

THE ROAD TO FASCISM

TIFFANY CABÁN

JULIAN BOND, RADICAL

ROBERT GREENE II

# THE Nation.

AUGUST 24/31, 2020

## Man and Beast

An unusual experiment in  
rewilding reveals that the  
marriage between humans and  
animals needs a lot of work.

VALENTINE FAURE



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# Letters

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## An Ounce of Prevention

Kudos to Sonia Shah ["How to Define a Plague," July 27/August 3] for pointing out the need to tell a new story about the coronavirus. As she notes, germ theory doesn't go far enough. It doesn't address genetic, epigenetic, nutritional, economic, and geographic factors or the influence of medications and other diseases. If the problem is seen only as the presence of a pathogen, then the solution is to kill the germ rather than change other circumstances that enabled it to cause illness.

The medical community would do well to adopt a broader perspective on illness using the model of integrated pest management, in which the first approach to dealing with insects in a building is not to pull out a poisonous spray but to remove food and water sources and seal cracks that allow bugs to enter. Similar to controlling weeds, IPM focuses on creating healthy turf that is better able to exclude weeds.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. May we see the bigger picture of this pandemic and act accordingly. **ANN McCAMPBELL, MD**  
SANTA FE, N.M.

## Abortion and the Court

☞ Re "Playing the Long Con" [Elie Mystal, July 27/August 3]: When you say, "The other four conservatives on the court are ideologically dedicated to ending abortion by any means necessary," you ignore that the Supreme Court cannot end abortion; all

it can end is safe and legal abortion. Abortions would continue, at great costs to women. **ANDY ORAM**

## Color-Blind Reporting

Re "Joe Kennedy III Hired a Cop to Advise Him on Race and Justice" by Maia Hibbett [TheNation.com, July 10]: As Black residents of Massachusetts, we condemn *The Nation's* disingenuous and offensive characterization of Suffolk County Sheriff Steve Tompkins.

Clearly, Hibbett does not know Tompkins. If she did, she would have mentioned that he has been at the forefront of racial justice longer than she has been alive. She would have mentioned that he is supported by progressive heroes like Representative Ayanna Pressley and that he traveled the country for Senator Elizabeth Warren to help sell her bold criminal justice reform proposal. She would have mentioned that he has used his platform to fight against mandatory minimums, police violence, and mass detention.

She also would have mentioned that Tompkins is Black.

That she did not is the kind of color-blind reporting that continues to allow non-Black voices and faces to define what progressivism is in America today. It was a clumsy effort to drive a narrative about Kennedy at the expense of a Black man's lived experience and credibility.

Not for nothing, Kennedy is

(continued on page 26)

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## 100 Years of Suffrage

Once upon a time, many American women looked forward to a euphoric 100th anniversary celebration of the 19th Amendment, which belatedly granted us the vote, to be led this month by the nation's first woman president. We still celebrate, though that much-anticipated president lost to a confessed

sexual predator whose administration is dedicated to rolling back women's rights. As I write, we are also preparing to celebrate the Democratic Party's second nomination of a woman for vice president, though I don't know who she is yet. (Readers probably will when they read this.) But we know that Joe Biden, who might have skipped a third run for president to back one of the four women senators who ran in 2020, promised to pick a female running mate before he sealed the nomination—a consolation prize of sorts for the largest bloc of American voters.

We will, of course, accept that consolation prize and go forth to save American democracy, as women voters have been doing since Donald Trump's election shocked many of us (too many of us, especially white women) into passionate activism almost four years ago. And not just activism: An unprecedented number of women ran for and won offices around the country, inspired by the Women's Marches that heralded the rise of a real resistance.

Whomever Biden chooses, it will be a victory for women, though bittersweet (especially if his choice is a centrist). If a woman is ever to occupy the Oval Office, it seems, even 100 years after we won the vote, even after we powered the anti-Trump resistance, she will have to spend some time directly apprenticing to a man, living at a safe distance from actual power at the Naval Observatory. And whoever gets the nod from Biden, we all know, has had to endure the same sexist stereotyping as did the women senators who had the audacity to run for president against him and as Hillary Clinton did in 2016.

On this happy centennial, though, let's not be bitter. Nobody likes a bitter woman. Also, let's not be too ambitious. An early front-runner to become Biden's pick, 2018 Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, got dinged for appearing to campaign for the job. And let's not be too smart. Another

early contender, Senator Elizabeth Warren, was a policy wonk who, we were warned, would serve her own agenda and not necessarily Biden's.

Let's not criticize our male competitors, either, as Senator Kamala Harris did running against Biden last year—though he did the same running against Barack Obama in 2008 (the year Biden became his running mate). Despite that history, former senator Chris Dodd, who is helping Biden with the VP search (and who also ran against Obama, as well as Biden), was offended by Harris's lack of "remorse" for critiquing Biden's anti-busing stance in one of the primary debates.

That appeared to create an opening for former national security adviser Susan Rice, who is also Black and worked closely with Biden in the Obama administration. But some critics lament that the former diplomat has sharp elbows, another thing women should avoid.

The issues with Harris and Rice led Dodd and others to begin pushing California Representative Karen Bass, a former state House speaker, with some suggesting she is a kind of multicultural Goldilocks: Black but not too competitive or abrasive or wonky. Just right to be No. 2. Which is insulting to the assertive, confident Bass. By the end of the vetting period, it seemed the 11th commandment of women's politics, 100 years after we won the vote, was "Thou shalt not be just right."

I am nonetheless looking forward to celebrating the centennial of suffrage—and to voting for the Democrats' second female vice presidential nominee. But I am just so tired of fighting all we've had to fight to get here. Is this an inspiring anniversary message? Not entirely. Is it rage-inducing? I hope so. We should use that rage to work for the female candidates running this year, from VP on down, so the women coming after us have a different story to tell 100 years from now.

JOAN WALSH

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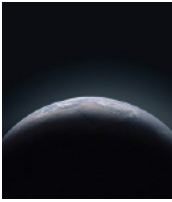
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BY THE NUMBERS



**45M**

Number of people in southern Africa who lack sufficient access to nutritious food—up nearly 10 percent from 2019

**8.4M**

Children who are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition across southern Africa this year; some 2.3 million of them will require lifesaving treatment

**820M**

Number of people worldwide who suffered from hunger in 2018—up from 784 million in 2015

**60%**

Share of food-insecure people who are women or girls

**2B**

People who are unable to access safe, nutritious, and sufficient food year-round

**132M**

Additional people who could become chronically hungry this year because of the Covid-19 pandemic

—Taliah Mancini

## Road to Fascism

*The Internet sees the NYPD for what it really is.*

**O**n July 28, a couple hundred protesters in Manhattan watched helplessly as an 18-year-old trans woman named Nikki Stone was snatched off the street by plain-clothes officers, shoved into an unmarked van, and taken who knows where.

Protesters were met with pepper spray to the face. Shortly afterward, video of the kidnapping was posted on Twitter for all the world to see.

The “crime” that warranted a literal kidnapping? Stone was accused of damaging police cameras with spray paint.

In the months since the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police sparked nationwide demonstrations against systemic racism and unjust policing practices, we’ve witnessed, in person and on video, federal and local law enforcement officers terrorize and brutalize protesters with impunity, making it ever clearer that we’re moving away from democracy and heading toward fascism.

Just days before Stone was taken, we watched federal officers in Portland, Ore., snatch protesters in similar fashion. So, naturally, messages of fear and confusion proliferated quickly online in response to the video from New York City. Were these federal officers? Members of the New York Police Department? Since they had no clear markings, could anyone be sure they were officers at all? An NYPD social media account eventually said the department was responsible for the kidnapping and falsely claimed that the arresting officers were assaulted with bottles and rocks.

To those outside New York City and to many of its residents, this was new and terrifying. To those of us who have fought police terrorism in the city, however, it’s the same NYPD we’ve always known. The division responsible for Stone’s kidnapping is known as the warrant squad. The name makes it sound as if the officers ride around town like the A-Team, taking down the toughest criminals with unorthodox tactics but for the right reasons. Quite the opposite: The warrant squad marshals the full weight of the department’s multibillion-dollar budget to terrorize the city’s most vulnerable communities.

A 2015 investigative report by John Surico for *Vice* highlighted the warrant squad’s repeated raids on homeless shelters—with a majority of arrests involving nonviolent minor offenses.

Surico wrote, “When I asked homeless people why this is happening, most said it was to meet quotas—the statistics-based policing that critics (and even some police officers) say is encouraged by One Police Plaza [NYPD headquarters]—and that the homeless arrests can act as fodder for the stats. This, they argued, may

explain why the raids fluctuate: Some months have low numbers, perhaps meaning the cops don’t need as many arrests; when the raids go up, the cops are presumably in need of some juice.”

As a former public defender, I’ve witnessed this police terrorism masquerading as public safety up close. In the early years of my career, parades of warrant squad detainees were regularly marched into court, the rattle of their chain gang shackles filling the room. Some were partly clothed; others were missing shoes. The infractions that justified their appearance in this dehumanizing state were almost always dismissed. One by one, they were unshackled and sent on their way, with the state acting as if nothing had happened—until the next raid.

Unlike many of the warrant squad’s incursions over the years, what happened to Stone on Tuesday was witnessed by hundreds of thousands of people via smartphones and social media. Several New York City Council members joined the righteous torrent of outrage, but many chose to look good rather than do good when the time arrived to hold police accountable.

In June a multiracial coalition of New Yorkers did their part in working to disempower an out-of-control police force by advocating a \$1 billion divestment from the NYPD and an investment of that money in social services. Those efforts were met with political chicanery when the City Council passed a budget that failed to cut the NYPD’s funding in any meaningful way. The same legislators who are standing up now to express their outrage and demand answers about Stone’s arrest sat on their hands when the time came not just to demand accountability but also to make real and lasting change.

What happened to Stone should be a wake-up call to anyone who thought police violence would confine itself to Black, brown, and poor communities. That she was snatched from a dense throng of protesters shows the sophistication of NYPD surveillance. This was an intentional act meant to send a message: Speak out and you, too, can be disappeared. If this happened in another country, we’d be condemning the regime responsible, as we frequently do when foreign governments that aren’t allies use their security forces to brutally suppress dissenting speech.

But it’s easy to call out oppression beyond our borders and much harder to do when it’s our own government waging violence against the people. However, difficulty cannot be a deterrent. History shows what happens when we fail to uproot oppression. The prophetic prose of Martin Niemöller’s “First They Came...” rings loudly in my head. “First they came for the Communists / And I did not speak out / Because I was not a Communist,” it begins. What started in the dark of night at homeless shelters is now in the streets in broad daylight. We are the last to speak for us. If you have not been already, it’s time to start shouting.

TIFFANY CABÁN

*Tiffany Cabán is a national organizer with the Working Families Party.*

*Nikki Stone was snatched off the street to send a message: You, too, can be disappeared.*

COMMENT



# Q&A BARBARA LEE

Representative Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) cast the sole vote in Congress against the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force resolution that launched what

would come to be known as America's forever war. But she's not alone anymore. In July, 93 House members and 23 senators supported a proposal by Lee and Representatives Mark Pocan (D-Wis.) and Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) to cut the Pentagon's budget by 10 percent and shift the money to tackling Covid-19 and mass unemployment. After the vote, Lee and I spoke about reordering our priorities and reimagining politics in 2020. Here are some highlights from our conversation.

—John Nichols

**JN: You've worked for decades to change our budget priorities. Suddenly you've got a lot of allies. What happened?**

**BL:** [With Covid-19 and mass unemployment], it's clear that people are hurting very badly. And yet they are told, "Well, the resources just aren't there." Of course we know that Republicans got their tax cuts, but the resources are also within the Pentagon in terms of their wasteful spending.... I think that this is the moment when all of this is coming together, where the movement is really pushing the Congress and saying, "We need resources for our domestic priorities."

**JN: How important is it for Democrats to make these new priorities a part of what they talk about in 2020?**

**BL:** Well, it's absolutely important, because young people are not going to tolerate [status quo politics]. They're not going to vote if we don't make it a part of our new priorities. When you look at polling data, when you look at where people are on military policy and domestic policy—when it comes to making sure that these unauthorized wars, these forever wars, stop—the public is with us.

**JN: There's also a rising demand to address another issue you've been discussing for years, structural racism.**

**BL:** I'm cautiously optimistic. It took the unfortunate and horrific murder of [George] Floyd for people to really seriously begin to focus on the systemic racist nature of the criminal justice system and our policing. I've been involved in police issues since the '70s. I was going into San Quentin, into prisons then, counseling and working with inmates. Even before that, I was a community worker with the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party stood down the police because they were killing people and they were brutalizing our communities in Oakland and throughout the country. I got it then and understood we had to have some systemic change in the criminal justice system.... I keep

going back to the notion that this is a marathon for justice. You have to keep fighting. You have to run this lap of the race. [Representative] Ron Dellums passed me the baton. We passed younger people the batons. We see Black Lives Matter and Dreamers. We see our Movement for Black Lives. Everyone is coming together now, taking these batons and running with it.

**JN: You were a Shirley Chisholm delegate at the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Do you think her "unbought and unbossed," "catalyst for change" politics is finally taking hold?**

**BL:** Absolutely. I know Shirley is smiling right now. She would be so proud of women in Congress, especially the women of color, saying, "Enough is enough." Can you imagine?

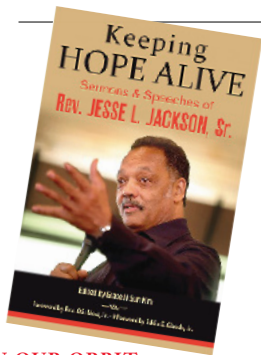
When I was here working for Ron after his election to Congress, I got to see Shirley Chisholm, and she mentored me. Let me tell you, [for a number of years] she was the only Black woman dealing with this entire power structure within the Congress. It was amazing. And she never backed down.

**JN: California's Bernie Sanders delegates to this year's Democratic convention recently suggested that Joe Biden should consider you for vice president. What did you think about that?**

**BL:** It just made me think, on a very personal level, "Well, maybe our progressive work and movement, maybe people see us and hear us and understand what I'm doing or trying to do." ■

*We see Black Lives Matter and Dreamers. We see the Movement for Black Lives. Everyone is... taking these batons and running with it.*





IN OUR ORBIT

## Antidote to Despair

**A**s a politician, Jesse Jackson has seldom enjoyed the full fruit of his labors. Running for president in 1984—building on Shirley Chisholm’s pioneering campaign in 1972—he won just three states and the District of Columbia. In 1988 he won 11 contests but never recovered from his defeat by Michael Dukakis in Wisconsin. Yet without Jackson, there would’ve been no President Barack Obama; without the Rainbow Coalition, Bernie Sanders’s campaign would’ve struggled to get out of Vermont.

As a prophet, though, Jackson has no living rivals. Readers depressed during this summer’s conventions by the decline in American oratory could do far worse than console themselves with *Keeping Hope Alive*, a new collection of his speeches and sermons. Some will be struck by his superb sense of occasion: Preaching in New York’s Riverside Church in 2005, he recalled the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s decisive turn against the Vietnam War from that very pulpit; Jackson also warned, “When China rattles its sabers at Taiwan...do we say that preemptive strikes are only good for America?”

What stays with me, though, is Jackson’s insistence on the possibility—the necessity—of redemption. At Riverside he invoked “Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson...Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth...Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta...Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.” None of them were perfect. But each was of use to Jackson, another flawed human who once reminded the nation, “God is not finished with me yet.”

—D.D. Guttenplan

## Eric Alterman



# Journalists Rise Up

The Wall Street Journal’s reporters are challenging its Trumpian opinion section.

