did so because criticizing appeals to global norms before and during the War on Terrorism allowed him to make his own contribution to the American right.

Together with some like-minded colleagues at the University of Chicago, especially his frequent coauthor Adrian Vermeule, Posner cultivated the reputation of a generational bad boy. He collaborated with Vermeule on a defense of their friend John Yoo’s torture memos that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2004. Associating himself with the early years of the Bush administration, Posner also defended coercive interrogation, a broader category overlapping with torture, as a necessary tactic in some circumstances. Apparently, for Posner, the War on Terrorism and its associated costs were not all that objectionable; he certainly did not argue that they were the fruits of demagoguery.

Posner and Vermeule also worked to rehabilitate Carl Schmitt, the notorious Nazi jurist. They coined “tyrannophobia” to describe the notion that if one temptation in governance is to allow too much authority in one place, another is to fear its concentration so much as to incur even higher costs. (Vermeule impishly titled one of his more notorious papers “Optimal Abuse of Power.”) As their last major act together before Trump’s election, they penned the 2011 book *The Executive Unbound*, which claimed that the American presidency had outgrown the founders’ attempts to impose checks and balances against it. Public opinion, they maintained, was now nearly the sole force that kept America’s national leaders from transgression—and this was a good thing, too, because of the beneficial role a

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competent administrative state plays relative to dysfunctional legislatures and ignorant judiciaries. In the fun and games of intellectual strife before Trump, no one anticipated that someone like him was coming to inherit the power the authors defended.

Known to their liberal opponents as the horsemen of the apocalypse, these now middle-aged conservatives blinked in November 2016 when the apocalypse actually materialized. Posner soon discovered his inner liberal: Within a matter of months and without ever explaining his turnabout, he began regularly advising liberals on how they could use the law to constrain the current president. No longer an edgy gadfly and outlier, he now helps man the ramparts of the Resistance and has been heralded by many of his erstwhile critics. Heads nod sagely everywhere *The New York Times* is read as it prints op-ed after op-ed from a defender of torture about how to hem Trump in.

But for informed observers, it seemed more like an atheist rushing into the arms of the church after the devil appeared. (For his part, Vermeule literally joined the church—he converted to Catholicism in 2016—and embraced reactionary positions much more consistent with his earlier writings, but that is another story.)

Part of Posner's appeal to the centrist coalition known as the Resistance is no doubt found in the fact that he is not interested in the root causes that led to Trump's election. Though Posner has written a book with the economist E. Glen Weyl, *Radical Markets*, that belatedly registered some of the costs of America's accelerating inequality, the only credible alternative to neoliberalism, they insisted, was even more of it. (We should marketize the voting system!) And now in *The Demagogue's Playbook*, Posner blames "the people" for Trump's rise. For Posner, all manner of evils are defensible, from free markets on steroids to forever wars that ruin the world, as long as elites are the ones who implement them. What the Platonist cannot abide is when the people push back.

Posner's opening premise in *The Demagogue's Playbook* is that "demagogue" is a better label for Trump than "authoritarian" or "fascist," at least to date. For Posner, the frequent arguments that Trump is already a fascist politician or

The Demagogue's Playbook

The Battle for American Democracy From the Founders to Trump

By Eric A. Posner

All Points Books. 320 pp. \$28.99

a dictator on the make are not so much mistaken as premature. They are "more like an inarticulate attempt to express—in constitutional terms—an uneasiness." If democracy can lead to tyranny, as Plato first proposed, demagoguery is a distinct and preliminary stage. And, Posner insists, it is more present, so far, in American history.

