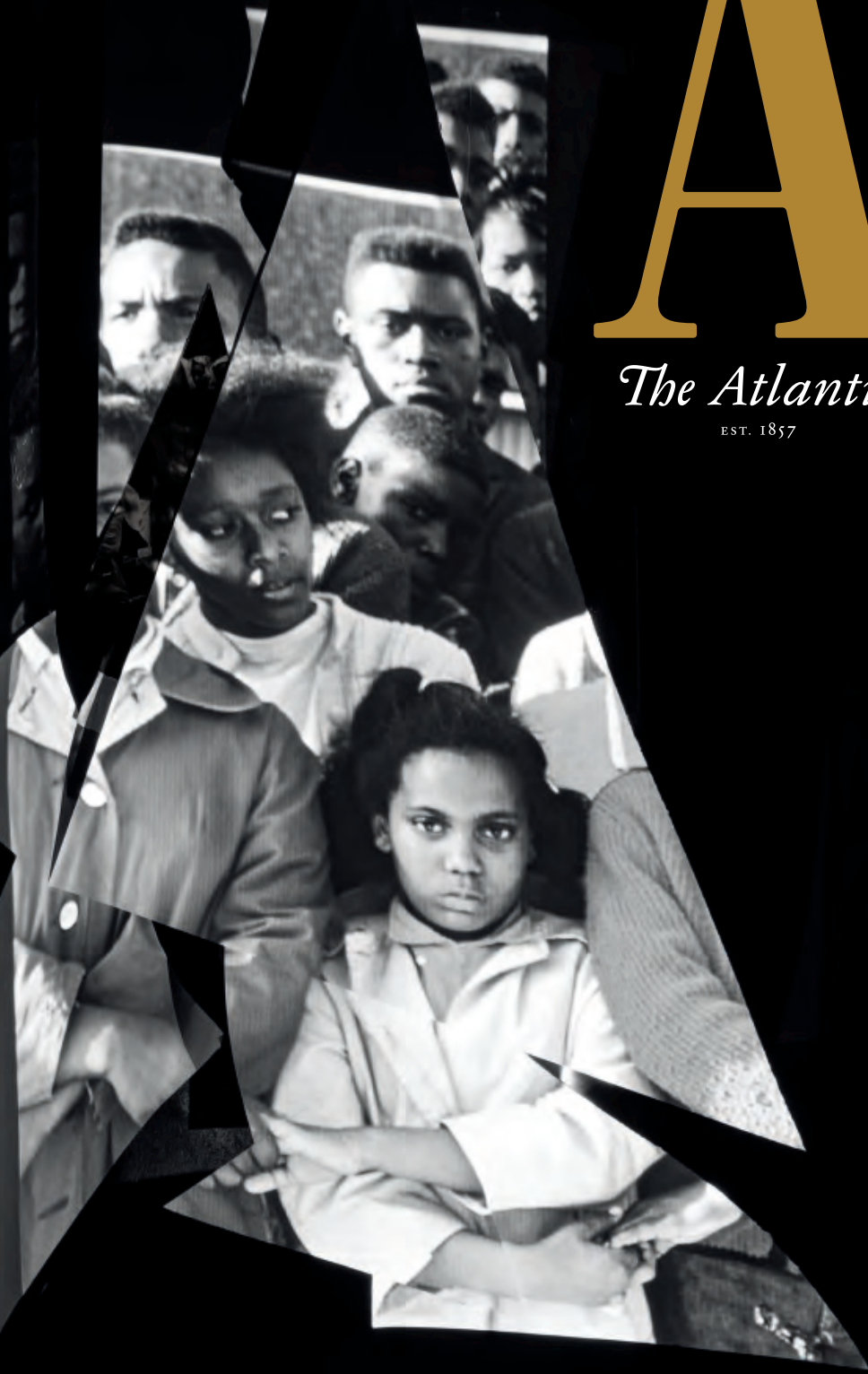


We Mourn
for All We
Do Not Know

*Danielle Allen,
Vann R. Newkirk II,
Anna Deavere Smith,
and Clint Smith
on Black life,
American history,
and the resilience
of memory*



A

The Atlantic

EST. 1857

Will the world always be this unpredictable?

Will my portfolio weather the storm?
How can I be sure?