**I**n 1981, Ben Bagdikian, a veteran journalist and former dean of the University of California, Berkeley, journalism school, tried to explain why *The Wall Street Journal* published an opinion section dominated by an almost lunatic fringe. “Executives and stockholders really do want to know the unpleasant truth about corporate life when it affects their careers or incomes. At the same time, however, most of them are true believers in the rhetoric of free enterprise,” he noted. Therefore, by “singing the grand old hymns of unfettered laissez-faire on the editorial pages” while reporting the truth in its news pages, “the *Journal* has it both ways.”

This was only moderately problematic when US politics was played on a field with center-left and center-right goalposts, though media critics often amused themselves by suggesting that any number of inaccuracies published on the opinion pages could have been easily avoided if their authors took the trouble to read their own newspaper. Unfortunately, the *Journal*’s editorial page helped mess up the game when Republican politicians started taking its arguments seriously. It began with the paper’s campaign for supply-side economics under President Ronald Reagan and ballooned with literally thousands of pages of conspiracy theories printed during Bill Clinton’s presidency. Incrementally, thanks to the massive investments of billionaires like Rupert Murdoch (now the *Journal*’s owner), Richard Mellon Scaife, the Koch brothers, and the Mercer family, this sort of nuttiness became holy writ within the conservative punditocracy.

Under the stewardship of Paul Gigot, who took over the *Journal*’s op-ed section in 2001, the page has lurched rightward with the rest of the conservative movement—to the point that even fabulists like Bret Stephens and Bari Weiss no longer felt comfortable and decamped to pollute the pages of *The New York Times*. Unlike the *Times*, however, the *Journal*’s page, with just one centrist exception, often publishes only right-wingers. Opinions may split between those who cheerlead for and those who chide the president. But there is a discernible consistency: a commitment to owning the libs.

Today the threat posed by the Trump administration spreading coronavirus misinformation

and violently repressing Black Lives Matter protests has made publishing the president’s most enthusiastic supporters especially dangerous. As the *Times*’ Senator Tom Cotton brouhaha demonstrated, journalists have pushed the issue of printing fascistic arguments on one’s op-ed page front and center. Despite the legacy of live and let live across the news and opinion partition, the *Journal*’s actual journalists took action in July. About 280 signed a long letter to the paper’s publisher, Almar Latour, complaining that the opinion section’s “lack of fact-checking and transparency, and its apparent disregard for evidence, undermine our readers’ trust and our ability to gain credibility with sources.” The letter had many examples, but a centerpiece was a column titled “There Isn’t a Coronavirus ‘Second Wave’” by Vice President Mike Pence, whose arguments were inconsistent with the government’s own figures when published and were thoroughly debunked by the *Journal*’s news pages days later.

Latour issued an anodyne statement in response, saying, “[We] remain deeply committed to fact-based and clearly labeled reporting and opinion writing. We cherish the unique contributions of our Pulitzer Prize-winning Opinion section to the *Journal* and to societal debate in the U.S. and beyond.” The editorial board, sounding a lot like Weiss upon her departure from the *Times*, complained that it would not kowtow to what it called the “wave of progressive cancel culture” and argued that unlike those fraidy-cats at *The New York Times* (or so it implied), “our opinion pages offer an alternative to the uniform progressive views that dominate nearly all of today’s media.”

Herein lies the dilemma that faces all serious mainstream media organizations: Take the Trump administration at its word, and you are not only disgracing yourself professionally by misinforming people; you are also putting your readers’ lives at risk. But if you don’t do so, you are vulnerable




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*The Journal editorial page helped mess up the game when Republican politicians started taking its arguments seriously.*



# GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION

WITH **BILL MILLER**

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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.



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WITH BILL MILLER

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Take the Trump administration at its word, and you are disgracing yourself professionally by misinforming people.

to the incessant and aggressive working of the refs by right-wing figures who label any attempts to impose standards of truth telling as “progressive cancel culture.”

For a few years after Murdoch’s purchase of the paper from the Bancroft family in 2007, the *Journal’s* jewel-like news-gathering operations appeared at risk. The mogul’s handpicked editor in chief, the British-born Gerard Baker, complained in 2017 of “a fit of Trump-induced pearl-clutching among the journalistic elite” and sought to steer the paper’s reporting in a pro-Trump direction. That fear was mitigated when Baker was replaced by the veteran journalist Matt Murray in 2018 and relegated first to the news pages and, after his May 15 column “The Often Distorted Reality of Hate Crime in America,” to the opinion pages. An earlier letter to Latour from staff members argued that the column not only posited “the highly controversial argument that black

people commit more hate crimes than white people” but also used “only his own single weighted statistical calculation, with no attribution or context” to support it.

I do not exaggerate when I say that the result of believing the *Journal’s* editorials can be death. Pence’s op-ed, for instance, used false statistics to encourage complacency in places experiencing spikes in coronavirus infections. At least three academic studies have pointed to an increased number of Covid-19 cases where viewership of Fox News, Murdoch’s other famous property, is unusually high. A direct causal relationship is difficult to establish, as the same people who are likely to be lied to by right-wing pundits might have refused to take proper precautions anyway. But it is enough to say that misinformation about the virus is a serious public health risk, and we should cheer on the journalists rising up within their institutions to insist that they are no longer willing to be a party to it. ■

## Biden, Just Say Yes on M4A!

*Covid-19 gives you the perfect reason to change your mind.*

Many of us are committed to preventing four more years of Donald Trump by any means necessary: mailing ballots, voting early, or braving in-person polls in November if we have to. As John Lewis recently reminded us, “Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part.”

While Joe Biden’s basement campaign may have given him a lead in the opinion

polls, it has done nothing to inspire young progressives to embrace a compromising—and deeply compromised—candidate whose reflexive bias toward the center misses both the urgency and the desperation of the current moment. Their frustration would have been all too familiar to the 23-year-old Lewis, the revolutionary firebrand who at the 1963 March on Washington was prevented by the organizers from asking, “Which side is the federal government on?”

PETER KUPER

The question remains all too pertinent. Yet it also suggests the single thing Biden could do to genuinely excite young Bernie Sanders supporters and to wake up the electorate: Endorse Medicare for All. Whatever the reasons for Biden’s previous resistance, the pandemic gives him more than enough cover to change his mind. From personal protective equipment and testing shortages to vaccine access to track and trace, the private sector just isn’t up to the job.

Recognizing that reality would be a sign of strength. It could also electrify and transform US politics. As John Nichols recently noted, Alvan Earle Boyer, who called the meeting that founded the Republican Party in 1854, previously campaigned on the slogan “Vote yourself a farm.” Give Americans the chance to vote ourselves guaranteed health care in November, and Trump and Trumpism will be buried under the landslide.

D.D. GUTTENPLAN

## COMIX NATION



“Well, as we say in QAnon, ‘where we go one, we go all.’”



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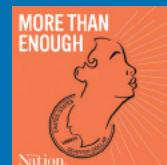
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TRUMP

## Bad for Business?

In a little-noticed move at the end of July, the US Chamber of Commerce, one of the Republican Party's most reliable allies, announced that it is preparing to sue Donald Trump's administration over its anti-immigration orders and regulatory changes. This marks an extraordinary moment. The lobbying group has long regarded the GOP as the party of low taxes, deregulation, and anti-unionism but also of free trade, internationalism, and a relatively open immigration system. The Chamber's almost unstinting support has been a boon to the Republicans for decades.

Now US business interests are beside themselves with anger over the Trump administration's recent efforts to shred the H-1B visa program, end protections under the Obama administration's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals initiative, and deny visas to international students whose colleges have moved to online courses during the pandemic. Chamber of Commerce CEO Thomas Donohue even penned a furious op-ed for *The New York Times*, arguing that these actions "clearly exceed the authority of the executive branch, as they take a sledgehammer to the immigration laws that Congress crafted over many generations."

If the Chamber of Commerce breaks with Trump and sours on the Republican project more generally—and if the businesses it represents start to distance themselves from a Trumpified GOP—that could signal a major realignment, barely three months before the elections.

—Sasha Abramsky



# Kali Holloway

## That Suburban Lifestyle Dream

*Trump says out loud what many white liberal communities support in practice.*

In recent weeks, just after the umpteenth round of media reports about the president's purported change in tone, Donald Trump resumed stoking white people's fears of Black people. This time, his racist outbursts were directed at "all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream," who he indicated would find themselves living in a multiracial nightmare if Joe Biden is elected.

"People have gone to the suburbs. They want the beautiful homes. They don't have to have a low-income housing development built in their community...which has reduced the prices of their homes and also increased crime substantially," Trump stated during a virtual rally with supporters. A day later in Texas, he picked up right where he left off. "I've seen conflict for years. It's been hell for suburbia. We rescinded the rule three days ago. So enjoy your life, ladies and gentlemen. Enjoy your life." The rule Trump rescinded was issued by the Obama administration in 2015 and required localities to track recurring issues around housing discrimination and create detailed plans for how to fix those problems. It aimed to strengthen the Fair Housing Act, the same anti-discrimination legislation the Justice Department sued Trump for violating in 1973. Almost 50 years after losing that case, he is still suggesting that whiteness should be the default measure of safety and affluence of a neighborhood while the mere presence of Blackness threatens both. The president says these kinds of overtly racist things partly because he believes them but also because—particularly when an election is on the line—they almost always work.

Even as the suburbs lean more Democratic than in the past, recent examples of white liberal NIMBYism prove that Trump knows precisely which anti-Black buttons to push. In Silver Spring, Md., as local officials consider proposals to eliminate exclusionary zoning policies that prevent more affordable housing from being built, residents have staged protests and taken to social media to register bitter complaints. ("I doubt that any of my neighbors want to stop living in their single family homes because an academic has told them it's racist to own a house with a large yard," one poster wrote.) Last year a group of wealthy homeowners in San Francisco launched a GoFundMe campaign to pay the costs of waging a court battle against a

homeless services center slated to be built in their neighborhood. In Maplewood, N.J.—where, according to *The New York Times*, Black Lives Matter signs are a common lawn adornment—a group of Black parents had to file a lawsuit in 2018 to force the desegregation of district public schools. And in New York City, after learning their children would be rezoned to a majority African American school, white parents publicly worried about the danger posed by Black elementary schoolkids. The rezoning went forward as planned, but most of the white kids never made the transfer, presumably because their parents sought whiter learning environs.

These examples of liberal white racism are further borne out by data. In a 2009 study, researchers found white people indicated that, compared with integrated and all-Black neighborhoods, "all-white neighborhoods were most desirable." A report from Harvard published this January noted, "Despite parents' espoused support for integration, in districts where parents are actually given greater opportunities to choose schools, schools appear to become more segregated." The authors concluded that "many White, advantaged parents appear to determine school quality by how many other White, advantaged parents send their child to a school, without doing the legwork to determine what schools in a district are actually high-quality and a good fit for their child." Another report released early this year determined that "the 12 most politically progressive cities in the U.S. have significantly larger achievement gaps [between Black and white students] in reading, math and high school graduation than the 12 most politically conservative cities." Among those deeply blue places with the highest Black-white proficiency gaps are San Francisco, Seattle, Oakland, Portland, and Washington.

The vast Black-white disparities in housing and education are the stuff that America's systemic racial inequalities are founded on, and unsurprisingly,



Recent examples of liberal NIMBYism prove that Trump knows just which anti-Black buttons to push.



they remain the areas where white folks of all political stripes have been most loath to upset the status quo. Housing determines nearly every aspect of our lives, from the resources available in our public schools to the quality of our streets and the accessibility of public transportation. The community we call home is tied to the very air we breathe, which, because of decades of anti-Black racism, is hotter and dirtier in African American neighborhoods. It's easy for white liberals to call for more Black inclusion in the abstract—or to plant lawn signage that makes the bare-minimum recognition of Black lives as fully human—but to fall quiet when the specific location sought is the house next door. And while historian Richard Rothstein said that racial segregation has undoubtedly been expertly driven “by racially explicit federal, state and local policy, without which private actions of prejudice or discrimination would not have been very effective,” individ-

ual acts of anti-Black bias also deserve recognition for the ongoing role they play in maintaining white supremacy.

Trump isn't clever enough to come up with a strategy to exploit racist fears on his own; he's just following a successful tradition in American politics. But there is some evidence that the tide is turning. In a few cities around the country, there are bills pending to end exclusionary zoning and allow communities to create affordable housing in places where it had been prohibited by legislation or pricing. (In fact, Minneapolis scrapped single-family zoning last year, and Oregon made big changes of the same kind.) The response to those proposals will reveal whether white liberals' professed commitment to dismantling white supremacy—stated loudly and often in our streets and social media feeds as of late—are genuine or just a veiled desire to get back to the sort of normalcy that keeps whiteness in power regardless of who's in the White House. ■

*It's easy for white liberals to call for more Black inclusion in the abstract but to fall quiet when the specific location sought is the house next door.*

**SNAPSHOT** / RINGO H.W. CHIU

## Feeling the Heat

A firefighter watches the Apple Fire in Cherry Valley, Calif., about 75 miles east of Los Angeles, on August 1. From 1972 to 2018, California saw a 400 percent increase in annual burned area—a trend scientists attribute to climate change. The Apple Fire had blazed through more than 26,000 acres by August 3.

Calvin Trillin  
Deadline Poet

### PRESIDENTIAL DIAGNOSIS

He tweets wacko theories. He rants and he raves.

His language decay is steady.

The question is asked: Is he falling apart—

Or was he apart already?





# Man and Beast

An unusual experiment in  
rewilding reveals that the  
marriage between humans and  
animals needs a lot of work.

VALENTINE FAURE





**T**HEY ARRIVED AS IF FROM ANOTHER AGE, AS IF THEY REMEMBERED WHAT HAD BEEN THERE BEFORE THE ROADS and buildings and cars. Ducks walking in the empty streets of Paris, a herd of fallow deer grazing on lawns in East London; buffalo walking along an empty highway in New Delhi.

Over the past few months, the Covid-19 pandemic has frozen the world's economy and forced half of humanity into confinement. Amid the calamity—over half a million deaths, untold economic and social dislocation—some pointed to unprecedented opportunities: to try degrowth strategies, end predatory tourism, or curb emissions. The animal resurgence, in particular, captured the public imagination. Many of us, clinging to the possibility of anything resembling a silver lining, were quick to share on social media these images of wildlife reasserting itself, like postcards from a possible future in which we might have finally learned a valuable lesson about our impact on the world we inhabit.

There's precedent for wildlife flourishing when humans are out of the picture. Thirty years after the Chernobyl disaster and the subsequent evacuation of 350,000 people, the site has become home to a thriving population of wolves, bears, and bison and now hosts more than 200 bird species. Now we are stricken with a pathogen that originated in animals; nature seems to be defying human primacy like never before. As the border between the categories we call civilization and the natural world dissolves, it's time to ask ourselves, what is our responsibility to the creatures with which we share the planet?

**T**HERE'S A SAYING THAT GOD CREATED THE EARTH but the Dutch created the Netherlands. Until 1968, an expanse of land now called Flevo-land, a few miles from Amsterdam, didn't even exist; for thousands of years, there was only the sea. But in the Netherlands, human beings must negotiate with water, and thanks to an ambitious drainage plan put into place in the 1950s, the province emerged from the bottom of the North Sea.

The part known today as the Oostvaardersplassen, or OVP, was initially intended for industry, but before the first building could sprout, a wetland ecosystem emerged spontaneously. Intrigued, a young ecologist named Frans Vera set out on an unprecedented ecological experiment: turning 14,800 barren acres into a place where, with the help of a few animals, nature would be restored to a long-forgotten preagricultural state.

At the time, most scientists believed that in Europe and elsewhere, the natural world looked like a virgin forest and that open habitats like grasslands were the result of human labor. All nature, the thinking went, eventually evolves into a closed forest when left to its own devices.