The threat of demagoguery, Posner contends, is the reason the American founders were Platonists: They crafted a modern republic on the assumption that the people themselves were the chief threat to it, and they sought to make popular legitimation safe for and through elite rule. To do so, they constructed the Constitution in

a manner that not only responded to the frailty of the federal government after 1776 but also warded off the growing signs of democracy, like the radical Pennsylvania state government and Shays's Rebellion. Their inspired achievement was the suite of antidemocratic devices that the Constitution enshrined, from the Electoral

College to the enumeration of congressional powers, from a Senate to cool any populist legislation to a Supreme Court that could invalidate it. Founder John Adams's main mistake, Posner writes, was "incautiously" telling the people openly it was good for them to defer to the superiors, as in his proposal of the tag "Your Majesty" for the president of the new republic. His son John Quincy Adams enthusiastically predicted that the handiwork of the founding generation would "increase the influence, power, and wealth of those who have it already."

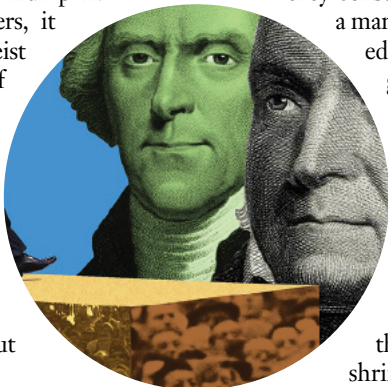
After celebrating the origins of the rule of the wise, American style, Posner goes on to discuss how challenges to it were contained. The process started, he argues, when, in the name of agrarian ideals, one of the founders, Thomas Jefferson, decided to take a run at the ascendancy of the best and the brightest he had helped set up. Then came "the first demagogue," Andrew Jackson. Whereas Jefferson conceded the need for elites and attacked the original framework at the margins—earning resistance from his never-Jefferson opponents after the election

of 1800—Jackson was the real deal. A white nationalist who railed against elite projects like Alexander Hamilton's national bank, "Old Hickory" portended Trump, Posner asserts, like no president before or since. A lot of ills followed, but Posner disputes the notion that Jackson did any good in exchange for the horrors he brought, even for the ordinary white men he claimed to represent. In Posner's view, Jacksonianism proved that democracy is the worst of both worlds: You lose elite governance without helping the masses, either.

Given that most of the people then could not even vote, it took the new era of mass democracy that followed the Civil War for the next wave of demagoguery to arrive. Wading into an old debate over late 19th century political history, Posner insists that a demagogic politics was central to the populist movement. But with little interest in the different economic and social grievances that propelled it, he generally conflates left and right populism and sees little reason people in the late 1800s—America's first Gilded Age of the victory of the rich, before our own—might have been interested in reclaiming power from elites. Generously, however, he concedes that William Jennings Bryan, the Nebraskan Democrat who ran unsuccessfully for president three times as a progressive and pacifist, wasn't a demagogue.

Posner's chronicle of American history continues with what he applauds as "the triumph of elite technocracy" in the 20th century. Progressives may have adopted populist ends, he allows, but they "distrusted the ordinary people whom the populists celebrated." Franklin Roosevelt capped this movement of elite egalitarian change: He helped the people by keeping them in their place, according to Posner. The Cold War, he argues, merely extended this suppression. He acknowledges that demagogues could still rear their heads throughout, from anti-communist zealots like Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s to Southern segregationists like George Wallace in the '60s. But Posner is wistful for the middle decades of the 20th century as a time when no president came close to demagoguery, in spite of a few feints by Richard Nixon. Instead, the party establishments worked to enthrone experts, pretty much as the Platonist founders had planned it.

In tracing the final stretches of the road to Trump, Posner shifts from his study of personalities to a story of the "political institutions that constrained the public's influence on the selection of the president and other major politicians." He has in mind, in



particular, nomination processes and transformations in the media. Predictably, for Posner, all hell broke loose as the parties democratized after 1968. With the rules changed, the people now had more power, which he argues allowed a series of figures to arise who now seem like premonitions of our moment—rabble-rousers like Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot. Posner specifically rejects economic and status grievances as causes for Trump's success, first among Republicans and then against his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. Instead, he contends that Trump inherited and maximized the populist undercurrent that elites sagaciously kept from surging in the prior century.