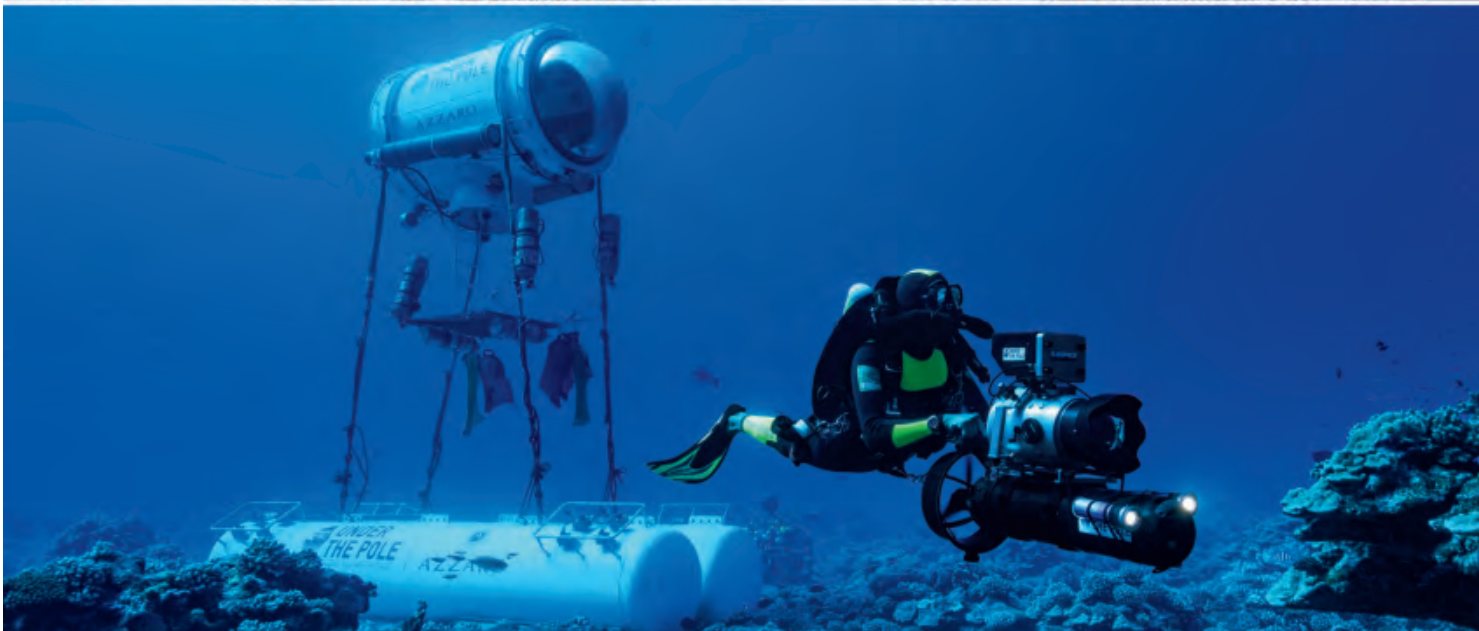
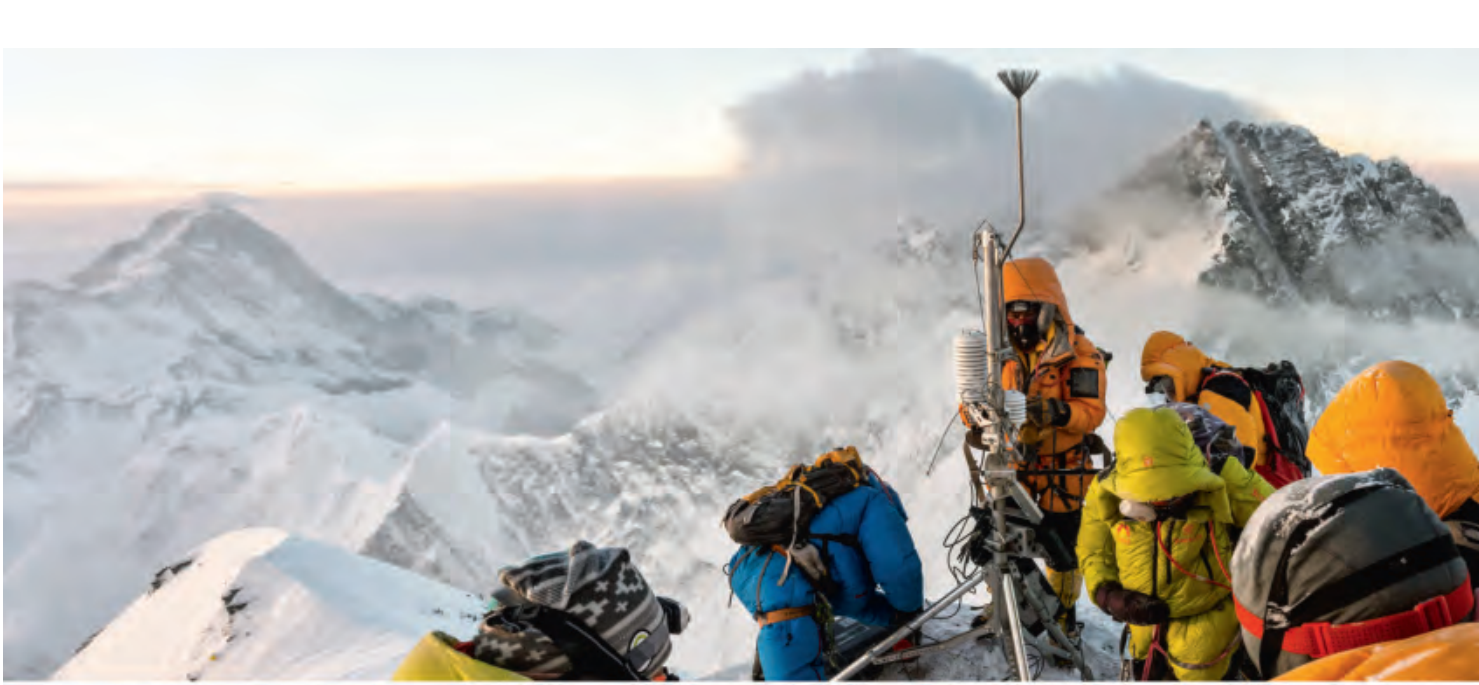


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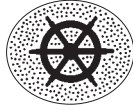
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THE ATLANTIC AND BLACK HISTORY

In 1862, an abolitionist from Philadelphia named Charlotte Forten decided to go south to the Sea Islands of South Carolina. She was taking up an important mission: teaching Black children, newly liberated by the Union Army, how to read. Two years later, she would describe for readers of *The Atlantic* the exhilaration she felt as she traveled to her post.

“We thought how easy it would be for a band of guerrillas, had they chanced that way, to seize and hang us,” she wrote in our May 1864 issue, “but we were in that excited, jubilant state of mind which makes fear impossible, and sang ‘John Brown’ with a will, as we drove through the pines and palmettos. Oh, it was good to sing that song in the very heart of Rebeldom!”

Forten’s writing is vivid and modern and beautifully descriptive. She takes her readers to a remote and brutal stretch of the Confederacy, and she renders her subjects—the persecuted, resilient people of South Carolina’s rice and cotton plantations—fully human. (Forten, in fact, was one of the first to call the melancholic state of mind that she discovered among the formerly enslaved “the blues.”)

For us, Forten is notable not only for her moral urgency but because she was the first Black woman to write in our pages. In the first decade of *The Atlantic*’s existence (the magazine was founded in 1857), it was the abolitionist Brahmins—Emerson, Lowell, Stowe, Holmes, Longfellow—who were most publicly exalted. And then, of course, came the giant, Frederick Douglass, who did

immortal writing for *The Atlantic*. But Charlotte Forten, a Black woman who deserves to be remembered, has been mainly forgotten.