But Vera thought animals had a role to play and that European wildlife once enjoyed a more diverse ecosystem, thanks to the presence of large now-extinct herbivores that roamed the continent hundreds of thousands of years ago. Wild horses, bison, and aurochs had allowed the space to remain open and accommodate a vast biodiversity—and they could do so again, he believed. God created the planet, and the Dutch created the Netherlands, but Vera would become the god of the OVP.

To put his theory to the test, in 1983 he introduced 34 Heck cattle (a breed of large wild ox bred to resemble au-

**It's time to ask ourselves, what is our responsibility to the creatures with which we share the planet?**

**Blurred lines:**

The coronavirus lockdown drew many wild animals into human-dominated spaces, like these goats wandering through a Welsh town.

rochs) to the Oostvaardersplassen. Twenty koniks (semi-feral horses bred to approximate the tarpan, an extinct type of wild horse) were added the next year and 44 red deer a few years later. The idea was to let natural forces restore biodiversity without intervening. This practice is now known as rewilding, a conservation method that, instead of protecting nature and what remains of it, aims to re-create extinct ecosystems without human interference through the reintroduction of key species. There would be no vaccinations or other medical interventions for the animals. He wanted to see what happens when we simply let nature take its course.

Rewilding is a way, as the philosopher Virginie Maris wrote, to “limit the human empire” in the so-called Anthropocene, the proposed geological epoch that begins with human activity's first significant impacts on the planet. Journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner Caroline Fraser, the author of *Rewilding the World*, calls the practice “the most exciting and promising” method of nature conservation. The best-known and most successful example of rewilding is in Yellowstone, where wolves were reintroduced in 1995, resulting in a cascade of tremendous ecological benefits. In Argentina and Chile, Tompkins Conservation, first led by the man who founded the North Face and Esprit brands, has carried out one of the largest rewilding projects on hundreds of thousands of acres bought from mostly absentee landowners, promoting the return of species like the wild llama and the jaguar.

Although rewilding has become mainstream, even banal—a recent *Guardian* article encouraged homeowners



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**Running free?**  
The konik horses that roam the OVP reserve are left to their own devices—for better and for worse.

to rewild their backyards—the Oostvaardersplassen is a controversial model. It was only after Vera’s project began that conservation biologists formalized the principles of rewilding around the three Cs: cores, corridors, and carnivores. Core reserves are the protected habitats. However, carnivores (the natural predators meant to regulate the ecosystem) and corridors (safe pathways between protected areas that allow migration) are missing in the OVP. And even though Vera paved the way for many successful experiments, from Croatia to the Rhodope Mountains, there are some who view his project in the OVP, 40 years after it began, as an unmitigated disaster.

**E**DDY NAGEL, AN ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST, IS among these outspoken critics. “I call it an experiment to make the strongest live and the weakest die,” he says. Most winter weekends, Nagel, 62, illegally tosses 150 bales of hay over the fence surrounding the OVP, then trespasses in the middle of the night to feed animals he says are starving. Under a cold rain in January, he and his frequent co-conspirator, Bas Metzemaekers, also in his 60s, guided me through the part accessible to visitors—who are prohibited from leaving its trails—toward trees with gnawed bark: proof, for them, of the horses’ famished condition.

The pair’s investment in the project is astonishing. During the winter, they go three or four times a week to the reserve to observe the animals, sometimes feeding them. They’re not wild but domesticated animals, the men insist. From the road that bisects the Oostvaardersplassen, we looked upon the expanse of grass and mud from which dark clouds of birds regularly take flight, with herds of cattle or horses here and there. There are electric towers, wind turbines, and a yellow train from Amsterdam that passes by every five minutes with a bang. The animals—wild or not—don’t seem to mind.

Metzemaekers has been in police custody several times for his trespassing and has sat through multiple trials, most notably on charges of having made death threats against a forest ranger. (“Lies, lies, lies!” he swears.) But he re-

**When we’re the ones who have orchestrated the wilderness, must we let it carry out its cruelty unimpeded?**

**The mastermind:**  
Ecologist Frans Vera engineered the controversial OVP experiment.



mains undeterred. A blacksmith and hunter who grew up among farm animals, he was heartbroken by the sights he encountered at the OVP: a deer drowning amid ice, a wounded mare dying while giving birth, a toothless stallion. “And I’m not sentimental, not at all,” he insists. “Let them take them to the butcher shop. All of them. I have the mentality of a farmer. For me, it’s normal to raise animals to eat them. I don’t have a problem with that. My problem is the animals that are starving.” Everything he sees gets cataloged and photographed as irrefutable evidence of the debacle happening at the OVP.

Nagel and Metzemaekers were radicalized against the OVP in the winter of 2017–18, or the “winter of horror,” as they remember it. In this supposed paradise of biodiversity, thousands of skeletal animals roamed like zombies, hordes of mud-stained ghosts in search of any blade of grass, under the horrified gaze of the train passengers crossing the reserve. That particularly harsh winter, 3,200 animals died, nearly 90 percent of them killed because they were deemed unfit to survive the winter. The Dutch public, after years of eyeing the situation warily, turned decisively against the Oostvaardersplassen.

For a while, the reserve—nicknamed the Dutch Serengeti—had been a source of national pride. While the OVP’s fauna is admittedly less exotic to Europeans than Tanzania’s or Kenya’s, an impressive array of species

returned over the years, as Vera predicted, including foxes, buzzards, goshawks, gray herons, kingfishers, kestrels, and even the white-tailed eagle, a variety not seen in the region since the Middle Ages. Ecologists from all over the world looked with admiration at this exceptional wild-life reserve. The handful of large herbivores introduced by Vera multiplied and grew. But their freedom of movement is constrained by fences, and although he says wolves—a key species in preagricultural Europe—are welcome there, the area is too small to accommodate them.

And that’s the rub: Predators are an essential component of any ecosystem, where a stable population presupposes a balance between births and deaths. In the absence of predators, deer, horses, and cows reproduced at an untenable



rate, turning the Oostvaardersplassen into a monotonous grassland—a decline of biodiversity that drove away its impressive array of birds and small herbivores.

In the wild, many creatures die from disease, wounds, starvation, or predation much more frequently than from old age. Sometimes nature deals massive blows. In 2015, for example, a bacterium wiped out 200,000 saiga antelopes in Kazakhstan in a matter of weeks. “In sober truth,” wrote the philosopher John Stuart Mill, “nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature’s every-day performances.” But when we’ve orchestrated the wilderness, must we then let it carry out its cruelty unimpeded?

As gruesome images of the widespread animal deaths spread, opposition to the OVP started to take root. In 2005 the president of the Dutch Council on Animal Affairs compared the situation to a concentration camp, to a form of “animal experimentation” that must be abandoned. Some years later, organized resistance groups mobilized to save the animals that remained. Vera began receiving threats online.

That year, the Dutch government commissioned an international committee of experts to find out whether it was possible for the OVP “to maintain a resilient, self-sustaining ecosystem including large herbivores” that was acceptable in terms of animal welfare. To compensate for the reserve’s lack of carnivores, the committee determined that the weaker animals should be killed to avoid painful natural deaths. It also recommended that shelters be created to protect the animals from the wind. Humankind was reasserting control over the laws of nature.

Five years later, a harsh winter meant a large number of animals had to be culled. Images of the starving animals appeared on national television, provoking outrage that brought conditions at the OVP to the attention of the Dutch parliament. After an emergency debate on the fate of the animals, the House of Representatives decided that rangers were mandated to feed large herbivores. A new committee of experts declared “a moral obligation for the managers [of the OVP] to take all necessary measures to minimize the extent of any unnecessary suffering” and recommended killing “the animals that are in visibly poor condition” before the winter could batter them, in “early reactive culling.” But the new committee deemed parliament’s supplementary feeding mandate a “political decision,” contrary to the experts’ advice. “In effect,” they wrote, the feeding “simply increases the winter carrying capacity of the ecosystem, allowing herbivore populations to increase and stabilize at a new, higher level.” As Vera told the journalist Isabella Tree, “Starvation is the determining factor. It is a fundamental process of nature.”

**S**CIENTISTS ARE DIVIDED ON THE OBJECTIVES OF rewilding. Should it—and can it—re-create a state of nature that existed before human influence, as in Siberia’s Pleistocene Park, where a Russian scientist and his son have approximated a mammoth steppe ecosystem of the earth’s last glacial period? Or should it repair specific ecological damage caused by humans? Does “wilderness” instead refer to the idea of a natural process, of letting go, without a



**The dissidents:** Bas Metzemaekers (left) and Eddy Nagel are devoted to putting a stop to the OVP project.

specific objective, of any given habitat, garden, forest, or urban area? If humanity is to limit its empire, where does it set those limits?

The very concept of wilderness, seen as untouched nature, is a human invention. In a 1995 *New York Times* essay, “The Trouble With Wilderness,” the environmental historian William Cronon wrote, “Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural.... If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall.”

The paradox of rewilding, a wilderness designed and conceived by people, is nowhere more blatant than at the OVP, where animals roam an artificial land, like a stage where one expects the spectacle of wildness. But must we necessarily stand outside nature for nature to be authentic? What is more natural—a UNESCO reserve or a dandelion growing through the asphalt of a parking lot?

“The awareness that we are slowly growing into now is that the earthly wildness that we are so complexly dependent upon is at our mercy,” wrote the activist Wendell Berry in the 1980s. “It has become, in a sense, our artifact because it can only survive by a human understanding and forbearance that we now must make. The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity.”

In an article for the scientific journal *Nature, Ecology & Evolution*, scientists termed this period of Covid-induced containment “anthropause.” Anthropause is, in part, a respite for nature, yet the cessation of human activities has exposed how much nature may need people in the Anthropocene. Closures of national parks and widespread travel bans have meant a drop in financial support for all kinds of environmental operations. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, tourism provides the money to maintain the parks that protect wildlife. Across Asia and Africa, reduced human presence and law enforcement in more remote areas have exposed endangered species to increased poaching. The anthropause authors wrote, “What is clear is that humans and wildlife have become more interdependent than ever before.”

As Hans-Erik Kuypers, an OVP ranger, more bluntly puts it, “Without man, the Oostvaardersplassen would

**What is more natural—a UNESCO reserve or a dandelion growing through the asphalt of a parking lot?**

not exist.” Even the animals’ DNA bears traces of human interference. Take Heck’s aurochs, which now populate the dull plain of the Oostvaardersplassen in the hundreds. The original aurochs, a muscular and aggressive wild ox, has the sad honor of being one of the first species recorded as extinct, in 1627. But in interwar Germany, the Heck brothers, who directed the Berlin and Munich zoos, selectively bred cattle in an attempt to genetically reengineer the species; the project dovetailed with the Nazi quest to restore a racially pure Germanic past. Both projects, of course, were chasing a myth: The oxen that emerged had little to do—genetically or otherwise—with any purported state of unspoiled nature.

The descendants of these herds were among the 3,200 casualties of the “winter of horror,” when protesters began to call the little Serengeti “Auschwitz for animals.”

“It is...time to conclude that this experiment is gone out of control,” read a petition launched in 2019 by the high-profile biologist Patrick Van Veen and signed by more than 200,000 people. “The State Forest Service claims to be a nature conservation organization, but what is different about this nature reserve from a zoo or a farm?” read the petition. Even the legendary field biologist Jane Goodall got involved. “When I heard [the OVP story], I could hardly believe that something like this would happen in a civilized country,” she wrote in an open letter. “There is no excuse for the continuation of a policy of non-intervention when this results in horrific suffering.” During demonstrations in front of the reserve, protesters held funeral processions and minutes of silence for the dead animals. The threats against Vera intensified. He received a letter targeting his grandchildren. “This letter had a huge impact on my family,” he told a Dutch newspaper in January 2020. He soon removed himself from the public eye, but that did little to stop the protests.

From this growing chorus of opposition to the OVP emerged Annemieke Van Straaten, the movement’s most vocal lobbyist. She has opted for PR tactics over direct action. Instead of bales of hay tossed over the fence in the middle of the night, she sends out six people to document abuses on the reserve and relays the news on Twitter in furious posts accompanied by vomiting emojis. Overpopulation, she claims, leads to “mare rapes.” In the winter she posts a lot of photos of horses with their hair matted in clumps, with burdock fruit stuck like Velcro. Van Straaten comes from the horse world, and for her, a happy horse is a horse in a field “with people who take care of it every day,” she says, and, presumably, an untangled mane and tail. In January 2019 she offered to buy 90 horses from the forest service that manages the reserve, without success.



**Another opponent:** Equestrian Annemieke Van Straaten lobbies against the OVP project from a far-right perspective.

**Perhaps “wild” and “domestic,” rather than being fixed categories, exist on a continuum.**

**Winter of horror:** The remains of thousands of deer and other grazing animals littered the OVP after the winter of 2017–18.



Politically, Van Straaten comes from the far right. Her foundation is supported by the Party for Freedom and the Forum for Democracy, two hard-line right-wing parties. She is critical of the ideology of the OVP’s founders, who are determined to continue their experiment. “They want to re-create an ancient nature,” she says indignantly. “And for that, they receive subsidies from Europe!”

Ultimately, Van Straaten would like to empty OVP of most of its animals, including all of its horses.

Where to put them? “That’s not my problem,” she says. “But when you put animals behind fences, you have to take care of them.”

**T**HE BATTLE AROUND THE OOSTVAARDERSPLASSEN reflects a long-standing cultural and political tension between the two visions of nature. “Ever since the 19th century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks,” Cronon wrote, adding that rural people “generally know far too much about working the land to regard unworked land as their ideal.” Sociological research has shown that in the Netherlands, appreciation for wilderness is greater in the city than in the countryside.

“That contradiction is reinforced in the current era, in which politicians are setting the elite and the people against each other,” says Martin Drenthen, a philosopher and Oostvaardersplassen expert, noting that the OVP is routinely accused of being an elite ecological plaything. This is reflected in the voting behavior of the province, which votes more conservatively than areas with big cities. Conservative parties such as the Christian Democratic Appeal, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy, and the Reformed Political Party are in favor of more active human involvement in the management of the reserve; social democrats, the Green Party, and the Party for the Animals support a hands-off approach, although the Party for the Animals wrote that culling is the “most animal-friendly solution.”

At the mention of Van Straaten’s diatribes, Kuypers shrugs. “Does an animal have to eat all year round? I’m not sure,” he says quietly. He seems transported by the contact with nature, his face reddened forever by the north wind. “They tell us, ‘You don’t like animals.’ We respond, ‘We love them as much as you do but in a different way.’ We give them space and freedom. It’s a different perspective.”

For example, he explains, the burdock fruit clinging to the horses’ hair (and grating on Van Straaten’s nerves) need animals as vehicles to disperse. The seeds fall off on their own during the winter. To him, they’re just further proof of an ecosystem that is working. All the supporters of a wild OVP, free from





**Inescapably intertwined:** A high-speed train carrying passengers to Amsterdam cuts through the OVP.

human meddling, praise the quality of life of the animals and their freedom of movement and socialization. In an interview with the Dutch daily *De Volkskrant* in January, Vera castigated the farmers who raise dairy cows that they kill after six years, when they could live for 20, and horse lovers who “sit on them.”

And then there’s the question of fences. The OVP’s critics liken the reserve to a camp that prevents emaciated animals from grazing elsewhere. (Some activists once cut holes in the fences to let red deer escape; some ended up on the highway and had to be shot.) Ecologists, for their part, respond that all wild areas are bordered by some kind of natural barrier, like a river.