The defects in Posner's account begin with the sloppiness of his central concept. The word "demagogue," he says, has a "core meaning" that has "remained stable over millennia." In fact, the ancient Athenians who coined the term—which literally means "leader of the people"—used it as the title for an office that advocated, after Pericles's death, the correct course for the city-state to take. It was not a term of abuse; for that matter, Plato never used it in any of his dialogues.

When it comes to modern history, Posner is on sturdier ground and is clearly onto something when he asserts that some politicians flirt with the boundaries of acceptable discourse to the point of outrageous excess. But rereading US history as a series of dry runs for Trump—and as a set of struggles by elites to maintain control of a democracy they were sometimes forced to build upon and expand—misses most of its moral drama and almost all of its social conflicts. Gone, in particular, are the deeper reasons elites desire control and sometimes lose it when their failures and shortcomings become clear.

Part of the problem (though Posner gets points for honesty here) is how apologetically he slips into laudatory portraits of elites as disinterested rather than self-dealing and of populist forces as uneducated and unwashed. In some ways, he is attempting to revive the consensus historiography of Richard Hofstadter, a Columbia historian and the most celebrated scholar of the American past in the mid-20th century. Yet Hofstadter, a former radical who was not merely anxious about challenges to centrist rule but also sensitive to liberalism's dark sides, was not above excoriating the injustices that elites perpetrate. He hoped to confine the most potentially destructive forces on the right to their fringe while protecting the vital center against the left. But

his centrism was anything but uncomplicated, in part because it was far more open to how universal irrationality is.

This is why the most revealing section of Posner's book is on the mid-20th century, when Hofstadter could consider centrist liberalism a *fait accompli*, thus normalizing the New Deal and the emerging Cold War consensus. For starters, Posner bends over backward to distract us from recognizing how damaging Roosevelt is to his whole framework. Although highborn, FDR nonetheless played the man of the people, challenging norms and institutions for their failures, and rightly so. For his trouble, he was commonly branded a demagogue—or an authoritarian or fascist—by his enemies, far beyond the denunciations that all leaders earn from their foes.

The real reason that memory has not preserved how profound Roosevelt's challenge was to the norms and institutions of his time is one that Posner eventually comes around to conceding: FDR "was vindicated by events, as much as history ever allows." The victorious demagogue in one era becomes the mainstream democrat in the next. Fortunately, that will not happen with Trump. But if Roosevelt succeeded where Trump fails, it is hardly because of the latter's excoriation of elite mistakes. Rather, it is because his persona and program intensified the elite rule of our time, as part of what the political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson recently dubbed "plutocratic populism."

Likewise, Posner does not engage the foreign policy fiascos of elites that—especially given his own past—ought to loom large in any assessment of how they lost hold. During the Cold War, which Posner portrays as a golden age of elite rule, Roosevelt's "technocratic" successors armed the American state like no power before it and made the globe its killing field. Posner affectionately cites John Adams, who remarked that "the Athenians grew more and more Warlike in proportion as the commonwealth became more democratic." Posner doesn't mention that the Cold War and the War on Terrorism would have made Adams blanch.

As the 1980s and '90s brought early warning signs of the impending disaster of 2016, like Buchanan's candidacy, it hardly signified that the dangerous people were improvising being given a chance to speak, as Pos-

ner disarmingly proposes. Rather, they were symptoms of how catastrophic the elite's performance was at home and abroad. The clues to the mystery of how Trump became credible to 60 million Americans surely lie in these decades—but not because democracy was unleashed, since, after all, a minority put him in office, thanks to the very minority-rule mechanisms the founders designed. Instead, the outcome signaled just how disastrous the preceding decades of elite rule had been.

As for Posner's explanation for Trump's electoral success, it is circular. On the one hand, he rejects the combination of grievance and racism that drew voters to Trump in order to insist it was demagoguery that did it; on the other, he acknowledges that these very factors made the situation ripe for demagoguery. (He explains that they were just not "a sufficient condition"—though who said they were?—and required a demagogue to take advantage of the situation.)