She came to my mind, though, during a conversation with Gillian B. White, one of our managing editors. Gillian was describing to me an idea, a way to use *The Atlantic* to fill in the blank pages of Black history. One of the questions that arose was *Are we doing enough?* Historically, this magazine has made many contributions on matters of race: Not only Douglass but W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington found a home for their writing here. When Martin Luther King Jr. sought a national audience for a letter he wrote while held prisoner in the Birmingham jail, he turned to *The Atlantic*. And *The Atlantic* featured on its cover the most influential article published in America in the past decade, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations.” But if we are to live up to this legacy, we have more to do. Gillian’s idea was to revive what we began to call “lost Black history.”

“For so many Black Americans, history is a dead end,” she told me recently. “I look at my daughter and my niece and my nephew and wish I had more of their history to share with them. I really want them to

see themselves represented in the story of this country and to know that America has always been ours, too. And yet Black people are left out of so many commonly shared American histories.”

Out of these conversations, and conversations across our staff, *The Atlantic*’s “Inheritance” project was born. The articles in this issue of the magazine represent the first fruits of this continuing effort, which you will see manifest itself in print, on our website, and everywhere *The Atlantic* makes journalism.

We open this issue with a legend (and an *Atlantic* contributing writer), Anna Deavere Smith, who recounts her own coming to consciousness on a sheltered, mostly white college campus in the 1960s. Danielle Allen, the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard and a regular *Atlantic* contributor, revives the memory of one of the nation’s earliest and most dogged abolitionists. Clint Smith, one of our newest staff writers, and the author of a forthcoming book, *How the Word Is Passed*, offers a close study of the ways in

which America reckons with slavery, and guides us through the archives of a New Deal-era initiative focused on preserving the memories of the formerly enslaved. And our senior editor Vann R. Newkirk II writes movingly about the history of the Voting Rights Act through the prism of his mother’s own experience of American democracy. These stories, and other stories being published

on our website, are part of an ambitious, never-ending effort to fulfill *The Atlantic*’s mission: to illuminate the American idea, and to help build, through our writing, a more perfect union.

Vann Newkirk’s mother died in November at the too-young age of 56, as Vann was working on the article that appears in these pages. Vann’s colleagues and friends are honored to dedicate this issue of *The Atlantic*, one devoted to the importance of memory, to the memory of Marilyn Thurman Newkirk.

— Jeffrey Goldberg

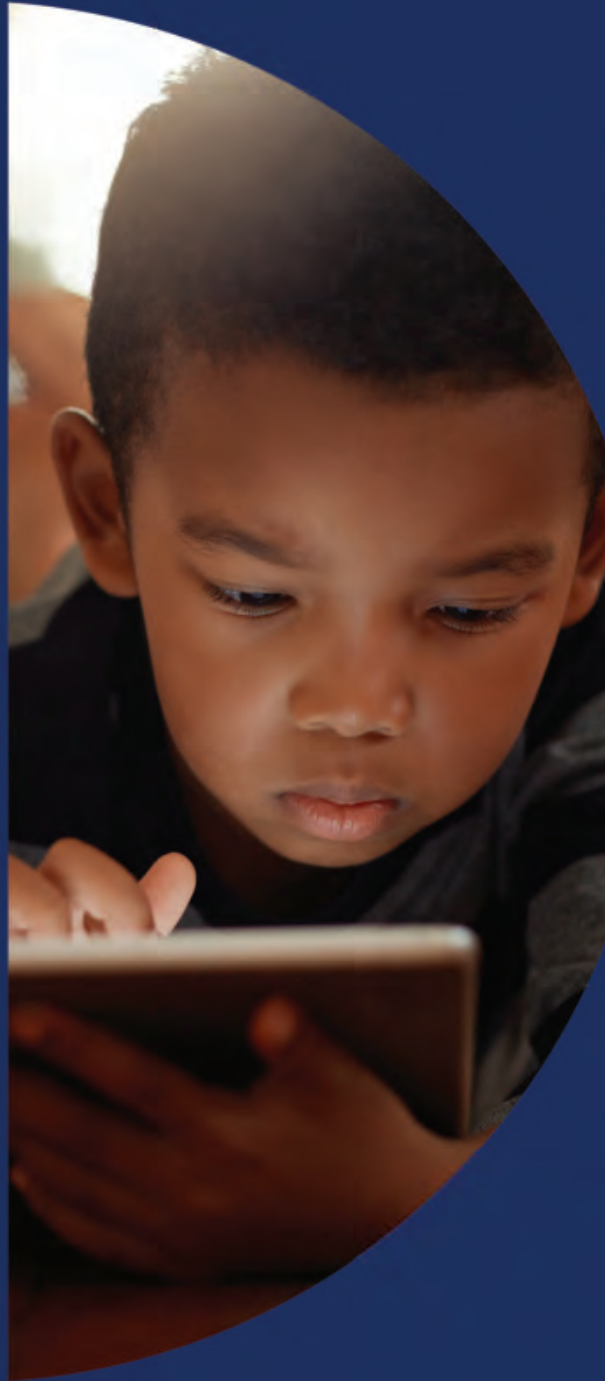


Charlotte Forten

A better future is ours to write.

Business can be the greatest platform for change. That's why we're partnering with *The Atlantic* to amplify the stories of "Inheritance."

Find out more about our commitment to racial equality at salesforce.com/racial-equality



Behind the Cover: To mark the launch of the “Inheritance” project (see “*The Atlantic* and Black History,” p. 8), we commissioned the photographer Aaron Turner to create this month’s cover. Turner’s work engages with race and history as he visually represents the relationship between the past and the present. For the cover, he began with Dan

Budnik’s 1965 photo of young people in Selma, Alabama, demanding voting rights for their parents and teachers. The resulting image conveys both resilience and fragmentation—persistent themes in our collective American history.
— Luise Stauss, *Director of Photography*
Christine Walsh, *Contributing Photo Editor*

THE

The Last Children of Down Syndrome

Prenatal testing is changing who gets born and who doesn’t, Sarah Zhang wrote in the December issue. This is just the beginning.