The larger debate on the role that humans should play in ending animal suffering most often concerns slaughterhouses, factory farming, and animal testing. But now animal rights organizations, following in the footsteps of the influential utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, are campaigning to alleviate the suffering of wild animals as well. Why should our moral contract with domestic animals be any different with wild animals? Since humans already interfere extensively with nature for their benefit, why not direct this interference to the cessation of animal suffering?

Some even dispute the idea that an animal is happier in nature, where the dangers are great, the stress level is high, and its natural needs are not necessarily satisfied. “There is a conflict between animal rights activists and environmentalists,” says Drenthen. The former focus on the fate and welfare of individual animals, he says, while the latter have a holistic perspective, focused on the flourishing of entire ecosystems.

At the OVP, where this debate has been raging for decades, the answer has yet to be found. Animal ethicists call ecologists ecofascists on the grounds that willingly sacrificing an individual to preserve a system is tantamount to fascism; ecologists reply that their ideological rivals are ecologically illiterate.

The Dutch philosopher and animal ethicist Jozef Keulartz suggested that “wild” and “domestic,” rather than being fixed categories, exist on a continuum and that obligations of care should be calibrated according to an animal’s position on this spectrum. In a 2017 lawsuit over whether the reserve was violating welfare laws regarding the treatment of domesticated animals, a Dutch appeals court granted the large herbivores of the OVP a specific intermediate status of “wild kept animals”—whatever that might mean.

**T**ODAY THE RANGERS AT THE OOSTVAARDERSPLASSEN CALL A VETERINARIAN if they see an animal in distress. But in practice, the rule seems unclear. Why didn’t they call the vet for a fox that walked past us with a limp? “Good question,” says Kuypers with a smile. Questions like these fit together like a chain of moral dilemmas. Should we replace slaughter with contraception? But can’t procreation be considered an animal right? Yet isn’t it better to deprive them of this right than to kill surplus animals?

“It’s impossible to satisfy everyone,” Kuypers concedes. “But one thing nature needs is continuity. No policy changes every two years. We need time to measure, to see what works, to adjust.”

“Conservation is about managing people. It’s not about managing wildlife,” Caroline Fraser quoted conservationist Joseph Kirathe as saying.

Opponents of the OVP are not limited to equestrians mocked by scientists. There are also hunters and the farm lobbies, angry to see this fertile land slipping away from them, and those who want an airport next door to finally open to commercial flights, despite the thousands of wild geese. After minister Henk Bleker’s decision to decentralize Dutch nature policy in 2011, the OVP’s future is being decided at the Flevoland provincial level, where these pressure groups are most influential. As of 2018, total animals had to be reduced to no more than 1,100, regardless of their condition. A few horses were slaughtered, and 180 were evacuated to reserves in Belarus and Spain. Deer were killed by the thousands; their meat is now sold to gourmet restaurants, and top chefs have judged it to be exceptionally marbled, thanks to the quality of life these animals lead.

“It’s no longer reactive culling. It’s hunting,” says Drenthen. Two guards who refused to kill healthy animals asked to be transferred.

The following year, the court barred further mass culling of red deer. The fate of the animals of the Oostvaardersplassen hangs on successive contradictory decisions. To this day, the various parties continue to appeal to human justice to decide whether and how many deer should be culled.

In this natural space, humans—their dreams, their battles, their shortsightedness, and above all, their financial motives—remain inescapable. Even the proponents of rewilding use the economic argument, adopting a lexicon borrowed from the market, of a nature-based economy or an economy of contemplation.


So it’s no surprise that in the Oostvaardersplassen, tourism looms on the agenda. It is about image, financing, compromise. “Sooner or later,” says Drenthen, “there will be holiday homes, cycle paths, and bird-watching huts.”

After all, what good would this wilderness be if it can’t be admired by humans? ■

**“Conservation is about managing people. It’s not about managing wildlife.”**

—conservationist Joseph Kirathe



A black and white photograph of a person with glasses, seen from behind, sitting in a wheelchair and looking out a large window. The person is wearing a patterned shirt. The window is bright, creating a strong silhouette effect. The overall mood is contemplative and somber.

# IT'S TIME TO ABOLISH NURSING HOMES

If three out of four Americans want to spend their final years at home, why do so many of us end up in institutional care?

SARA LUTERMAN



**A**LBERT P. DIED ALONE IN A NURSING HOME FROM COVID-19. BECAUSE OF NEW SAFETY REGULATIONS, HIS DAUGHTER, Gita, was not allowed to visit. In the days before his death, she told me, the nursing home staffers “spoke to my mom at length about how great my dad was doing.... [They] said, ‘He’s eating. He’s drinking water. He’s smiling. He’s doing really well.’”

Gita wasn’t so sure. She said there were previous issues with her father’s care: hours spent sitting in soiled bedsheets, medication mismanagement, and missed meals.

On May 6, a staff member called to tell her that Albert, 79, had died. She had never been told that her father was even ill. Then she was asked, “When are you going to come to claim the body?”

Gita remembered hanging up the phone. “I didn’t know what to do.”

Albert’s death was no outlier. More than 40 percent of Covid-19 deaths in the United States—about 62,000 people as of July 30—have been linked to long-term care facilities, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About one in 37 nursing home residents have died of Covid-19. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo described the threat of the disease in nursing homes as “fire through dry grass.”

The rapid spread of infection in nursing homes isn’t new. Before the pandemic, 82 percent of nursing homes had citations for failure to adequately prevent or control the spread of infection; about half had multiple citations. Opportunistic infections by pathogens like *Clostridium difficile* thrive in nursing homes, and those usually caused by neglect, like sepsis and urinary tract infections, are prevalent. Covid-19 just spreads more easily and does its deadly work faster.

In *New York* magazine, music and architecture critic Justin Davidson recently imagined what it would take to build better nursing homes in the wake of Covid-19. Perhaps if we had smaller facilities or installed wet bars, people would like them better. He emphasized the need for more funding. But the problem with nursing homes is not that they need wood floors instead of vinyl or that food is served on plastic trays. The problem is that they are total institutions: secluded facilities where staffs tightly control the lives of vulnerable people.

There is some debate over the origin of the total institution as a concept, but it is usually credited to the sociologist Erving Goffman. In his 1961 book *Asylums*, he described total institutions as “an assault on the self.” In a nursing home, patients depend on and are at the mercy of the staff. Patients do not choose with whom they live or what activities they can do on a given day. It is, he wrote, entirely opposed to the way normal society functions.

Nursing homes allow for an economy of scale. Feeding, washing, and otherwise seeing to the needs of elderly and disabled residents all at once is more efficient than addressing those needs on an individual basis. But this efficiency comes at the expense of human dignity. Ari Ne’eman, a senior research associate at the Harvard Law School Project on Disability, points out,

**“Popular culture constantly acknowledges our... worst-kept secret: Nursing homes are awful places to live.”**

—Ari Ne’eman,  
Harvard Law School  
Project on Disability

#### Taking care:

A first responder in Massachusetts loads a nursing home resident with Covid-19 into an ambulance in April.

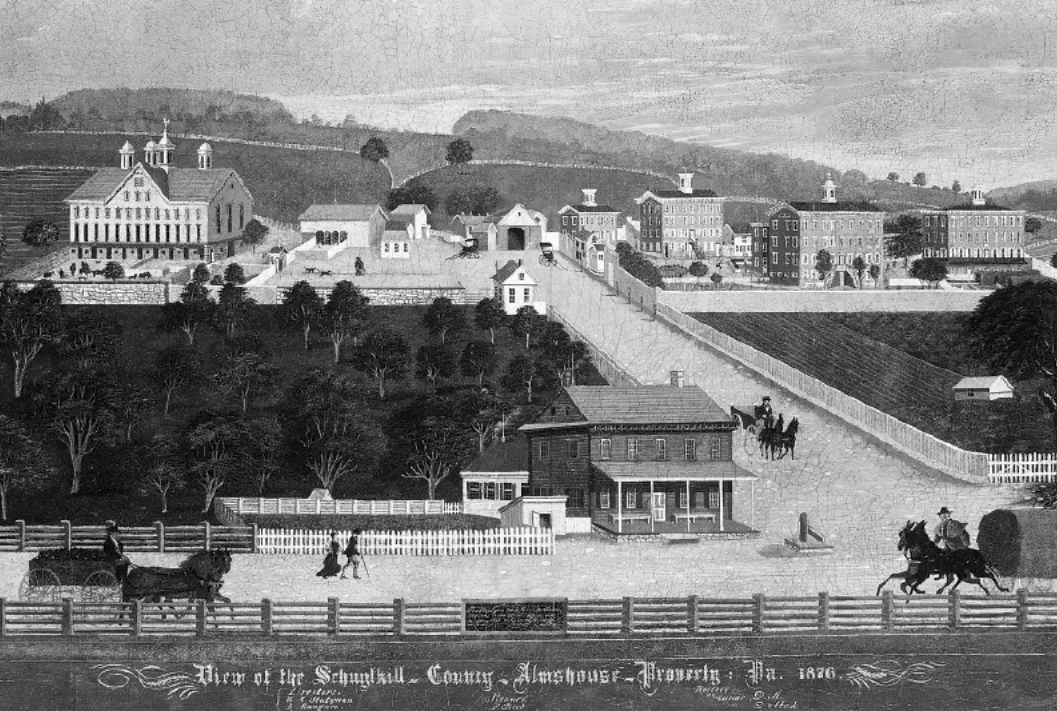
“From Grandpa Simpson to Junior Soprano, popular culture constantly acknowledges our society’s worst-kept secret: Nursing homes are awful places to live. Unfortunately, we’ve set up our health care and human services systems to send vast numbers of seniors and people with disabilities there anyway.”

That leaves us with a few basic questions: Why do nursing homes exist? How have they so thoroughly embedded themselves in the American life cycle? And what can we do instead?

**N**URSING HOMES ARE RELATIVELY NEW. BEFORE THE 20th century, all kinds of care—elder care and even surgery—were performed at home. The wealthy could hire servants to tend to the needs of their elderly relatives. Among those less well-off, women were expected to take on the bulk of the caregiving, uncompensated. And for those who were poor and without families capable of caring for them, there were almshouses.

Almshouses sheltered the “undeserving” poor: the disabled, the ill, children born out of wedlock, widows, and elderly people in poverty. Poorhouses were, for the most part, dilapidated and dirty and were seen as a last resort for human refuse. On Blackwell’s Island, now Roosevelt Island, in New York City hundreds of beds were squeezed so tightly together that the residents had difficulty getting in and out of them, according to





Thomas Cole's *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*.

By the early 20th century, more specialized institutions opened to address the disparate needs of people who had relied on almshouses. These included schools for the blind and the deaf, orphanages, mental asylums, and homes for wounded veterans. As a result, the percentage of people in almshouses who were elderly soared. In 1880 about a third of almshouse residents were elderly; by 1923, that share of residents had doubled. In 1903 the New York City commissioner of charities announced that the almshouse on Blackwell's Island would change its name to the Home for the Aged and Infirm.

The Great Depression overwhelmed and ultimately destroyed the almshouse system. Suddenly, millions of Americans were in poverty. This gentled public opinion toward the poor. The public turned against almshouses and embraced cash benefit programs. This shift culminated in the Social Security Act of 1935 and the advent of a federal welfare system. The act was meant to usher in an era in which senior citizens could pay to support themselves in their own homes.

To facilitate this goal, the legislation prohibited the use of federal funds for "an inmate of a public institution," cutting off support for locally run almshouses. Unfortunately, it did not provide money for home health care or assistance with activities like feeding and washing. Private rest homes for the elderly stepped in to fill the void. Although it was supposed to end institutional care for senior citizens, the Social Security Act only re-fashioned it.

In 1960 amendments to the act radically increased nursing home funding. Between 1960 and 1965, federal spending on nursing homes ballooned from \$47 million to \$449 million a year. The advent of Medicaid in 1965 expanded nursing homes even further. Nursing home capacity more than doubled from 1963 to 1973.

Congress amended Medicaid in 1967 to include a definition of a skilled nursing facility and to require 24-hour nursing services and stricter building codes. Many of the smaller, older rest homes were unable to

#### Nowhere else to go:

In 1876, Charles Hofmann painted the grounds of the Schuylkill County almshouse in Pennsylvania.

**"Far too often, hospitals and nursing homes don't tell older adults how they can get the care they need in their homes and communities."**

—Jennifer Goldberg,  
Justice in Aging

*Sara Luterman is a freelance journalist and commentator. She writes about disability politics, research, and culture.*

meet these new requirements, so larger, more hospital-like nursing homes took their place. But these more medicalized facilities weren't much better. In order to turn a profit, many still spent as little as possible on residents. In his 1980 book *Unloving Care: The Nursing Home Tragedy*, Bruce Vladeck describes post-reform nursing homes "with green meat and maggots in the kitchen, narcotics in unlocked cabinets, and disconnected sprinklers in nonfire-resistant structures."

In 1981, Congress amended the Social Security Act to allow for home- and community-based services waivers. Before that, seniors and disabled people could get comprehensive long-term care only in institutional settings like nursing homes; if they remained at home and wanted such care, they had to pay for it out of pocket. The new HCBS waivers allowed Medicaid to fund comprehensive care at home.

Even though three out of four people over the age of 50 want to remain in their homes, according to a 2018 AARP survey, the system remains weighted toward nursing homes and other forms of institutional care. Despite scandal after scandal and reform cycle after reform cycle, federal spending on nursing homes was \$57 billion in 2016. The American Health Care Association, the largest lobbying group for the industry, spent \$3.84 million in 2019 in its push to further loosen safety regulations and reduce the industry's legal liability. And the resulting solution to lawsuits over poor conditions? In July, President Donald Trump announced \$5 billion in additional funds.

**T**ECHNICALLY, ALL SENIORS WHO MEET THE FINANCIAL criteria should have access to home care through Medicaid. But despite legal requirements, seniors and families are rarely informed of this option. Jennifer Goldberg, the deputy director of Justice in Aging, pointed out that "far too often, hospitals and nursing homes don't tell older adults how they can get the care they need in their homes and communities."

In 2017, when Albert first entered the nursing home, it was meant to be a temporary stay for rehabilitation, with the cost covered by Medicare. He had experienced some kidney trouble. A nursing home, according to Gita, was the only option given.

Initially, Albert seemed to be doing well. But days before he was supposed to be discharged, he contracted a *C. difficile* infection, which can be deadly and is spread mostly in hospitals and nursing homes. His health declined rapidly. He lost a dangerous amount of weight, and it became clear that he would not be returning home within the time allotted by Medicare. Then he came down with pneumonia. Eventually, he also developed contractures—painful tightening of the tendons and joints from months of disuse. He bounced from



nursing home to hospital to nursing home. And at no point, according to his daughter, was his family offered an alternative.

“Had staying at home been an option, I don’t think we would have ever put him in a nursing home,” Gita said.

**A**CCORDING TO THE KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION, nearly three-quarters of national long-term services and support spending for seniors goes to institutions like nursing homes. Nursing homes are an entitlement, which means seniors have immediate access to them through Medicaid. Home care, on the other hand, has waiting lists. In 2017 there were 201,000 seniors and adults with physical disabilities waiting for Medicaid-funded home care. Nationally, the average wait for an HCBS waiver is two and a half years.

Why do waiting lists exist for a service delivery model clearly preferred by most Americans? And why wouldn’t case managers tell seniors about all of their options? Nicole Jorwic, the senior director for public policy at the Arc of the United States, a part of the Disability and Aging Collaborative, gave one possible explanation. “If a case manager is talking about discharge options for an individual, [an HCBS waiver] waiting list may last longer than the individual may live,” she said.