One might expect Posner to close his tale of American demagogues kept at bay with a suite of new remedies for the pathologies of popular rule. Surprisingly, he offers none. He acknowledges that "constitutional reform" is on the agenda. "Perhaps," he muses, "we need to strip the presidency of many of the powers that it has accumulated over the years, so that future demagogues who are elected president will be unable to cause harm." But the sole indication that Posner has thought about how to reconcile his old and new selves—the apologist for presidential aggrandizement and the critic of this particular president—comes in a footnote. "I believe," he says there, "that only a strong presidency can solve the problems with the American constitutional system." The only fair conclusion is that for Posner, even once you realize demagoguery is a risk, you do not act to contain unaccountable and unchecked power; you just pray that elites wield it.

In the end, Posner replaces one Resistance cul-de-sac with another. Instead of focusing on impending tyranny, he endorses an only slightly more useful notion that the country's problem is demagoguery. But it is not clear that any political leaders elected by a majority have ever seized dictatorial control of their countries, and certainly none have done so in American history. (So much for Plato's theory.) And Posner's charge that



America's difficulty is that the country has finally fallen to the very demagoguery its founders designed it to avoid really just distracts from assessing the costs of elite rule. New Deal reformer and Yale Law professor Thurman Arnold had it right: "The man with the social values which you do not like, you will call the demagogue." Crying "demagogue" is another kind of evasion.

Learning nothing from his experiences, Posner offers an apology for elite rule during a period in which it is in a state of crisis—an apology that will persuade only those who share his complacency. A study that found the top 10 percent of earners control the political system "does not prove that elite control is excessive," he asserts. Instead, "we would need to know what policy would look like if elites held less control, and no one knows." He prefers to rest content with the wisdom that in "any organized system of governance" there is a "need for division of labor and specialization of functions" that "results in a small number of people at the top." Instead of calling for better elites, however, Posner goes so far as to indict the rare ones who bolt from the defense of their privileges.

But the fact that "there is no direct way for the people to rule in the American system," as he observes, is hardly an excuse for suggesting that we should simply accept the status quo ante of the rule of the self-appointed wise. Thanks to thinkers like Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Joseph Schumpeter, the first lesson of modern political science as a profession is indeed that elites will rule even in democracies. But it very much matters which ones do so, for whose sake, and to what ends. Among other things, they can help democracy live up more and more to its promise of collective self-government, challenging the line between the ruling class and the rest of us.

Finally, unlike Posner and the other latter-day Platonists, we know that elites have their own passions and prejudices, as disabling and distorting as those of the people and probably more so. Posner's most debatable error—one that connects his earlier career arguing for free markets and executive power with his current bout of democratic malaise in the Trump era—is in giving elites a pass for their dysfunctions. That the ancient case against the irrationality of democracy is itself irrational suggests that Plato is the wrong place to begin when explaining Trump's rise. The reasonable fear for the immediate future, once Trump is kicked out by the people, is of a baleful elite restoration. In fact, it already seems like the biggest thing to fear. ■



SOURCE CODE

Arca's transcendent pop

by JULYSSA LOPEZ

On the cover of her new album, *KiCk i*, the Venezuelan experimental artist and producer Arca is wrapped in white underwear, the soft fabric across her skin in stark juxtaposition to the blade-like bionic prostheses on her limbs. She's bare but also armed, vulnerable yet gladiatorial.

The image, taken by the Spanish photographer Carlota Guerrero, captures something of the album's tensions—the way Arca stitches together industrial blasts, blankets of glitch noise, and sudden waves of glossy pop into songs that mutate by the second. The shards of sound that Arca uses are often incongruous and alarmingly divergent, so much so that each change is like an unexpected splash of cold water to the face. But *KiCk i* isn't simply a study in contrasts; it's a rebellion against convention in both music and life. The project is a living, breathing

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example of how Arca has found a way to be so much at once, committed only to pushing deeper into her mind-bending artistry.