Letters

“T

“The Last Children of Down Syndrome” was well written, thought-provoking, and emotional. I did not have prenatal testing, and at the age of 29 I gave birth to a son with Down syndrome. It was a shock, to say the least. I am so glad that

I did not know he had Down syndrome while I was pregnant; his father and I may have made the wrong decision and aborted the pregnancy.

Eric, now 32, has not experienced any major health problems but has had challenges throughout his life. But what child has not had challenges? I am thankful every day for him. He is friendly, funny, moody, caring, and the best thing that has ever happened to our family. He has meaningful relationships with family and co-workers. I am a better person because of him. I have much more tolerance of others, patience, empathy, and acceptance.

Judy Osowiecki
Moosup, Conn.

Thank you for sharing this sensitive, balanced article about Down syndrome. My eyes were first opened to Down syndrome when, as a book-smart third-year medical student, I interviewed a 42-year-old expecting mother. “Did you get a prenatal test?” I asked. “No,” she responded. “My first child has Down syndrome. I wouldn’t trade him for anything in the world.”

Now, as a pediatrician who is 35 years wiser, I have cared for scores of children with Down syndrome. Despite their myriad medical challenges, they have taught me more about love and family than I could have ever imagined. They are also among the

most emotionally intelligent people I have ever known.

Kip Webb, M.D., M.P.H.
San Francisco, Calif.

As a long-practicing prenatal genetic counselor, I am moved to ask why the conversation about prenatal diagnosis is still focused on abortion of babies with Down syndrome. There is so much more to this issue.

Some American women, many in my own practice, undertake prenatal screening in order to be aware of and start learning about their child’s condition. Obstetric care and plans for delivery and newborn care are often different if Down syndrome or structural differences are known prenatally. For example, identification of cardiac defects that will require immediate postnatal surgery enables delivery at a hospital with a pediatric heart surgeon, and third-trimester monitoring of a fetus with Down syndrome reduces the risk of stillbirth.

Many more fetal conditions are detected prenatally, and a small but growing number are amenable to prenatal treatment. Fetal surgery for spina bifida improves the outcome for affected children, and life-saving fetal therapy exists for babies with severe congenital diaphragmatic hernia. There is no question, however, that the availability of such therapy is limited, and there are indeed inequities in who gets to take advantage of it.

Parents and professionals must consider the potential benefits and risks of employing



prenatal and preimplantation genetic testing, and providers should counsel individual patients with complete information, care, and respect. But we've got to stop limiting the discourse about prenatal testing to the inflammatory issue of abortion.

Kathy Morris, M.S.S.W., L.C.G.C.
Albuquerque, N.M.

Sarah Zhang's article misses a key consideration for parents trying to decide whether to carry to term a pregnancy that would result in a child with Down syndrome. When parents elect to have a child with Down syndrome, they are not only committing to parenting that person until they themselves reach the end of their lives; they are also committing their other children to take over the parenting role. When my mother had a stroke at age 88, the parenting role for my brother fell to me. I assumed this responsibility willingly and gladly. Not a day goes by that I am not involved in some aspect of parenting my brother.

My love for my brother has no limits and no conditions. I would do anything to protect him from harm. But as I myself get older, I cannot help but be concerned about what would happen to him if something were to happen to me.

I do not bring this up to say that abortion is the right solution whenever a fetus is

diagnosed with Down syndrome. But it is unfair to call choosing to terminate a Down syndrome pregnancy the "canary in the coal mine," or a step toward designer babies.

Richard Fleming
Benicia, Calif.

The Existential Despair of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

In December, Caitlin Flanagan revisited "the most disturbing Christmas special."

Everything Ms. Flanagan writes about the show is true. Both Santa and Comet behave abominably. Donner is a chauvinistic

jerk. Even Sam the Snowman is not above criticism—his obsession with silver and gold surely is not healthy.

Yet they are not the reason we watched the show faithfully as kids. We relished the unforgettable lines of Hermei, Rudolph, and Yukon Cornelius. Even now a year doesn't go by that someone in my family doesn't say, "Let's be independent together," or "Don't you know that bumbles bounce?"

Chris Wright
Spokane, Wash.

CAITLIN FLANAGAN REPLIES:

If I may defer to the school of reader-response criticism, I would

say only that we each have our own Rudolph, none more or less accurate than the other. Let us honor Rudolph in our hearts, and try to keep him all the year.

Correction:

The print version of "The COVID-19 Manhattan Project" (January/February 2021) stated that the Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines were reported to be 95 percent effective at preventing COVID-19 infections. In fact, the vaccines prevent disease, not infection.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

Q • & • A

Remote schooling has been a misery, Erika Christakis wrote in December—but it's offering a rare chance to rethink early education entirely. Here, she responds to a reader's questions about her essay.

Q: I appreciated this article and agreed with it, particularly its observation that schools have remained the same despite our changed understanding of childhood development. What might reforms look like, practically? If you had money and control and support, what would your ideal school look like? — *Douglas Baker, Pittsburgh, Pa.*

A: Effective educators, research tells us, prize knowledge of child development on two levels: the general ("What does a 6-year-old look like?") and the specific ("How does this 6-year-old think and learn?"). This

deep understanding of childhood and children calls us to reimagine the crushing uniformity of so many school norms and policies (such as unvarying school hours and calendars) that ill-serve the disparate needs of children and families—and often the needs of their teachers, too. If bespoke scheduling seems too radical, we could jettison our cultlike devotion to homework, which burdens children across the socioeconomic and learning spectrums by fueling the specious view that "learning" happens under the auspices of an institution, rather than within the unbounded human brain. Some children need to be left alone after a long school day to juice their learning mojo; others may need much more comprehensive support to unleash their potential than is found in a pack of multiplication flash cards. Adults often balk at this kind of customized education, and the challenges shouldn't be minimized. But in the long run, it's surely easier and more cost-effective to educate the individual than to keep tripping over the realities of human development.