Another barrier to the wider adoption of home care in the United States is that nursing home associations and unions lobby against it. The associations’ reasons are self-evident: They are protecting their business interests. Trade unions have historically opposed home care because home care workers are less likely to be unionized. In general, they also have lower pay and less job security. Even with home care workers unionizing in recent years, the pay remains low and the hours long. Most of these workers are immigrants and women of color, and the turnover is immense: Every year, two-thirds of home care workers quit.

In order to expand and improve home care, workers need higher pay, better benefits, and more job security. In short, they need to be treated as the essential workers they are.

Then there are the more literal, physical barriers to home care. Stairs and bathtubs can become unusable for elderly residents. Carpets and coffee tables can be deadly hazards. There is a shortage of accessible housing in America. This problem, at least, has a straightforward solution: Pay to make existing housing accessible. The Community Aging in Place—Advancing Better Living for Elders (CAPABLE) initiative at the John Hopkins School of Nursing piloted a successful home-based intervention a decade ago, and the program has been expanded.

**“No one goes to a nursing home because they’re old. They go there because they have a disability.”**

—Kelly Buckland,  
National Council on  
Independent Living

**Farewell:** Margaret Choinacki, 87, waves goodbye after a friend’s drive-by visit at Miami Jewish Health in July.



A registered nurse, an occupational therapist, and a construction worker meet with a senior at home, evaluate the person’s needs, and renovate the home for accessibility. According to CAPABLE, every \$1 spent on the program yields nearly \$7 in savings.

But what about seniors with severe disabilities like dementia? Many people think it is impossible for a person with dementia to live safely outside a locked facility. Jorwic, whose organization represents many Americans with significant cognitive disabilities, disputes that.

“When it comes to serving individuals with dementia, it can be really difficult for families, service providers, and staff to see how that person can live outside of a [nursing home], and it is important to note that the same security can be done in a home- and community-based setting,” she said.

The idea that anyone can live independently given the right supports is prevalent in discussions about disability but less common in ones about aging. Appropriate staffing is key: People with more significant disabilities may need more staff to assist them in their everyday lives.

The idea of a greatly expanded home care workforce and widely available individualized care brings up the issue of cost. According to the National Council on Disability, an independent federal agency, home- and community-based services have proved to be significantly less expensive than institutional care in every state that tracks the data. But the current level of home care is not always sufficient to meet an individual’s needs. Costs are held low by Medicaid reimbursement caps, the exploitation of home care workers, and red tape: Navigating Medicaid home and community-based services can be a Kafkaesque nightmare. People sometimes die before they’re able to access adequate care.

Finally, there is the prevailing cultural idea that nursing homes are inevitable: We are born, we work, we retire, we go to a nursing home, we die. But there is nothing inevitable about nursing homes.

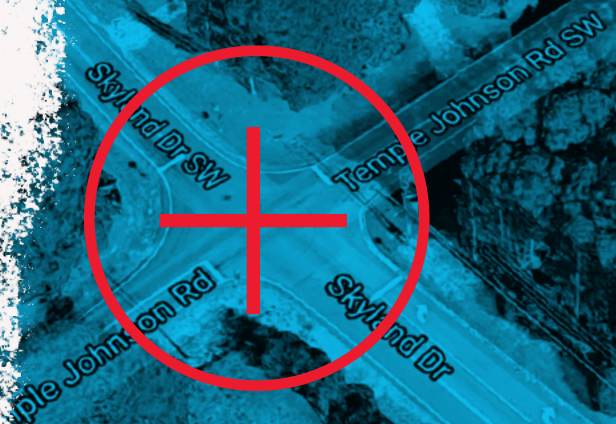
Through his work in disability rights, Kelly Buckland, the executive director of the National Council on Independent Living, has been championing ways to end the nursing home model for the past 30 years. Oddly, many people who support community living for younger disabled people still think of nursing homes as necessary for seniors.

“There’s this underlying belief that when you get old, that’s where you go,” Buckland said. “But no one goes to a nursing home because they’re old. They go there because they have a disability.” He and other disability rights advocates envision a world with home care for everyone: no more institutions. To some, it may seem like an absurd dream, but all we need is the political will to make it happen. ■

# A THICK BLUE FOG A TH



Momodou Lamin Sisay was killed during a traffic stop in Georgia. Only the police know what really happened. ML KEJERA





**I**MAGES OF BLACK DEATH HAVE BECOME INESCAPABLE, YET FOOTAGE OF MOMODOU LAMIN SISAY'S DEATH REMAINS ELUSIVE. Sisay was killed in Georgia on May 29 in an altercation with officers from the Snellville and Gwinnett County police departments.

Here is the story, according to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation: A Snellville police officer attempted to stop Sisay's car on Skyland Drive for a vehicle tag violation. Sisay reportedly did not stop. A chase ensued. Officers eventually forced his car off Temple Johnson Road. They approached the car, giving "verbal commands." Sisay did not comply. As they prepared to enter the car, he pulled out a handgun and pointed it at the officers. They fired and took cover behind their cars. Sisay started his engine. A SWAT team was called in. He shot at the officers. An unnamed officer shot back. Sisay was found dead. "A handgun was located at the scene," says the police report.

Sisay was Gambian, like me. A common refrain of the Black Lives Matter movement is to say, out loud, the names of police victims. Saying Sisay's name, I thought of its similarity to mine. Variations of the Prophet Muhammad's name are common in Gambia; mine is Muhammad Lamin, and my mother's maiden name is Ceestay. I imagine that most Black people, upon hearing news of state-sanctioned Black death, think, "That could've been me." For me, those words have never rung truer. In saying Sisay's name, I'm almost saying mine. But if I had come across the news from the local outlets that first covered it, one of which referred to the killing as an "officer-related shooting," this utterance would have been impossible.

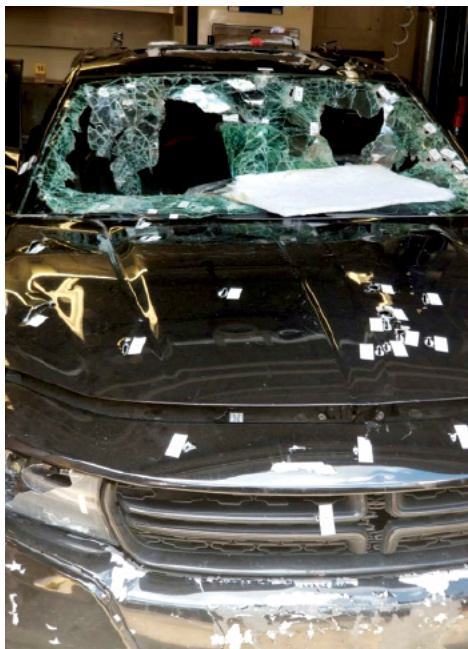
A sometimes painful aspect of diaspora existence is that grief, too often, is disrupted by distance. Being from a country unfamiliar to most neighbors but with citizens around the world means getting the news by word of mouth. Sisay was identified publicly in a Facebook post by Gambian human rights activist Banka Manneh, who is based in Atlanta. He was notified of the killing by Habib Mbye, a family friend of Sisay's. In a May 30 Facebook post, Manneh said the Gambian community "is still holding out hope that some passerby recorded the proceedings just like that of George Floyd in Minnesota." No such person has come forward.

From Manneh, I learned that Sisay was raised in Georgia. He was better known as Boy Sisay, according to a eulogy on Facebook posted by Aji Amber Barry. He was Muslim and "known to always be at the mosque." He took care of his siblings after his mother died. Lare Sisay, Momodou Sisay's father, described him as someone who "abhors violence." The family has opened its own investigation into his death. "We're not going to let it go," Lare Sisay told *The Fatu Network*, a Gambian news outlet.

For a few days, it seemed that Momodou Sisay's killing was the only thing Gambians talked about, particularly in Georgia's tight-knit Gambian community. A family member sent me a Facebook video purporting to be footage of the

**A video image can function not only as evidence, but as vindication.**

**Momodou Lamin Sisay's car, with bullet holes marked, in a police evidence photo obtained from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.**



confrontation, but it turned out to be one that took place in New York last year. There is no shortage of footage like this. Traditional and online petitions demanding the release of body camera footage have circulated. The Gambian government has gotten involved, calling for a federal investigation.

Nelly Miles, a spokesperson for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, told *The New York Times* that the officers' body cameras were recording during the altercation, implying that the police have video of it. No such video has been made public.

**I**ASKED SOME FRIENDS IF THEY KNEW ANYONE WITH A Georgia address, and one of them put me in touch with a local activist. I contacted the Sisay family's civil attorney, the pro bono victims' advocate Abdoukadir Jaiteh, who told the *Times* that the footage was not made available to him because of the ongoing investigation.

Throughout the process, I asked myself why I sought this video, which in a way I wish did not exist. As Kia

Gregory wrote in *The New Republic*, the phenomenon of "linked fate" can make watching these videos a traumatizing experience. "When black people watch a video of police violence against another black person, they see themselves or their loved ones in that person's place, knowing that the same fateful encounter could very well happen to them," she said. At the same time, we live in an age when everything can be documented—and often is. It then becomes a question of whose interests these documents serve. In the case of experiences that run counter to official narratives, like police violence, a video image can function not only as evidence but also as vindication.

The 1992 riots in Los Angeles, sparked by the acquittal of four police officers who had beaten Rodney King, might not have taken place if footage of the episode had not circulated nationwide for a year. Though I was born two years after the

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riots, the video, recorded by a bystander, has been embedded in my memory ever since I first saw it as a child in Saudi Arabia. Before I ever experienced American policing, I was struck by the relentlessness of King's attackers and saddened by the inaction of the other officers present, who did nothing to stop their colleagues.

Ferguson, Mo., still burns in recent memory through an audio recording of Michael Brown being shot to death. Eric Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," captured on video after an officer from the New York Police Department put him in a choke hold, have become a rallying cry at demonstrations against police killings. Protests ensued after bystander video surfaced of Walter Scott's killing by a North Charleston, S.C., police officer that directly contradicted the police version of events. The killer claimed that Scott was reaching for the officer's stun gun. The video showed Scott running away when he was shot. After these widely publicized killings—and the outrage in response—pressure mounted on police departments to implement the use of body cameras. This year the visceral and widely seen video of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis has brought us to a breaking point, inspiring protests unprecedented in their reach. The national consciousness has been seared with Floyd's echo of Garner, his strained repetition of "I can't breathe." We watched a man dying for more than eight minutes; the duration itself has taken on symbolic meaning. It was a murder, caught on camera, to which we all became witnesses.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation was the first agency to respond to a request from my contact for information about Sisay's death. Brad Parks, the special agent in charge of the GBI's office of privacy and compliance, sent a form letter stating that the requested documents were "not subject to dissemination until the investigation is concluded, which may also include prosecutorial actions and the appeals process." The same response was used for

**Law enforcement officers** on the grounds of the Georgia State Capitol during a protest after the killing of George Floyd.

**The police reports and statements to the press have created a fog of uncertainty.**

**Momodou Lamin Sisay**, in a photo provided by his father.



ceeded to provide my contact with an Excel spreadsheet titled "List of Responding Officers," comprising 116 names. Whether or not the intention was to bury a civilian request in paperwork, it was impossible to determine which officers actually took part in the fatal encounter. Although the request was filed on June 22, Gwinnett County said it would make an initial response by July 14—well past the three-day limit mandated by the Georgia Open Records Act. The county did not provide a description of the records when it notified my contact of the delay, as required by the public records code. Yet its report revealed a piece of information undisclosed anywhere else: the involvement, in an unspecified capacity, of the Atlanta Police Department.

**T**HE SNELLVILLE AND GWINNETT COUNTY POLICE reports and statements to the press have created a fog of uncertainty. One inconsistency between the GBI's preliminary press release and recorded interviews with officers who were at the scene was noted by *The New York Times*: The bureau claims that Sisay discharged his weapon after the SWAT team's arrival, while Detective Jeff Manley of the Snellville PD told the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* that Sisay fired his weapon before the team arrived.

According to Manley, "The subject produced a handgun and began firing at the officers." But the GBI report says that although Sisay pointed a gun at the Snellville officers, he was not the first to shoot. Michele Pihera, a public information officer for the Gwinnett County PD, told the *Journal-Constitution* that "the patrol officer assigned to Gwinnett County decided this situation would be a SWAT activation," but the GBI reports that it was Snellville police, not Gwinnett County police, who requested assistance from the county SWAT team. Pihera also claimed that Sisay, after a single round from the team, "still continued to move around in-



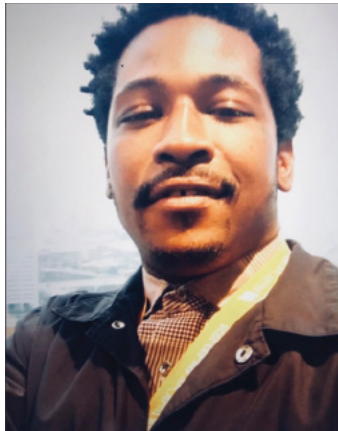
side his vehicle.” She said that, using a SWAT vehicle, officers “were able to get up close and determine that he was, in fact, injured.” In contrast, the GBI website says that “GCPD SWAT approached the vehicle and found the driver unresponsive.”

There are more discrepancies between the statement about the case published on the GBI’s website and a video of on-the-scene interviews with Manley and Pihera conducted by the *Journal-Constitution’s* John Spink. The website says that Snellville PD officers “were preparing to use a non-lethal device to enter the vehicle when the driver pointed a handgun at the officers.” In Spink’s video, on the other hand, Manley says that they went through with the use of the less-lethal device, but it “did not have the effect that we wanted.” The circumstances may well be different, but it is hard not to be reminded of Scott, who was accused of aggression and shot in the back.

When Sisay died, not only were the police his killers; they were the only witnesses. The public might see the video evidence only after the GBI completes its investigation. Even then, some information may remain redacted, as the law allows for the exemption clause to be applied to any subsequent prosecution process as well. Yet my conversation with Manneh reminded me of what local authorities had been clear about from the start. He wondered why, with the resources available to the Snellville and Gwinnett County police departments, more effort wasn’t made to obtain Sisay’s surrender. Use of deadly force is meant to be restricted to cases of extreme necessity—circumstances unlikely to arise after a stop for a vehicle tag violation without some cause of escalation. Jaiteh pointed out that Sisay did not present a threat to the community at the time of the chase, as there was little to no traffic. In his opinion, the police “should have called off the chase.”

I reached out to the Snellville PD and the city manager for comment. Police Chief Roy Whitehead’s version of events mostly aligned with the GBI’s statement. Sisay’s car was run off the road by way of two pit maneuvers because of a tag violation. Sisay at no point responded to police commands, including offers of medical aid. Whitehead told me that the Atlanta PD “only assisted in trying to find out who owned the car.” Although I didn’t ask, the Snellville PD also told me officers “recovered a gun, fraudulent ID, and a felony amount of marijuana and packaging material.” Whitehead concluded with the revelation that Sisay was “a convicted felon” and “prohibited from possessing a firearm.” Through my subsequent investigation, I learned that Sisay had a marijuana possession charge from 2011 and a previous vehicle tag violation. Whitehead, with more direct access to the same information, chose to leave his description at “convicted felon.”

The Snellville PD maintains that Sisay shot first, finally acknowledging the existence of video as proof. A particular



**Rayshard Brooks,** who was killed by Atlanta police in June.

detail from my exchange with Whitehead haunts me. He said Sisay “raised a cell phone, pointing it toward the officers, but they did not fire.” Even in Whitehead’s version of events, Snellville PD officers pointed their guns at Sisay after he pointed his phone at them. I was reminded of the police killing of Stephon Clark in Sacramento, after officers confused his cell phone for a gun.