Transformations—both major, miraculous ones and steady, gradual shifts—are central to Arca's slinking path through music. She began as a bit of a cipher, dwelling in the underground corners of the Internet and releasing sonic experiments on SoundCloud in the early 2010s. Then she caught the attention of Kanye West, who enlisted her to contribute production to 2013's *Yeezus*. As she gained more recognition for her albums (2014's *Xen*, 2015's *Mutant*, 2017's *Arca*), she became something of a secret weapon of the avant-pop set. Her name sprang up in the credits for albums by Björk, FKA Twigs, Kelela, and Frank Ocean. Arca evolved musically with each new record, testing vocals, serpentine structures, and unpredictable production work. She launched conceptual work as well: 2020's *@@@* was a 62-minute track conceived as a transmission from a char-

acter named *Diva Experimental*, and last year she debuted *Mutant;Faith*, a four-day performance art piece at the Shed in Manhattan.

Still, given her past collaborators, it's not all that surprising she'd eventually move her career under a pop spotlight, and *KiCk i* is that leap forward. With this latest album, Arca has slipped into the deepest layers of popular music and changed its source code without giving in to its structural traditions. She's also brought along some of her contemporaries and previous collaborators: Björk, the Scottish artist Sophie, the Spanish singer Rosalía, the London DJ Shygirl. And while the album doesn't sound much like the approachable mainstream, it's occasionally entangled in the larger problems of pop music—a risk any foray into the genre would likely have faced. *KiCk i* is loaded with some of Arca's most technical work, but these sonic flexes can feel more impenetrable, even messier, than her prior releases. Certain moments also seem to counter the radical impulses Arca has become known for, yet these contradictions end up shaping an album that's as complex, free, and unyielding as Arca and her uncompromising artistic method.

The opener, "Nonbinary," is a manifesto for Arca's current mindset: propulsive, salacious, and proud. (Arca came out as nonbinary in 2018 and uses "she" pronouns.) A distant smattering of thuds and snares trickle into the arrangement before she darts in and drops heated spoken-word verses, her voice as smooth and fluid as molten lava. "I do what I wanna do when I wanna do it / Bitch, I got the bags to prove it / Hips to move it around and make shapes," she says sharply before hitting the kicker: "It's French tips wrapped 'round a dick." It's a show-stopper of a song that marks a departure from her earlier music; she started experimenting with vocals only later in her career. To some, the new lyricism might seem too direct or obvious, but it exemplifies the unfiltered approach Arca has taken here. She's unafraid to use her words to demand and set the terms for her visibility, all while her community and her fans cheer her on.

The beat skips along and then speeds up; Arca's voice becomes amorphous and robotic. She sings at one point, "Ask me about my luck / Yeah, I've been lucky / And I've been unlucky / It's both." The declaration is subtle, but it hints at the challenges she's faced as well as the breaks she's had throughout her career. It might even evoke a recent social

media debate about her privileged upbringing, which Arca addressed somewhat clumsily on Twitter by saying she hadn't seen "\$1" from her family "since college graduation." Regardless, Arca doesn't shy away from the truths she represents. She exposes her complexities and, in the process, refuses to exist in marginalized, limited spaces or adhere to simplistic binaries. She takes on heteronormative gender roles and subverts ideas of desire frequently. "I want a male that knows how to touch me," she purrs in an androgynous Auto-Tuned voice on the electronic dreamscape "Machote." Often she delivers her lyrics in quick, winding twists, as on "Rip the Slit," in which she raps in a helium-high pitch, "I'll hit you with that limp wrist / Lipstick / Slit lip / Rip slit." Each verse unspools like a riddle, as knotty and intricate as the aspects of herself she's putting forward.