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DISPATCHES

FIRST PERSON

THE LAST OF THE NICE NEGRO GIRLS

*In 1968, history
found us at a small
women's college, forging
our Black identity and
empowering our defiance.*

BY ANNA
DEAVERE SMITH

MMy high-school counselor at Western High School, an all-girls public school in Baltimore, was a rotund white woman with a pleasant but less than energetic countenance. She was wholly absent from my education until one day, after rumblings about affirmative action in colleges had begun shaking the ground that Negroes traversed to higher education, she suddenly summoned my mother and me for a meeting. My mother, a veteran teacher in Baltimore's public schools, took the afternoon off. We sat

in the high-ceilinged counseling office, prim and proper as can be, while the counselor showed us one pamphlet after another with images of white girls in sweater sets relaxing in bucolic environments.

I knew nothing about the multitude of small colleges across the U.S. that had been founded, many by religious institutions, for the specific purpose of educating white women. Nor did I know anything about “suitcase schools,” some of which had reputations as glorified finishing schools where girls were focused on meeting boys attending nearby institutions. (They were called “suitcase schools” because on Fridays the girls took off to spend the weekend with their prospective husbands.) But in 1966, as my counselor put it to my mother, many of these all-girls colleges were “looking for nice Negro girls like Anna.”

My father did not like the idea. He was adamant that I attend Howard or Morgan State or some other historically Black college or university, just as he and his siblings and my older cousins had done. My mother and I made our case about “opportunity.” He became emphatic: If I went to a white women’s college, he said, I’d have no social life. This was a legitimate concern—but up to that point, my father’s strictness had severely circumscribed my “social life.” Now he was suddenly concerned about it?

I applied to three of the colleges the guidance counselor had suggested. When acceptance letters arrived from all three, my father said he would refuse to help financially, so my mother and I set about trying to find the

money to pull this off. My father’s only acknowledgment of this was to murmur that I should pick the college closest to Baltimore, so I could get home with limited expense on a train. I ended up choosing Beaver College, in a suburb of Philadelphia, without having ever seen the campus.

wheel, and two brothers, my two baby sisters, my paternal grandfather, and my mother piled into the car. My aunts Esther and Mildred, concerned about the shabby state of my luggage, had pooled their resources to buy me a brand-new set. My spanking-new luggage, my spanking-new

We were among the first to arrive. A large gray castle loomed. The place had originally been a private estate modeled after a castle in England. Buildings had been repurposed to become a theater, a chapel, an art studio, and a biology lab.

White girls accompanied by their families trickled down



AUGUST 1967: The Smith family left Baltimore for Beaver College at the crack of dawn. Because what would that be like—colored *and* late? My father sat behind the

clothes, my plastic record player (with my five LPs), and the weight of my family caused the car to emit a scraping sound as it made its way along the turnpike.

the dorm hallway throughout the morning and afternoon. While my mother and I sat alone in an antiseptically pristine room waiting to meet my roommate, the rest of my

family wandered around the campus, sizing up the place.

I'd had white friends in high school, but I had not lived with them. I'd gone to only one slumber party at a white home, a sweet-16 sleepover, from which my father took me home at 10 p.m., because to him there was nothing sweet about me spending the night with a group of white girls. He and my mother didn't allow me to hang out with anyone whose parents they didn't know—and in Baltimore at that time, Negro parents didn't know a lot of white parents.

"I'm Marie." A resonant voice with a rich timbre. My roommate, a white girl with long, straight hair and an infectious grin, was holding out her hand. Her mother was elegantly dressed and wore sunglasses, which she never took off. I rose from the desk chair to greet her.

Marie led the small talk right away. "How many kids in your family?" At the frontier of race and class, even simple questions cause a twinge. Concern about the "Negro number," as a result of Margaret Sanger's 1939 Negro Project, still had resonance in the '50s and '60s. The Negro families I grew up around were much smaller than in my parents' generation. My father had been one of six. My mother, one of eight. My cousins—the other children of the six and eight—did not exceed three per family, and most of the clusters were two per household.

"Five," I said.

"Beat you by one! We're six!" she announced. Marie was Catholic.

My family left me with a sea of white girls and headed back to Baltimore. I walked along the slowly rising road past the wishing well, past the

castle, past the lacrosse field, past the art studio and the theater that had once been servants' quarters, to the chapel that had once been a stable, and climbed the stairs for the convocation.

Like any self-respecting Negro, as I took my seat I counted every single person

LIKE ANY SELF-RESPECTING NEGRO, AS I TOOK MY SEAT I COUNTED EVERY SINGLE PERSON WITH COLOR IN THEIR SKIN.

with color in their skin. Beaver College recruiters had found seven "nice Negro girls," including myself. There was no Black Students' Union. We were not even "Black" yet. We made eye contact and nodded toward each other.

The seven of us occupied different places within the Negro community's distinct class system. We had different relationships to hairdressers, different slangs, different high-school experiences, different ways of worshipping (if we worshipped), different family arrangements. Race may have looked like it overrode those differences, but in 1967 it did not. Three of the girls had gone to the same high school, so they hung tight.

One of us, Karen McKie, lived in Philadelphia, and had been recruited in person from Simon Gratz High

School, which had a low graduation rate, an abysmal college-attendance rate, and a reputation for being a violent, dangerous place. I caught up with Karen a few weeks ago.

Anna Deavere Smith:

When we arrived, we didn't have afros.

Karen McKie: Absolutely not. The idea was to blend in.

Smith: We, being these obedient girls—what was the frame of reference for our behavior? Were there any movies or novels about nice Negro girls like us?

McKie: No.

Smith: Right?

McKie: Being "Black and proud" was already a lyric to songs—James Brown. But we were walking that fine line, because we weren't following anyone onto the Beaver campus. I didn't know that anybody who looked like me went to Beaver.

We were an experience.

They were giving us an opportunity to be the experience for these white girls. So that then they could be more comfortable going out into the world where people were talking about being Black and proud. Something needed to be done so that they would be prepared.

Smith: That's hilarious. I thought it was coming from a white-savior thing on their part, to give *us* an opportunity.

One night, still early in the term, my roommate and I were studying at our desks.

"Did you get a letter?" she asked casually, swinging her feet from her chair.

"What letter?"

"I got a letter asking if I minded having a Negro roommate," she said.