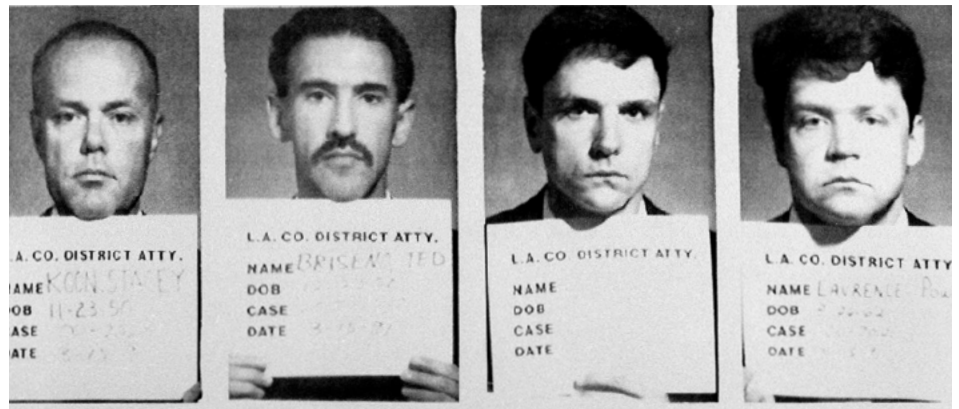
**S**ISAY WAS NOT COMMITTING A VIOLENT crime when Snellville police began chasing his vehicle. After he was run off the road, his vehicle was stuck. Whitehead verified that, during the short chase, only one other vehicle was in the vicinity. According to all the relevant police authorities, a SWAT team—with armored vehicles—was called in to deal with one man with a single handgun. No police officers were injured as a result of the altercation. At the very least, this case appears to be one in which a miniature army was dispatched to deal with one man over missing paperwork.

**A miniature army was dispatched to deal with one man over missing paperwork.**

According to *The New York Times*, Butch Sanders, the Snellville city manager, claimed Sisay discharged his weapon five times. But Sanders told me that he “did not mention a specific number of shots.” He stopped responding to my e-mails after I asked him to clarify whether he maintains that the *Times* misrepresented the details of its reporter’s conversation with him. Whitehead, however, said that Sisay was in possession of a five-chamber revolver and that all its shots had been discharged. A photo of the car, after it was taken in for evidence, shows white stickers placed next to every bullet hole. There are dozens. If Sisay did shoot five times, the rest must have been fired by law enforcement. Was all this necessary for one man who was not presenting a danger to the public?

While I conducted my investigation into the killing of Sisay, a 27-year-old Black man named Rayshard Brooks was killed by Atlanta police officers. They claimed to have received a call from a local Wendy’s, where Brooks had fallen asleep in his car in the drive-through line. Video of the killing, recorded by a bystander, was widely seen. In response, the Atlanta PD released body camera footage of the killing, even though the case is under investigation by the GBI. Under Georgia law, the choice is the police department’s alone. ■

**The 1991 booking photos** of the four police officers indicted for brutalizing Rodney King in a videotaped attack. From left: Sgt. Stacey C. Koon, Officer Theodore J. Briseno, Officer Timothy E. Wind, and Officer Laurence Powell.



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# Letters

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(continued from page 2)

leading incumbent Senator Ed Markey among voters of color by double digits in every public poll. We encourage *The Nation* to come to Massachusetts and report on why. Perhaps it is because Kennedy understands how deeply impacted Black lives are by erasers in the hands of white allies. As he wrote in *The Washington Post*, "The reckoning going on in this country today is a reflection of what the Rev. [Martin Luther] King himself warned us of—that it is the silence of friends, not the words of enemies, that ultimately protects American shackles." *The Nation* owes its readers better.

TONY BREWER, BOSTON

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JACQUES "TEDDY" CHERY,  
MEDFORD

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CLAUDIA THOMPSON, MALDEN

LINDA WHITLOCK, NEWTON

BENNIE WILEY, CHESTNUT HILL

FLETCHER WILEY, CHESTNUT HILL

## Hibbett Responds

Yes, Tompkins is Black, and no, I did not pat the Kennedy campaign on the back for having the basic common sense not to appoint a white police officer

as its race-and-criminal-justice adviser amid mass protests decrying police brutality and abuse of power. Repeated studies have found that diversifying police forces does not significantly reduce rates of brutality and killing. An officer's race does not absolve the police of the disproportionate and inherently violent power they have over civilians. I don't think that there is any cop—brutal or gentle, mean or nice, white or Black—who would be appropriate for Tompkins's position on the Kennedy campaign.

It is this imbalance of power that makes Tompkins's role in the July 7 debate between Kennedy and Markey such an egregious offense. Not only does he work for the Kennedy campaign, but he also incarcerates the people who asked the questions. Do I really have to explain how that's undemocratic?

I didn't dig into Tompkins's progressive bona fides because the piece wasn't actually about him; it was about the campaign. A writer can't include everything about everyone. You didn't mention that Warren has endorsed Markey in this race or that Kennedy endorsed then-incumbent Representative Mike Capuano over Pressley in 2018. But I get it; every argument has a limited scope.

I apologize for any offense I caused. I didn't state the race of any politician mentioned in the piece—and that's what these people are to me: politicians. They are not my friends, and I would like for our legislators to be chosen based on policy, not personality. I just hope my home state agrees in the September primary.

MAIA HIBBETT  
NEW YORK

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# Books & the Arts



## IN THE FIRE OF ACTIVISM

Julian Bond's life in politics and protest

by ROBERT GREENE II

In May of 1969, *Ebony* magazine ran a profile of Julian Bond, the activist and civil rights leader who had recently been reelected to the Georgia House of Representatives. With the United States mere weeks away from putting a man on the moon and the war in Vietnam still raging, the magazine wanted to take stock of where Black America found itself at the end of the decade. It was a moment of both retrospection about the civil rights

movement and excitement about what the future held for African American politics. Yet Bond had been fighting for freedom and justice for more than a decade, and it showed. *Ebony's* David Llorens wrote, "Attractive cat that he is, Julian Bond looks tired."

The profile sought to examine what it meant for a radical stalwart, struggling against a broken system from the outside, to become a politician struggling to effect change from within it. Bond's shift "from protest to politics," as Bayard Rustin put it in an article earlier in the decade, was a measure of how far the movement had changed

Southern society. That Bond was one of the first Black people to serve in the Georgia legislature generations after Reconstruction was also a measure of how much further the nation as a whole had to go.

After describing Bond's work as a state representative, his speaking tours at colleges, and his deepening involvement in the Democratic Party as its New Deal coalition started to unravel, Llorens moved on to discuss the twin pillars of pride and ambivalence that supported Bond's new role. These were the same pillars that held up the aspirations and fears of so many African Americans in

---

*Robert Greene II is an assistant professor of history at Claflin University and has written for Jacobin, In These Times, and Dissent.*

the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement. As Llorens wrote, “Julian Bond, as a politician, represents hope for the freedom of black people,” but it was a hope “entirely dependent upon the possibility that white people are capable of a humane and non-racist America.” For Llorens, this hope was real and somewhat tangible. But as he noted at the end of the passage, it depended on a radical change in the thought and action of white Americans—something that in 1969 still appeared far off because of a continuation of the “backlash politics” that had defined American political, social, cultural, and intellectual discourse ever since Reconstruction.

That mix of felt urgency and anxious uncertainty about how much change could be made in American society would define Bond’s efforts for much of his career. His time in office, like his time as an activist, would be characterized by both his hopes for greater social equality and the continuing need to fight for such change when these hopes were too often thwarted. This tension was central to nearly all of his writing, much of which is now collected in a new book, *Race Man*, edited by the historian Michael G. Long.

*Race Man* captures the full output of Bond’s long and distinguished career, first as an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, then as a member of the Georgia legislature (in the House and later in the Senate), then as a traveling academic who taught about his experiences in the social upheavals of the ’60s, and finally as a writer and aging lion of the civil rights movement still fighting to hold on to the ideals of his youth. Along the way, the book also makes clear a set of themes and quandaries that have troubled so much of the history of the American left: What is lost in the movement from protest to politics? How can lasting change be achieved in the face of unsatisfying compromise? How can radicals and activists carry the torch of emancipation and equality in an age in which both major parties and many voters appear, at best, apathetic to meaningful change and, at worst, downright hostile to it?

Bond’s years as an activist also offer a guide through the intellectual and political history of the left in the second half of the 20th century. As Long argues in his introduction, Bond’s importance to the history of the United States and the American left in particular is nearly impossible to overestimate today. Very few Americans, he writes, “had sought more consistently

## Race Man

*Selected Works, 1960–2015*

By Julian Bond

Edited by Michael G. Long

City Lights Publishers. 304 pp. \$22.95

and doggedly to establish solid connections between the black civil rights movement and the many progressive movements it sometimes unpredictably inspired.”

**J**ulian Bond was born in 1940 in Nashville. His father, Horace Mann Bond, was the first president of Fort Valley State University in Georgia and later became the first Black president of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, both historically Black institutions. While serving as a college president, Horace Bond participated in the intellectual ferment of the World War II and early Cold War years. He did considerable research to support the NAACP’s arguments in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954 and served as a prominent civil rights advocate during the period. The elder Bond’s participation in the rarefied world of African American educators and intellectuals meant that his son was exposed to many of the leaders of Black America from an early age. A famous image of Julian Bond as a young boy, for example, shows him side by side with the actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson. The photograph itself is a testament to the intergenerational links between the different civil rights cohorts.

Yet Bond’s early exposure to the intellectual creativity and political activism of Black America would hardly shield him from the racism and violence spawned by white supremacy. In the Jim Crow South, Bond saw racism and discrimination all around him—a radicalizing experience that never left him, even after he and his family moved to Pennsylvania when his father became the head of Lincoln University. Bond’s growing politicization throughout the ’50s was only deepened by his years at the George School, a prep school founded by Quakers, where he began to develop his long-term fascination with pacifism.

In 1957, Bond returned to Georgia to attend Morehouse College. Long a hotbed of Black struggle and uplift, the school helped launch his career in civil rights activism. He met Martin Luther King Jr. in 1960 while at Morehouse, and that year he cofounded, with fellow student Lonnie King, the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights, which eventually led

to his involvement in the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Bond immediately understood the significance of SNCC and the role that students could play in expanding the civil rights movement. The younger generation of Black Americans was ready to use new tactics to fight for the kind of social change their parents and grandparents sought in previous eras. Reflecting on the rise of these new organizations, Bond wrote, “The struggle for human rights is a constant fight, and one which the students do not plan to relinquish until full equality is won for *all* men.”

Against the backdrop of African nations declaring their independence abroad and civil rights agitation growing at home, 1960 saw a wave of sit-ins, starting in Greensboro, N.C. Four students at North Carolina A&T, a Black college, decided to stage a sit-in, adopting the tactics of non-violent direct action already being used by various civil rights organizations. Word of the sit-ins spread across the South, spurring even more sit-ins as well as Bond’s participation in Atlanta. “Why don’t we make it happen here?” Lonnie King said to Bond in February 1960. That brief conversation, between two young men who yearned to be part of the great moral and political issue of their age, sparked Bond’s lifelong service to the movement.

Bond participated in the sit-ins in Atlanta that year and in a whirlwind series of campaigns across the South as the communications director of SNCC. Leaving Morehouse to dedicate himself to this work full-time, Bond, like many other young Black Americans, accepted that he would have to relinquish the comforts of the college campus and risk life and limb in the fire of activism. At this time, he began to think in broader terms about the idea of human rights, looking beyond America’s shores to recognize the violence and oppression that the country inflicted on various peoples of color elsewhere—an internationalism that he would soon marry to his domestic egalitarianism.

By the mid-’60s, after five years of working with SNCC, Bond began to grow frustrated. While he recognized the changing nature of struggle, he had always imagined SNCC as an organization that would embrace everyone, and he became worried about its increasingly separatist politics. “I didn’t like the direction it seemed to be taking,” he recalled, especially as SNCC embraced the idea of becoming an exclusively Black organization.



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EMILY'S  
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Despite Bond's ambivalence about SNCC's separatist turn, the organization continued to exert a major influence on his life, especially with its anti-imperialist politics in the middle of the decade. SNCC denounced the Vietnam War, and Bond grew increasingly active in anti-war efforts. He also began to consider running for office. In early 1965, Rustin made his appeal to civil rights activists to turn "from protest to politics," arguing that the problems they would continue to face, even after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, required more than demonstrations. By then, Bond was preparing a run for the Georgia House of Representatives, and he was joined by the many different strands of the Black freedom struggle—the mainstream civil rights movement, Black nationalists, and the growing number of African Americans active in the Democratic Party—that were also making the move.

After his election, Bond found himself at a curious intersection of local, national, and international politics when the state House refused to seat him because he had endorsed SNCC's anti-war stance. SNCC, Martin Luther King Jr., and other activists rallied to defend Bond's right to represent his constituency in Atlanta.

Eventually the Supreme Court ruled, 9–0, in *Bond v. Floyd* that his right to free speech had been violated by the state House's vote to deny him a seat.

After Bond became a legislator, he found that more of his peers were following in his footsteps. People like John Lewis, Marion Barry, and Jim Clyburn, after years in the streets demanding change, were now running for office as they sought to secure and extend the gains they had helped win. It seemed the logical next step, even if the change that could be achieved in state legislatures sometimes appeared small compared with what could be done at the federal level. And yet, as Llorens wrote in *Ebony*, that kind of work mattered as well: Basic services like streetlights, garbage removal, sewage, repairing roads, and draining water from flooded basements were "some of the things we need" as Julian sees it, and he takes pride in being able to use his political weight to deliver them. "Those are things my constituents weren't always able to get in the past," he says. Nor are most of his constituents, who...are

victims of poverty, apt to forget the water removed or the street repaired."

The essays in *Race Man* nicely illustrate this trajectory from college activist to elected official (and beyond). Broken into 10 sections, the book traces Bond's political formation throughout these periods of his life. The problems of white supremacy, capitalism, imperialism, and misogyny were his fights throughout, even if they all changed shape. From the struggle against Jim Crow to the battle for LGBTQ rights, he remained convinced that it was necessary to agitate on behalf of the powerless outside the halls of power, but as he got older, he became convinced one had to do it from inside them as well. Whether as an activist struggling for voting rights or as a politician in the Georgia legislature redrawing district boundaries, Bond insisted that only through a combination of movements and policy could social change be achieved.



Bond's essays capture the intellectual world that inspired him and that he helped inspire in turn. Though dedicated to egalitarian politics, he often found himself in heated debate with other elements of the left. This was especially true in the late '60s, as the hope of nonviolent

civil disobedience peacefully changing American society began to buckle under the strain of Vietnam, the half-hearted War on Poverty, and the ever-present specter of white backlash. The rise of the Black power movement offered Bond and other civil rights activists a unique challenge: They embraced many key components of this more radical turn but also struggled to find their way among its constituency, one that increasingly seemed to view the gains they had won as limited and incomplete.

Of course, in many ways those gains were incomplete, and reading Bond's response to his more radical contemporaries, one can see that he might have missed how their militant spirit—not to mention their ability to continue to find common cause with social movements all over the world—helped, in the long run, to solidify the reforms he and his colleagues had won. An example of this is seen in his writings about South Africa and the growing movement to divest from the apartheid state, in which Bond sounded far more like his more radical peers. "There is an insepara-

ble connection between black Africa and black America," he argued in 1978 while participating in a protest against a Davis Cup match between the United States and South Africa in Nashville. This was not a coincidence: After all, Bond was also in pursuit of an equality far greater than the federal government was willing to offer, and the civil rights liberalism that their protest spawned was, in their view, only the beginning, not the end point. Likewise, Bond, who hewed steadfastly to pacifism early in his public life, also began to doubt, with his more radical colleagues, its efficacy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and while he lauded the achievements of the sit-ins, he came to recognize the clear limits of early civil rights activism. Indeed, that was one of the reasons he turned to electoral politics.