Arca's full-length self-titled album from 2017 was as raw and pained as an open wound, tying together queer experiences and diasporic desolation. The aims of *KiCk i* are decidedly different. "Rather than depicting gender dysphoria, I want to explore gender euphoria," she told *Garage* magazine this year. She has chosen instead to focus on the exhilaration of queer love and the blurring of body and form that happens on the dance floor. "Calor," which most resembles the spaciousness of *Arca*, is a tender ballad in which she sings about her partner, showing off a more intimate side.

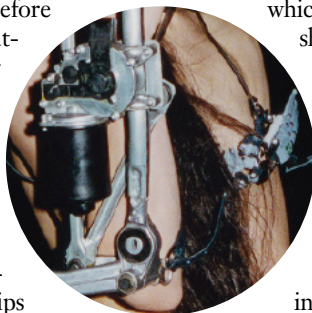
Later, she and Sophie kick up crackles of noise and grime on "La Chiqui," creating the kind of pitch-black, pulsing club moment you'd want to experience with your closest friends. Both are demonstrative of the many ways in which Arca has interpreted ideas of ecstasy, but perhaps the best example is "Mequetrefe." The title comes from a colloquial term, Arca has explained, thrown around in Venezuela at sleazy, good-for-nothing men. She sings about how badly she wants this kind of guy for her enjoyment, for a mischievous reclamation of the word, but steely synth twinkles and reggaeton percussion make the track so blissful, you just want to get lost dancing in it. The sound is nostalgic, understated, and mesmerizing—just before it explodes into a firework of static and chopped-up vocal loops.

Unfortunately, the depth of "Mequetrefe" doesn't carry into "KLK," a highly anticipated collaboration with Rosalía that's far less moving (and even discomfiting) as the two artists trade boasts and Caribbean-

an slang over a grim reggaeton beat. Since 2019, the Spanish-speaking music industry has boosted Rosalía to the center of reggaeton and dembow, despite the fact that she's a white European experimenting with sounds created by Black people in Latin America and the Caribbean. Arca's decision to have her lead yet another reggaeton-influenced song is a disappointment, and though it boasts contributions from the talented producer Cardopusher, "KLK" doesn't really take the genre anywhere new. It's a missed opportunity to acknowledge the roots of music that has clearly had an influence on Arca, and it stands out as almost regressive on such a progressively minded project.

The power of Arca's work is its inventiveness. Cultural work that proposes new modes of expression and communication is especially important right now as people have organized to call out the lack of imagination that has continued systems of oppression and inequality for generations. *KiCk i* fits into a recent series of releases—some of the year's best, in fact—from queer and nonbinary artists that defy the limits of traditional genre and form in distinct ways. Moses Sumney turned soul and R&B inside out on his 20-song masterpiece *gra*. Perfume Genius's *Set My Heart on Fire Immediately* came out in May and offered gut-wrenching portraits of intimacy. Just a few weeks later, Yves Tumor embraced off-kilter, abrasive sounds on *Heaven to a Tortured Mind*. It's not exactly fair to group these artists, given how wildly different their output has been, but what they share is a resistance to convention that creates a portal into an uncharted artistic future.

Sasha Geffen summed up their work best in the recent book *Glitter Up the Dark*. "I hear a refusal to force the body against its true shape," Geffen writes. "In their slippery, confounding, and transcendent music, these artists—and the hundreds of others that join them on this path—cast off the claustrophobic molds that would keep them from themselves. Their music twists into new shapes without names, shapes that open the way into a world that lets in the light." During her own act of letting in the light on this record, Arca is fearless. She lays bare her multiplicity and her contradictions, the compelling and unflattering bits, celebrating it all. The title of the final song, "No Queda Nada" ("There Is Nothing Left"), is a love letter to her partner that rejoices in how full and self-realized she is in this moment of her career. "Nothing left," she sings. "Except that which you see." ■



Q&A N.K. JEMISIN

For a work of fantasy, *The City We Became*, the first book in a new trilogy by the sci-fi bard N.K. Jemisin, reads like an act of near-journalism. In its pages,

New York City, once the epicenter of this country's Covid-19 outbreak, is battling another terrifying contagion. This one doesn't attack the lungs and blood vessels, but it is no less vicious. Loosed upon the city's five boroughs by the book's villain, the Woman in White, it attaches "long, feathery white tendrils" to people and rapidly multiplies, with the goal of destroying the city. As in real life, the virus disproportionately endangers people of color.