"No," I said. "I did not get a letter."

None of the seven of us got a letter.

There were a dozen or so students in my freshman English class—all white except two of us. Our professor was Helen Buttell, a white woman (Beaver had no Black faculty when I arrived). She's in her 90s now. I called her the other week.

Smith: I just have to see if you remember anything about this at all. In my first paper for freshman English class, the assignment was to write about a taboo word. And I wrote about the word *nigger*—we now say "the N-word"—and so did the only other Black woman in the class.

Helen Buttell: I certainly do remember making that assignment and I certainly must have been amazed.

Smith: Why were you amazed?

Buttell: Well, it seemed like a sort of brave thing for a couple of Black students to bring this up—a pejorative word about your race—in a class where papers might be read aloud. It seemed like a very dramatic thing to me.

Smith: I remember you coming in when you were handing back the papers and saying, "Well, two people in the class have written about the same word, and they've written about it differently."

The other Black girl and I, who at that point in the year had never spoken a word to each other, did not even look at each other when Dr. Buttell

announced that we'd written about the same word with completely different interpretations. My classmate had written that the N-word was a word of affection; I had written that it was offensive and hurtful.

Buttel: I don't remember a classroom that broke into wild discussion on the subject. Do you?

Smith: No, I don't. I don't remember any wild discussion at all of any kind. [Laughs.]

Buttel: I imagine that probably just shut them all up. [Laughs.]

ONE EVENING, four nervous white girls visited me in the study room of my dorm. Beaver was a small school, less than 1,000 students, but none of these girls were in classes that I took. They wanted to tell me that their roommate, who was from the Deep South, had flown a Confederate flag from the wishing well in the center of campus after Beaver had won a lacrosse game. Perhaps I'd heard about it? I hadn't. Their roommate had a big personality, and they assumed that I'd noticed her around campus. I had not.

The purpose of the meeting: Would I be willing to function as ambassador to the Negroes in our freshman class and explain that their roommate meant no harm? Why had they chosen me? More perplexing, why had they assumed we seven were a group?

I started with the three girls who'd gone to the same high school and hung together. The consensus was to give the southern girl the benefit of the doubt.

And "we" were now a group.

APRIL 4, 1968: The murder of Martin Luther King Jr. The white girls in Dilworth Hall ran up and down the corridor—horrified less, as I recall, about the murder and more because the curfews and travel restrictions in major cities would mess with their spring-break plans.

The nice Negro girls made a plan to meet. My roommate recalls that she asked me, "Can I come to the meeting?" and that I said, "No, not this time." I don't recall that specifically. But I am sure I said no.

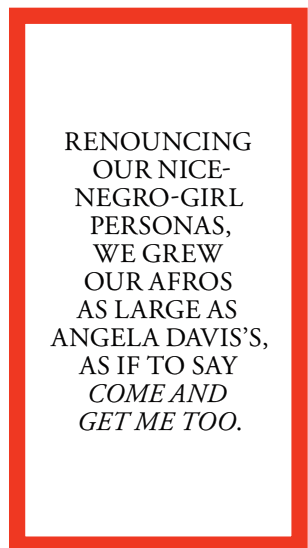
Up to that point, the world outside the walls of Beaver College had remained a distant, muffled drumbeat. A veil separated the student body from the reality outside. Many of my white classmates' lives were centered on finding husbands at nearby Princeton, Lehigh, Lafayette, Haverford, Penn, and Franklin & Marshall. This was a suitcase school with very little political activity. But for the seven of us, King's assassination shredded what was left of the veil. The veil would rip for our white classmates, too, because of Vietnam and the draft. It was all falling apart.

For the Beaver College Blacks, as we'd come to call ourselves, King's death magnified the holes in our lives. Like Black students all over America, we sought to make sense of what was happening in urban areas before and after the assassination. "I think we learned how to demand to be educated," Karen says.

We met with a dean who was from the South. Her accent, full of extended vowels and crystal-clear consonants, was enough to make any Black girl go right back to feeling like lynch meat. We met in

a sterile classroom with linoleum floors and no art.

Our demands were modest: We wanted courses in Black history and a Black faculty member or two. The meeting did not go well. The dean told us that if we exhibited "undesirable behavior," the administration



would not be happy to have us there. And "if you continue to show undesirable behavior," she said, "we're certainly not going to pay to have you here."

If a dean were to talk like that to a group of Black students now—heck, if a school custodian were to talk like that to a group of Black students now—they wouldn't even get to the "pay to have you here" part. They'd be fired by the time they said "undesirable behavior." Someone would put it on social media, and that would be that.

Back then, though, there wasn't much we could do.

I resorted to mimicking the dean, accent and all, and gave performances whenever requested—on the walkways to class, in the dining hall, while doing archery (my effort at fulfilling the physical-fitness requirement). My comic

reenactments of our meeting served as a kind of salve. Of course, we should have been outraged. We *were* outraged. When you laugh loudly you bare your teeth.

We finally got a Black-studies course—not a whole curriculum, a single class—and a Black faculty member, a grandfatherly type, who quickly helped make us feel more at home ... and then, sadly, died. We created a performance—a celebration of his life through songs, poems, and readings—to eulogize him, and our "we" got even stronger.

MOST OF THE seven of us came to this pseudo-Gothic architectural setting from cities that had been embroiled in riots. The Kerner Commission Report, the landmark report on American race relations released in 1968, begins like this: "The summer of 1967 again brought racial disorders to American cities, and with them shock, fear, and bewilderment to the nation."

To read the Kerner Report is to hear auguries of the summer of 2020—riots, police beatings, murder.

Many believe that the moment we live in is unprecedented. I don't know about that. I'll just say that as hard as what the seven of us went through in 1967 was, what others went through not long before us was even worse. I once interviewed the journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who had integrated the University of Georgia about half a decade before we seven got to Beaver. Her presence caused a *riot* on her third night at school. Someone threw a rock through her dorm-room window. There was glass, she told me, all over her clothes, which lay in an open

suitcase on the floor. Tear gas was used to disperse the crowd. The girls in her dorm were ordered to strip the sheets from their beds to get the tear gas out. The dean came to remove Charlayne from the dorm and to tell her she'd have to leave the university. As she was escorted out, all of her white dormmates were lining the hall, dressed in their nightgowns, some standing on chairs. As she headed toward the front door, one of the women threw out a quarter and said, "Here, Charlayne, go and change my sheets."