Bond's ambivalence about the growing radicalism of SNCC was also rooted in his desire for more concrete action. Intimately aware of the organization's internal discord, he concluded that it had become mired at times in what he called "too much democracy" and a lack of decision-making by its leaders. He did not appear to question SNCC's democratic goals, but he felt that by 1967 its leadership was no longer taking responsibility for the group's decisions, in terms of both immediate tactics and long-term strategies.

One policy change in particular frustrated him: the separatism that no longer sought to build a multiracial membership in SNCC. Bond opposed this separatism on principle as well as for practical reasons, writing in 1967 that it would lead to "near unanimous condemnation" and cause SNCC activists to narrow the scope of their activities, "effectively contained by their own unwillingness to trust the 'outside world.'" For Bond, part of the lesson of the '60s was that activism alone was not enough; one had to have a programmatic plan of action for both grassroots organizing and building political power in the face of rampant white backlash.

Once in office, that was exactly what Bond attempted to do. He wanted to find a way around the dead end that movement politics appeared to face in the late '60s and the political weaknesses of white liberal complacency in the early '70s. While serving in the Georgia legislature, he amassed a national reputation, and by 1972, he began contributing serious ideas to the political ferment of that era.

Bond participated in the discussions



across the South that led to the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Ind. His criticism of both the American left and mainstream liberalism grew more pointed as the decade progressed, when he repeatedly expressed his deep ambivalence—if not outright hostility—toward the presidential campaign and then presidency of former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. “Southern Baptists are fond of saying that ‘prayer changes things,’” Bond wrote. “Jimmy Carter’s religiosity has certainly had that effect on him, in fact has changed him from left to right to center so many times that converts to the Carter cause ought to take a cue from an earlier apostle, Thomas, who doubted.” In the end, Bond was one of the few mainstream Black civil rights activists turned politicians who refused to back Carter during his 1976 run.

For Bond, Carter’s candidacy—as well as his backing by so many prominent African Americans—was less a betrayal than a reminder of how weak the Black vote was as a bloc within or, if need be, outside the Democratic Party. “American politics has always been group politics,” Bond wrote in 1977, during the first year of Carter’s administration, and Black movements and politicians needed to embrace this fact and form a cohesive electoral faction.

Bond’s arguments mirrored those put forth a decade earlier in the book *Black Power* by Charles V. Hamilton and the future Kwame Ture about the necessity for independent political action, now applied to electoral politics. And he was not wrong, either. During Reconstruction, Southern Black men formed the backbone of the Republican Party below the Mason-Dixon Line and thus wielded considerable power. During the New Deal era, both major parties sought Black voters while carefully trying to not antagonize pro-segregation white Southerners. In the ’70s, with the New Right on the rise and liberalism—as well as the broader ideas of social democracy—under threat across the Western world, Bond believed it was more urgent than ever for Black Americans to acquire sustained political power. “The sooner we realize the difference between elections and governing, the better able we’ll be to form ourselves into a political bloc,” he wrote.

This came, ironically, after Bond argued in 1972 that “coalition politics always weakens at least one partner in the coalition rather than strengthens both partners” (a fear Hamilton and Ture also voiced). Such questions, of course, are still with us, especially

concerning the direction of the Democratic Party and whether it has taken generations of Black voters for granted.

One of the advantages of *Race Man* is that instead of shuffling Bond’s writings together by theme, Long presents them in chronological order so we can chart Bond’s evolution as well as his consistency. We can see his thinking change over time on a wide variety of topics—sometimes dramatically—and while we can see the shifts in his tactics and strategies, we also see just how consistent his principles remained. However, the book’s chronological structure slightly overdetermines Bond’s changes: We lose sight of the complicated nature of the broader civil rights and Black power movements, and at times it can be difficult to situate his arguments in the context of national politics and international tumult. From almost the outset of his career, Bond was writing from within the milieu of a Black freedom movement that inspired and was inspired by other movements in pursuit of freedom, justice, and equality elsewhere in the world.

This is why Bond’s seamless movement from domestic campaigns to international

policy mirrored a broader awareness among Black Americans of the need to get more involved in global affairs. It was also why there were sometimes moments of fierce friction, as displayed in the arguments Bond had in the ’70s with the growing environmental movement. Pleading with its champions to look past a narrow politics of conservation and local resistance, he insisted, much like climate change activists today, that “environmental pollution is only a symptom of the moral and political pollution at its core.... Long before industrial filth fouled the rivers, lakes, and air of this continent, the bitter salt of slaves’ sweat and tears soured the [once] fertile soil and the blood of noble red men soaked the fields and plains.”

Bond’s insistence that the environmental movement’s rhetoric about a ticking “population bomb” was equally misguided anticipated the birth of a more diverse and robust movement that sought to think more systemically about environmental problems. The growth of the environmental justice movement in the ’70s and ’80s—a Blacker, poorer relative of the better-known movement that spawned Earth Day in 1970—ameliorated Bond’s fears by tapping into long-held concerns

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by Black Americans and others about the relationships between racism, land ownership, and environmental waste. This more sophisticated environmentalism also drew Bond into its movement, and he got arrested in 2013 at the White House while protesting the Keystone XL pipeline alongside members of the Sierra Club and in defiance of the nation's first Black president.

Bond was likewise concerned about a growing disconnect between activists and ordinary people in the 1970s. As Black power gave way to a Black liberalism safely ensconced in the Democratic Party, he continued to wonder if activists had lost their way. "It suggests that the supposed and alleged security of the college campus is not the proper place from which to engage in social criticism of people who seldom see any book but the Bible from year to year," he warned, critiquing what he saw as an activism that had become too comfortable

in the ivory tower, far removed from the everyday needs of working people.

By the late '70s and early '80s, Bond had become, for many Americans, an avatar of the civil rights movement and its legacy. He lent his voice to the groundbreaking miniseries *Eyes on the Prize*, serving as a one-man Greek chorus for the now-iconic struggle. He hosted an early episode of *Saturday Night Live*, cementing his status as a national public figure. But there was an increasing sense that Bond had failed to live up to his early promise on the political stage and that as his celebrity grew, so did his distance from his constituents in Georgia. In a bruising 1986 race for the US House of Representatives that pitted him against his friend and colleague from the civil rights movement John Lewis, Bond was criticized for having lost his way. Rumors that he used drugs were

whispered about in Atlanta and were blown wide open when Lewis challenged him to a drug test. "I love Julian like a brother," Lewis said in a 1990 profile of the two men in *Atlanta* magazine. "But he fumbled the ball. He had unbelievable opportunities. He just didn't take advantage."

Part of what hurt Bond's campaign, as *The New York Times* pointed out after his defeat, was the concern that his "thousands of speaking engagements and television appearances elsewhere" hampered his ability to be an effective voice in the Georgia Senate. That lost him the trust and goodwill he needed to win what turned out to be his toughest—and final—political campaign. After the election, Bond accepted teaching positions at several distinguished institutions, including Harvard and American University, and he reflected on the charge that he had failed to live up to his potential as the man who could have been the nation's first Black vice president, perhaps even its first Black president. "I can't do what other people want me to do," he said. "I'm absolutely content and fulfilled right now [teaching and lecturing]. It's enough for me. I'm confused as to why it's not enough for anyone else."

Bond remained active in left political circles for the rest of his life, and he continued to consider how one could be radical and yet work within the system, sounding the alarm during George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's presidencies on a range of issues, especially the erosion of voting rights and the need to fight for LGBTQ rights.

It is difficult to imagine a thorough history of the American left after 1960 that doesn't include Bond and the many roles he played: as a communications director for SNCC, as a state legislator for 20 years, as the first president of the Southern Poverty Law Center (a position he assumed in 1971), as the voice that millions of people associated with the civil rights movement thanks to *Eyes on the Prize*, and as an elder statesman of the movement before his death in 2015. His balancing act between radicalism and reform, between movements and party politics, still speaks to the divides and the cohesiveness of the left. Fighting for freedom in the streets, in the classrooms, and in the halls of power was all part of Bond's tool kit. Reading his essays, we are reminded that the challenges of forging a principled yet practical path forward are nothing new—and that Bond is someone who might serve as a guide in our own uncertain times. We cannot be afraid of difficult debates or of changing tactics when necessary. Julian Bond proved that, time and time again. ■

## The Love Poems of Virginia

Now the love poems that aren't about being devoured  
Are about being executed.  
One can see the naturalness  
Of the line, how it extends, how it was thought  
Into the holes of the future by an unruly wish  
Under pressure.

Which is to say: You do not want  
To share a language, lover.  
You want to do something.  
You want to constitute an enemy.  
You want to organize. You want  
To learn. You want to work.

This punctured tire, the chairs  
Falling apart, the de-articulated toys around us.  
The fixable is here, now, slow, waiting,  
Violent and curled  
On the tongue of an impossible language.  
And when you kiss me you say see

We don't need it. We don't need any of it. Not  
This tired love, not someone else's future.  
Not another poem about the lover's body, however  
Bloused in coastal light or tenderly parted  
Into new forms. The songs that matter never stay written  
Down when there are plantations to burn—

SCOTT CHALLENGER





# THE USER ALWAYS LOSES

How did the Internet get so bad?

by LISA BORST

In the mid-1990s, as part of a carpet-bombing campaign to market the still nascent World Wide Web to potential consumers, America Online offered free dial-up Internet trials and mailed CDs containing software to several million Americans. Reportedly, half the CDs in the world at one point were branded with the AOL logo. For several weeks in 1998, the company apparently used the entirety of the earth's CD manufacturing power.

The ad blitz was an astonishing, almost unbelievable feat of logistics, and it set the stage for the Internet as we know it today—that is, as one of history's most expensive, extractive, and manipulative advertising apparatuses, dominated by a shrinking handful of giant platforms. The story is one of the countless pieces of Internet history breezily covered in Joanne McNeil's new book, *Lurking: How a Person Became a User*, a conversational and idiosyncratic account of the past 30 years of online life that reminds us that the Internet didn't have to become what it is today.

*Lurking* is written from a layperson's

Lisa Borst lives in New York and works at n+1.

perspective—that of the everyday surfers, posters, and especially the eponymous lurkers who have been witness to the Internet's development over time, even if they haven't participated in guiding it. What interests McNeil is the shifting experiences of daily online life for these users, not the developers, engineers, and CEOs whose hagiographies have until recently dominated the landscape of trade tech writing. In this way, her book is structured as a kind of people's history of the Internet, a bottom-up chronicle of online expression and digital environments that prioritizes the textures and cultures of the Internet's demos. It's a project rooted in a sense of optimism about the power of the user against the sort of massive corporate might on display in AOL's campaign. "Infrastructure is power, but it is not the law," McNeil writes, "which means there is still an opportunity for users—as individuals and collectives, and working with government bodies—to hold platforms accountable."

Alongside this history, *Lurking* provides richly descriptive narratives of the more familiar and quotidian dramas that generate these platforms' content: the emergence of

trolling and harassment in digital communities built with utopian aims, the rise and fall of Internet microcelebrities, and the homogenization of user experience on a World Wide Web that has swelled ever vaster (from one website for roughly every 9,000 users in the mid-'90s to about one for every three today, according to McNeil).

The result is a fast-paced and sometimes excursive chronicle of online communities and identities that is less interested, for example, in detailing the enormous infrastructure required to take over global CD production than in examining how it felt to come of age on AOL. It's a story that will be broadly recognizable to many but that, by prioritizing the means by which users have shaped and manipulated their platforms, occasionally passes over the grimmer and more opaque policy decisions and business strategies that allow platforms to shape and manipulate their users.

McNeil has had a hand in much of the better critical Internet writing of the past decade. Her career has seen her involved with many prominent Internet-focused publications and research groups, from the New Museum's *Rbizome*, where she was an editor in the early 2010s, to New York's Eyebeam Art + Technology Center and the School for Poetic Computation, an artist-run coding and design institute. The computer, she writes, is "where I grew up."

The chronology sketched in *Lurking*—beginning in the mid-'90s, when the Internet became accessible to a critical mass of Americans—is more or less coterminous with McNeil's biography, and some of the strongest parts of the book are written as memoir. She writes movingly and stylishly of the friendships she forged online as a teenager in chat rooms devoted to riot grrrl zines (always under a screen name: "Why on earth would I be myself online—a person I hated?") and with lucid humor, then genuine anger, about her experiences with online harassment. But occasionally her intimacy with the material leads *Lurking* to read less like a diverse and polyphonic people's history and more like a single person's history, extrapolated—a warm and often firsthand account of three decades of life online that, viewed from a distance, might nevertheless be considered enormously depressing. The story of the Internet since the mid-'90s is, of course, also one of hyperconsolidation, increasingly nightmarish privacy violations, and a brutal competition for clicks. Between its personal moments, McNeil's book

focuses on the centralization and market dominance of a diminishingly few social media platforms, over a period when “the dream of cyberspace—strangers, strangeness, anonymity, and spontaneity—lost out to order, advertising, surveillance, and cut-throat corporatism.”

In her studies of AOL, Friendster, Tumblr, Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as the less explicitly social (though still theoretically user-oriented) Google and Wikipedia, McNeil takes a diachronic approach, surveying changes in user behavior over time. Often she seems to be after a sort of gestalt principle of platforms: What historical conditions did the collective voice of Myspace articulate? Why did blogging take off as a shared response to the US invasion of Iraq? (When “the Internet became an ideal valve to release opinions,” she writes, “who didn’t have an opinion on the Iraq war?”) What weirder and more regional Internet communities and communication habits were lost in the shift to broadband service?

McNeil is a sharp reader and critic, and many of her observations assume the form of a rhetorical analysis or notes on trends in user experience. She’s great with epithets, and her descriptions of the voices and affects that have emerged from platform to platform are by turns damning and sympathetic. Twitter, with its “distributed punditry,” is “jangly and feral”; AOL was “pedestrian,

## Lurking

*How a Person Became a User*

By Joanne McNeil

MCD. 304 pp. \$28

hypercapitalist, and a failure”; 4chan is “resilient in its regressiveness.” Of Friendster, she writes, “Those of us who were once xSonicYouthx and Marathon83 were recast as John S and Katie L (but not yet John Smith and Katie Lee)” —a startlingly concise one-sentence history of compulsory nonanonymity told via usernames, even if it’s hardly news to anyone who’s been online longer than a few years.

A chapter on search engines similarly notes a phenomenon that seemed intuitively familiar, though I’d never seen it named before. “Search strings used to be phrased like ingredients: ‘revolution AND french OR russian NOT american,’” McNeil writes. But in the past two decades, the language and tone of our search queries have become more baroque and confessional. “When I search for information now, I feel like I should add ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ to every request. There is no way around it, talking to the Google search bar like a human generates more relevant results.” This feels anecdotally true; I’ve certainly gotten into the habit of phrasing my searches, as McNeil notes, along the lines of “‘how do i download a printer driver for mac’ rather than ‘download printer driver mac.’” Al-

though *Lurking* is studded with perceptive observations about our shifting behavioral and emotional relationships with platforms, it’s less interested in addressing the policy decisions and funding streams that quietly guide these changes. Google is, as McNeil writes, “the intermediary between my ideas and action forward, the glue between my questions and answers, a placeholder for thoughts and a way to sort my desires.” But it’s also an advertising, machine-learning, and data-collection regime, with material incentives for addressing it as an advice column rather than an algorithm.