I recently spoke with Jemisin about how a book she wrote almost two years ago turned eerily prescient. Here are some highlights of our conversation.

—Jessica Suriano

JS: What has it been like to have this book come out during this period, when a lot of events in it feel more like reality than fantasy?

NKJ: Well, I wrote the book almost two years ago, so it wasn't like I intended for that congruity to be there. The pandemic is a new thing, but what *The City We Became* is talking about is the almost plaguelike afflictions that have been attacking the city for a long time. What I think is happening is that I described things like gentrification as viral or as infectious. And then we have a literal plague. The pandemic has really exacerbated a lot of existing issues within

our society that have been like a slow-motion plague. It's just made that more visible and acute.

JS: Would you say that this book was written out of a love for New York or frustration?

NKJ: Love for New York and fear for New York. I'm 47. I've lived here on and off since I was 5, enough to see New York go through massive changes. Around the time that I was born, the city was going through white flight as a result of desegregation. And then the city almost went bankrupt. Then there was a crack epidemic. There was a period in the '90s when the city was finally free of crack but the drug war was still a huge problem. The police were a huge problem. But people were able to get jobs, and neighborhoods were being built instead of burned down. A lot of New Yorkers started to feel hope.

And then a different kind of plague began to hit, which was housing prices going so far beyond affordable that there's effectively no middle class in New York anymore. Suddenly, when new people came in, the city became beholden to real estate developers. Suddenly, we started to not get the funding that we needed for infrastructure and repair. What I see is the city's growth and health

being sapped by people that don't seem to understand what the city needs to thrive.

But also, part of New York is fighting back. When the city starts to become a place where the poor cannot live or where Black people cannot simply walk down the street and be themselves, New York fights. New York sees a threat and begins to work against it, and that is also what I wanted to capture.

JS: What makes someone a New Yorker?

NKJ: Oh, that's deeply existential. I think there comes a moment after you've been here for a year or so when you just suddenly realize this is your city, that you don't want to live anywhere else. New Yorkers are chosen: New Yorkers choose themselves. And then New York tests them to kind of make sure

it's real. And if they can handle that, then they become New Yorkers. You don't have to be born a New Yorker. This is a city that's hungry for new people.

JS: Will everything that's happened in the past five months influence the rest of the trilogy?

NKJ: It has, because I had intended to do some things in later volumes that got stolen by reality. You can kind of see in the book that I had been planning to explore an angle with [the New York Police Department]. I may still go with that, because the NYPD is still going to be the NYPD. They didn't get defunded. Nothing has changed. I don't know exactly how I want to handle that. That was for book three, and once again, thanks, America, for stealing my ideas. ■



What The City We Became is talking about is the almost plaguelike afflictions that have been attacking the city for a long time.

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NEW
Domini Funds
2019
Impact
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Download the report at domini.com/2019impact



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Before investing, consider the Fund's investment objectives, risks, charges and expenses. Contact us for a prospectus containing this and other information. Read it carefully. The Domini Funds are not insured. You may lose money. Shares of the Domini Funds are offered for sale only in the United States. The Domini Impact Equity Fund is subject to market, recent events, impact investing, portfolio management, information and mid-to large cap companies risks. The Domini Impact International Equity Fund is subject to market, recent events, impact investing, portfolio management, information and mid- to large-cap companies risks. The Domini Sustainable Solutions Fund is subject to market, recent events, sustainable investing, portfolio management, information, mid- to large-cap companies, and small-cap companies risks. The Domini Bond Impact Fund is subject to market, recent events, impact investing, style, information, interest rate, and credit risks. DSIL Investment Services LLC, Distributor. 06/20