The Beaver College Blacks were among the last of the nice Negro girls. We had aspired to be educated, and to move a step beyond where our parents had been able to get to. We were told that we had to get good grades in school and that we had to work harder than the white kids (just like today). We were told to never piss off authority figures—especially white authority figures. We were told that we had to be good and we had to be nice in all ways. We were told that we must above all escape teenage pregnancy, because pregnancy would ruin our lives. (The use of birth-control pills for unmarried women was not legalized until 1972, a year after we graduated.)

Then, as the seven of us nestled into our senior year, Angela Davis hit the FBI's most-wanted list, accused of supplying guns for a shoot-out at the Marin County courthouse. She was on the run for two months, and during that time Black women who looked remotely like her (or not at all like her) were getting apprehended by cops. Renouncing our nice-Negro-girl personas, we grew our afros as large as hers, as if to say *Come and*

get me too. Freeing ourselves from the hot irons and lye-based products that left scabs and burns on our scalps and on our foreheads and necks in pursuit of straight hair was a cosmetic choice, yes, but as Davis went to jail and nearly to death row, we were also saying: *You're right, we could be her*. The nice girl was gone.

Were we ever really "nice"? Gracious, perhaps. Kind, perhaps. We definitely had manners. But those manners had to do with how we treated one another inside the walls of segregation. Anyone over 30 was addressed as Miss or Mr. But the "nice" that Beaver recruiters sought was a performance left over from slavery and Jim Crow, when to not be nice was a potential death sentence.

I may have left my nice-Negro-girl persona behind at Beaver College, but the need to be "nice" remained. In the '80s, when a terrifying hurdle was thrown onto my tenure track, some older white male friends quickly identified the cause as racism—yet they counseled me never to use the word *race* as I struggled to survive. Though the academy boasts about its dedication to truth, few people tell it like it is. A cadre of savvy academics, Black and white, helped me escape. One literally helped me pack. To this day, I carry the trauma, but I landed tenure at Stanford. The horrible story had a happy ending. But I know it is not always so.

TODAY, AMERICA'S DARK past is breaking through the cracks. Divisions are stark. Did the Civil War ever end?

A new generation of sisters who no longer perform "niceness" have a palpable sense of their vulnerability, even as they've got a better hold on

the ladder to success than we seven did.

Andrea Ambam, an excellent recent graduate student of mine, is a first-generation American whose family immigrated from Cameroon and settled in a tiny Missouri town. She was educated in predominantly white institutions from preschool through graduate school—didn't have a Black teacher until college. She was raised in a household that emphasized the need to stay out of trouble. But in high school she began to question respectability politics.

"I think that so many Black women moving through the world are warned about their attitude—you know, about being polite, about being feminine enough," she told me recently. In the litany of videos of Black people being attacked or killed by police, the one that hit closest to home for her was Sandra Bland's. In 2015, the 28-year-old African American college graduate was pulled over and jailed after a traffic stop in Texas, and died in lockup three days later. The descant of our hour-long conversation about why Bland holds so much significance for Andrea and her peers was "That could be me."

Andrea Ambam: If I would've been in that car and the policeman told me to put out my cigarette, I would put it out, right? But I understand the feeling of not wanting to pretend, of not wanting to say "Yeah, everything's good, everything's great, Officer." The last video we have is her fighting for her life and for her right to not be treated this way, and then the next thing we have is that she

[died]. I feel so deeply connected to her defiance. It can make you cower and say, "Okay, I'm not gonna do that." Or it can make you lean into defiance. It can ignite something in you that says, *I am going forward proud in my defiance, rather than stifling that defiance and that resistance as a safety measure*.

There's progress, of course. Beaver College, now Arcadia University, is coed. Black students and other historically oppressed minorities have affinity groups there. Arcadia's president, Ajay Nair, is publicly dedicated to social justice. In the late '60s, the seven of us had to fight to get one Black teacher—and now many colleges have entire African American—studies departments.

We no longer have to strain so hard for the sake of euphemism. When I spoke with Dr. Buttel, she recalled that a dean had told her she had to get the seven Negro girls, to whom she had become the institution's dedicated adviser, to stop using the "dreadful" name we had given ourselves: the Beaver College Blacks.

"And I said to the dean, 'That's impossible. What would you want it to be called, the Beaver College Colored Folk?'"

In our current moment of division, we cannot afford to go forward without looking back. We must excavate history to assess how we learned to restore human dignity that had been ripped away by plunder and slavery. How did we get this far? Not by being nice. *A*

Anna Deavere Smith, an Atlantic contributing writer, is a playwright and an actor.



CAROLINE SHAW IS MAKING CLASSICAL COOL

Her innovative work won her a Pulitzer Prize at age 30. She's collaborated with Kanye and Nas. What does her success mean for the long-suffering genre?

BY JONATHAN GHARRAIE

A few months before the coronavirus pandemic made even the smallest gatherings seem quaint, the composer Caroline Shaw asked her audience at the Kings Place concert hall, in London, to hum in B-flat while she sang from the stage, accompanied by the strings of Attacca Quartet. This was not a typical classical concert. For much of it, Shaw sat atop a barstool, either singing or introducing her works to the audience. After the intermission, she joined the quartet as second viola for a more conventional performance of a well-loved classic, Mendelssohn's String Quintet No. 2.

The audience skewed younger than one might expect. Shaw, who lives in New York City, is often cited as proof that classical music has an exciting future. In 2013, at the age of 30, she became the youngest composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for music, for *Partita for 8 Voices*. The citation for the winning composition described it as “a highly polished and inventive a cappella work” including “speech, whispers, sighs, murmurs, wordless melodies and novel vocal effects.” Since then, Shaw's music has been performed at the Hollywood Bowl and Lincoln Center, and used for a Beyoncé tour video. She has collaborated with hip-hop giants such as Kanye West and Nas, and received a 2020 Grammy nomination for *Orange*, an album of her music recorded by Attacca Quartet. She released her latest album, *Narrow Sea*, in January.