“When users are scapegoated, Silicon Valley is left off the hook,” McNeil writes in a passage on disinformation campaigns on Twitter. We might read this conclusion as the driving premise of her book. By analyzing user behavior as the labor—the “content and dis-content”—of real people, *Lurking* aims, fundamentally, to make a case against tech companies’ consistent “contempt for outsiders—and users.” But a reader may be left wondering whether a primarily descriptive and personal, bottom-up account can put Silicon Valley on the hook, either. A chapter on AOL and anonymity online, for instance, focuses chiefly on the kinds of communities the platform enabled; it’s clouded with nostalgic recollections of message boards and dead channels, fond roasts of AOL users as the “fanny-pack masses, an invasion of the

## Status Update

I am safe. I am here! I’ve survived the shooting,  
bombing, hurricane, flood of numbers streaming

across a screen in Silicon Valley where some kid  
codes *We are safe*. All’s well, we buzz from our train

seats, offices, stalls; the bills all canceled, the old  
debts wiped clean. I shall go gently into that good

night on a Tuesday in spring surrounded by books  
and those I love, a smile bright as silver spread

across my face. I am safe—what’s dangerous is  
elsewhere!, breathing down someone else’s neck,

a bat hovering over the baby in the bassinet.  
We must love ourselves where we lie! I am safe

on the coast, in a church, hung out to dry.  
I am safe in the field, salt-parched, gut-drunk,

overdue to call home. I am safe, my loved one,  
my sweet, dear stranger. Is anyplace lovelier

than this nothingness? Here, there is no bottom  
to the well, no arsenic, no chair with straps and wires

to rattle the fillings in our teeth. There’s no huntsman,  
no one deranged, our delicate watches never running



squares.” This is a company that, in 2006, intentionally leaked the partly anonymized search terms of 650,000 Americans in a privacy breach that swiftly led to the public exposure of a number of users based on their identifying (and often deeply strange) search histories.

Although that’s exactly the kind of dehumanizing corporate history behind the story of how a person became a user, we don’t hear about it in *Lurking*. Instead we get studies of users’ changing search habits, analyses that occasionally exaggerate the role of users in creating those habits.

**B**y the end of *Lurking*, we’re in the present, and McNeil has hit an angry, polemical stride. “In this book I have tried to maintain a consistent tone of criticism that is not openly combative,” she writes, “less ‘this is wrong’ than ‘isn’t it interesting how wrong this is,’ but I have found it next to impossible to maintain this distance when it comes to the topic of Facebook. I hate it.... The company is one of the biggest mistakes in modern history, a digital cesspool that, while calamitous when it fails, is at its most dangerous when it works as intended. Facebook is an ant farm of humanity.”

An ant farm of humanity! This is McNeil in her best and most persuasive mode—as colloquial and triumphantly invective as a blog post but with better research. Much of

her writing, in fact, echoes the formal pleasures and occasional frustrations of prose styles native to the Internet. Recalling her earliest use of the Web amid the “provocative optimism” of mid-’90s techno-utopian rhetoric, she writes, “Information superhighway or cyberspace, I remember it like an intense dream; my feelings come before the details, tone and emotions before coherence.” It’s a potent, tweet-length account of the hours lost to scrolling—and a fitting description for a book in which tone can occasionally outpace coherence.

Despite *Lurking*’s attentiveness to affect and user experiences, the book is oddly organized. Associative and loping, it almost mirrors the way one experiences the Internet. Each of its seven chapter titles addresses a specific concern (like “Search,” “Anonymity,” and “Sharing”), but each chapter departs quickly from its nominal mission, sometimes getting bogged down in unwieldy case studies that range from original reporting and testimonials (an interview with a Google Street View driver, a profile of a Wikipedia editor) to summaries of canonical media studies like Julian Dibbell’s “A Rape in Cyberspace.” Rapidly expanding and contracting in scope and linked by meandering transitions, the book has a flavor of disorganization that will feel familiar to those of us who have spent many hours browsing aimlessly: digressive, curious, sometimes a little haphazard.

**M**cNeil ends *Lurking* with a “longing for an Internet that is better, for Internet communities that haven’t come into being yet, certainly not on a mass scale, and even then, nothing lasting.” Life online, her book reminds us, used to be a little more capacious and strange. The smaller and more user-driven Internet communities of the past—the websites and services that “could not compete with the speed and price points of corporate broadband” after the dot-com collapse—might offer a model for a more democratic and less revenue-driven Internet in the future. She sees an imperfect example of one such community in Wikipedia, a platform that remains “global and open, transactional and pluralistic, chaotic and rule-based, anonymous apart from usernames and IP addresses,” and anachronistically ungoverned by the market logic of other websites its size. The whole platform, McNeil writes, can seem like a “nineties cyberspace holdover,” and an Internet that scaled up some of Wikipedia’s ethos would share qualities with the pre-broadband, pre-duopoly Internet that existed when *Lurking* begins: more local, less obligatory, less competitive and commercial.

Is such a vision achievable anytime soon? *Lurking* was published in late February, a few weeks before the era of social distancing transformed the Internet from the tool and distraction that McNeil describes (“a hell

out of time, the barbs clasped to the dandelion’s skull forever, the dogs content on their leads until—

Disaster strikes. We reenter our watery bodies, their soft bones, tap the pale dull screen to

whisper *I’m safe*. In my little town, with my white night gown and box of sleeping pills; in my county

that’s real and true with its clothespins and postman, its poisonous tree, its constituents all over the map,

its middle-class spoils, cold grocery aisles, its toll gate nobody wants to pay, its trailer park and auto-

body repair, its courthouse whose inner chamber’s enclosed by a labyrinth of halls that guards the room

holding a pock-marked metallic stone—the meteor locked away in its case of glass, as if to suggest,

as if to say without really saying, that though we’re dead men walking, there’s nothing to fear, the air is clear,

that one dark day the sky fell well and good behind us.

SHARA LESSLEY

that is fun”) into the very precondition for sociality and solidarity: In an era of quarantine, the Internet became a vital site for community. Reread *Lurking* while confined to one’s home, and McNeil’s vision for a different and better Internet takes on a new salience. In the first weeks of the pandemic, it sometimes seemed the Internet had gotten a little weirder—more frantic and more jittery, certainly, but with occasional glimpses of the possibility for something different and less consolidated. Neighborhood-based mutual aid efforts emerged or strengthened, gaining traction on surprising platforms like the workplace messaging app Slack. Blogging enjoyed a bit of a renaissance as well, perhaps because, like the Iraq War, the pandemic and its mismanagement invite opinions from everyone. Scrolling through Twitter this spring, I remembered McNeil’s invocation of tech journalism circa the platform’s launch. “Early criticism of Twitter could be distilled to a single (ironically tweetlike) sentence: ‘No one cares what you had for breakfast,’” she writes. (“It was always breakfast,” she adds. “Never dinner, never snacks.”) I’ve never seen more tweets about breakfast than I did in the first weeks of lockdown—until suddenly, instead of breakfast, there were photos from uprisings, videos of police brutality, chains of donation receipts to bail funds. Since the beginning of the protests in response to George Floyd’s murder, the user-driven parts of the Internet have looked and felt alive in a whole other way: a joyful, mournful, militant, redistributive mobilization of for-profit platforms to imagine something else. I can’t stop looking at it.

The pandemic, of course, illuminated the consequences of the digital divide. The Internet access needed to trawl Twitter all day—or to complete one’s newly remote work duties or school classes—is a resource that’s nowhere near evenly distributed, as long as broadband continues to be controlled by one or two conglomerates across most of the country.

At its most persuasive, McNeil’s book reminds us that life online, structured from the beginning by private interests, only heightens the inequalities of life off-line. A better and more equitable Internet would, like *Lurking*, begin with the premise that every user is a person, something our existing platforms have consistently failed to do. The past few months have only made it clearer that market-based solutions can’t build the better and fairer health care or justice systems we badly need. They won’t build the healthier and fairer Internet we deserve, either. ■



# FUNK FOR THE FUTURE

Nick Hakim’s *Will This Make Me Good*

by **MARCUS J. MOORE**

**W**hen Nick Hakim sings, it’s as if he were talking to you and no one else. There’s a certain comfort to his music, and across two EPs and his first full-length album, his songs impart the feeling of an intimate, closed-door conversation with a dear friend.

In his earlier work, like the 2014 EP

*Marcus J. Moore is a contributing writer for The Nation and the author of the forthcoming book The Butterfly Effect: How Kendrick Lamar Ignited the Soul of Black America.*

*Where Will We Go*, his sound was more traditional, veering toward straightforward R&B cuts about heartbreak, sensuality, and romance. Three years later, on the LP *Green Twins*, his music took on a psychedelic aura. “Roller Skates,” “Miss Chew,” and “Slowly” borrowed the sounds of ’70s soul, down to the analog cassette hiss. In the best way, *Green Twins* played like a warped vinyl record you’d find in a cardboard box in your parents’ house or evoked that forgotten classic you snagged from a stoop sale because the cover looked cool. It spoke to Hakim’s creative charm:



While he conjured a bygone era of experimental soul music, he took from the past without leaning too heavily on it. His art salutes legends like Shuggie Otis and Milton Nascimento, but it's still very much Nick Hakim.

For his new album, *Will This Make Me Good*, the D.C.-born Hakim treks deeper into his retro aesthetic, compiling an LP of dusty tape loops, meditative chants, and lo-fi beats that, when paired with his rich falsetto, feels equally nostalgic and trippy, a kaleidoscopic mix of funk-infused soul informed by late '90s Maxwell and Voodoo-era D'Angelo. This album presents Hakim as a despondent drifter in search of peace away from the chaos and nonsense he encounters in daily life. This is still love music, though not in the lustful sense. Throughout the album, he urges us to adore the planet, be one with our communities, and be mindful of the mental health of friends and strangers alike.

"Qadir," a sweeping seven-minute epic dedicated to a late friend with that name, is the best summation of the album's thematic focus, even if he explores personal pain and US politics on other parts of the LP. It was the first song Hakim wrote for *Will This Make Me Good*, and it sets a pensive tone. In announcing the album, the singer described "Qadir" as his attempt to convey how his friend must have felt in isolated moments. And while the lyrics depict a man spiraling downward, the backing beat—a composition of hard drums, electric piano, strings, and flutes—ascends with each verse.

Then there are the vocals: Hakim and a who's who of experimental vocalists and producers (including We Are King's Amber Strother, rising rapper-singer Pink Siifu, and beat-makers Nelson "Bandela" Nance and KeiYaA) sing in unison like a gospel choir. It's a stellar celebration of Qadir's life and the album's most captivating song. Exploring a similar theme, the track "Vincent Tyler" pays homage to another person who died, a Washington man who was shot 13 years ago in the city's Northwest quadrant and left on the snowy ground in an alley. Here, Hakim sings, "I walked over slowly and prayed that he was sleeping / I tapped his foot three times, but nobody answered." On "Qadir" and "Vincent Tyler," he presents the two men as tragic figures who died alone. It's also an indictment of the groups and institutions that abandoned Qadir and Tyler and let them perish.

In Hakim's view, we have detached from one another, and on the album opener, "All These Changes," he laments how that lack of community solidarity has led to our trifling with the planet. As he sees it, climate change is just Mother Earth raging against all the pollution we've dumped into the atmosphere. "Cities burning, tides that rise," he sings, "pretty soon we'll be underwater." On paper, those lyrics read with an almost apocalyptic sense of doom, yet in the song, beneath a delicate blend of strings and bass drums, his proclamation doesn't seem so alarming. Instead, he likens our demise to a rebirth of sorts. "Pretty soon we'll be drifting in the ocean, and we'll grow scales so we can breathe."

When he isn't talking about the earth, he's chastising authority figures who sell fear and drugs to people as ways to control the populace. The title track's beat sounds machinelike, as churning and pounding as a factory operating at full tilt. "Don't give in to the master plan!" he exclaims. "Burn it down, light that shit up in flames." The song and the album as a whole mark a sharp creative turn for Hakim. *Will This Make Me Good* might sound messy and downright confusing at times, but it works—not just because it's different but also because he manages to capture the joy, pain, and uncertainty of life itself.

Musically, the album does not have the same ease of *Green Twins* and *Where Will We Go*, yet there's something beguiling about the way Hakim unpacks weighty subjects while maintaining the warmth of his past work, even if deeper listening reveals his most riotous album to date. That he created something this frank is its own form of protest. Take the song "Bouncing": Here he describes a scene of "lonely strangers marching through the snowstorm trying to get to work on time." Though this summarizes life in any major city, "Bouncing" seems to address New York, where Hakim now lives. Bad weather tends to make the city feel desolate, and when you add the stress of subway commuting and working to make the rent, the city can feel like a pressure cooker.

Throughout *Will This Make Me Good*, it's clear that Nick Hakim is tired of, well, everything and he's fighting to feel human again. "I just wanna get back and support my family," he shouts on "Drum Thing." "Fuck all the other shit. That's all that matters to me." ■

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DRAWING THE NATION

# Portraits of a Pandemic

Over the past five months, I have been drawing daily portraits of people affecting and affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Beginning August 14, they will be a weekly feature at TheNation.com. —Steve Brodner

## BALIN BRAKE, 21.

FORT WAYNE, IND.,  
PROTESTER, LOST VISION  
IN ONE EYE, HIT BY  
A GAS CANISTER FIRED  
BY POLICE, WHO CLAIM  
HE WAS ATTACKING  
THEM. FOOTAGE SHOWS  
NO SUCH THING.  
ON MAY 30 8  
SUCH INJURIES  
WERE INFLICTED  
ACROSS THE  
COUNTRY,  
"I WANT YOU  
TO LOOK ME  
IN THE EYE  
AND SAY YOU  
STAND BY THE  
POLICE AND WHAT  
THEY DID."



## CHRISTINA SANTANA, NURSE,

EL CENTRO REGIONAL  
HOSPITAL, EL CENTRO, CA.:

OUR LITTLE TOWN IS  
GETTING RANSACK-  
ED AND BEATEN UP  
BY THIS MONSTER...  
YOU START TO REAL-  
IZE WHAT PTSD LOOKS  
LIKE...IT'S WARTIME.  
IT'S CONSTANT SUFFER-  
ING AND DEATH  
AND DYING... AND  
GOING ON... AND  
DOING YOUR  
BEST...AND YOU  
DON'T SEE AN END.  
THE NUMBERS  
KEEP GOING UP—  
AND JUST TO SEE THEY  
WANT TO OPEN EVERY-  
THING BACK UP." THIS  
IS LIKE THE FLU."  
THIS IS NOT  
THE FLU!  
THIS IS A MONSTER.  
IT WREAKS HAVOC  
ON YOUR ENTIRE BODY  
NOT JUST YOUR LUNGS. IT  
IS A SYSTEMIC DISEASE, AND WE'RE  
TIRED. WE'RE EXHAUSTED PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY.  
I DON'T SEE HOW WE CONTINUE. BUT WE DO.



THE WALL OF MOMS HAS GATHERED IN  
PORTLAND. STANDING BETWEEN  
PROTESTERS AND TRUMP'S CAMO-WEARING  
SECRET POLICE, AS THE FAJAMA-POSSE ATTACKS  
WITH STUN GRENADES AND TEAR GAS, MORE MOMS  
ARRIVE NOW IN THE HUNDREDS, CHANTING: "MOMS  
ARE HERE, FEES STAY CLEAR.", INTO THE NIGHT.



## NICK CORDERO,

BROADWAY STAR,  
"ALWAYS MORE CON-  
CERNED WITH  
OTHERS THAN HIM-  
SELF." (JUSTIN  
SQUIGS ROBERTSON)  
LOST IN THE PANDE-  
MIC. HIS AGE, 41,  
CHALLENGED THE  
PERCEPTION THAT  
COVID-19 WAS A  
DISEASE OF THE  
ELDERLY.





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