Shaw is a little younger than the average classical listener (who is 45, according to a survey of listeners across

eight countries). She was born in 1982, in Greenville, North Carolina. Her mother, a singer and violin teacher, was her first mentor, introducing Shaw to her instrument at the age of 2. “I started on a 64th-size violin,” she recalls. Shaw fell in love with classical music—singing in a church choir and watching *Amadeus* over and over. She had a Lisa Loeb tape and a passing acquaintance with 4 Non Blondes, but by middle school, classical music was key to her identity.

At 14, Shaw attended the music camp Kinhaven, in Vermont. The experience was a revelation. “That’s when I figured out there are other kids in the world doing this and they are better than I am, and they know more things,” she told me. “Someone would put on a recording of the Ravel String Quartet and talk about it like their mind was going crazy. I’d never heard this piece before, and I was just interested in why they were interested in it.”

Of course, Shaw and her Kinhaven peers were the exception. As recently as the mid-20th century, classical music was a mainstream genre in the United States; today, it’s a niche preference. (By 2019, the genre accounted for only 1 percent of all music consumption in the country, according to Nielsen’s end-of-year report.)

Throughout the ’90s and into the 2000s, the major labels were casting about for ways to introduce classical music to new audiences. They had some reason for optimism: When the Three Tenors, a trio of well-known opera singers, performed the aria “Nessun Dorma,” from Puccini’s *Turandot*, at the 1990 soccer World Cup, an estimated

800 million viewers around the world tuned in. Whole pieces were filleted for their signature tunes and used for advertising or movie soundtracks, and photogenic musicians such as Nigel Kennedy, Joshua Bell, and Vanessa-Mae were marketed as unbuttoning the sometimes stuffy genre.

But if these tactics were designed to turn masses of young people into fans of classical music, they didn’t

A NEW INDIE SPIRIT HAD STARTED TO EMERGE AMONG CLASSICAL MUSICIANS.

exactly work. Lately, though, classical composers like Shaw have been reaching younger listeners through the unlikely means of modern pop. And a new generation of ambitious artists, Shaw among them, has helped break down the formerly rigid boundaries between genres.

AFTER GRADUATING FROM Rice and then Yale, where she studied performance, Shaw began composing in earnest. “I wanted to take the music I was playing, that I didn’t really like very much,” she told me, “and ask, ‘What would I do differently?’” In the summer of 2008, during the financial crisis, she moved to New York. “It was really scary, because I didn’t

know how to make enough money to pay all of my bills,” Shaw said. She worked with the choir at Trinity Church Wall Street, and picked up jobs as an accompanist for ballet classes at various dance academies in New York.

Around this time, a new indie spirit had started to emerge among classical musicians. Early in 2009, Shaw’s friend Caleb Burhans, a composer, recommended her for a new a cappella ensemble named Roomful of Teeth. The band’s commitment to exploring vocal techniques from around the world, incorporating different folk and classical traditions, intrigued her. After being accepted, she decided to join. She hadn’t told her friends that she composed her own music, but she wrote “Passacaglia,” now the last movement of *Partita*, for her new group in order to experiment with yodeling. “They loved it,” she said, “and the audience really loved it.”

Still, her worries about the future persisted. She considered applying to journalism programs or to law school, wrapping her LSAT study guide (which she still has) in packing tape, out of a fear of broadcasting her intentions at a time when she was still performing around the city.

Instead, she began a doctoral program in composition at Princeton. While studying there, she finished the remaining movements of *Partita*, which she submitted for the 2013 Pulitzer—in what she describes as a “bold-ass move” designed to draw the attention of the prize committee to Roomful of Teeth, which was then struggling to book shows. One bright April afternoon, having time to kill

before a rehearsal in Brooklyn, Shaw wandered a Lower Manhattan park overlooking the Hudson. She took a call from Jeremy Faust, the board president of Roomful of Teeth, who told her the news.

It was almost too much to process. “I remember thinking that day when it happened, *This is not something I can celebrate or cherish; I have to go to rehearsal.*” Her friends “were proud of me but also shocked and didn’t really know what to make of the news,” she said, describing “a fear of resentment” that haunted her for months.

Sustaining a professional career as a composer was almost as great a weight on her. Shaw told me about “the pressure of not knowing if I could write music on assignment or commission.” Having submitted *Partita* to raise the profile of her ensemble, she was suddenly in demand as a composer. Concert programmers wanted to hear more of her work, yet she didn’t have much to offer them. “But I loved music,” she recalled. “I said to myself, *You’re not going to get through this if you don’t have the confidence*, so I just dove into it and started writing.”

The composer Jennifer Higdon, who won the Pulitzer in 2010 for her Violin Concerto, invited Shaw to Philadelphia to talk, a gesture Shaw appreciated. Since then, Shaw has found herself bearing the responsibilities of mentorship too. “I visit schools, and one of the things a lot of young composers ask me is, ‘How do you win a Pulitzer Prize?’ No! This is not what it’s about, kids! It should be about making the sound and organizing things and working really hard.” Since her win, Shaw has also cultivated close ties with small, grassroots ensembles such as

the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, for which she has written several pieces, and the North Carolina Symphony.

These relationships with local groups represent a departure from how classical music has traditionally been presented to the public. In 2018, Alex Ross of *The New Yorker* reflected on the centenary celebrations for Leonard Bernstein, perhaps the greatest public advocate that classical music has ever had. Ross suggested that the role of heroic communicator could never be re-created, “not because talent is lacking but because the culture that fostered him is gone.”

That culture centered on the remote and glamorous figures of maestros and divas. But Bernstein, who understood how classical music could be integrated into the postwar cultural landscape of movies, records, and TV, might have admired—and envied—Shaw’s collaboration with some of the most innovative musicians in pop.

After a performance of *Partita* by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2015, Kanye West went backstage and introduced himself to Shaw. Soon after, West and his team contacted her about arranging music from his album *808s & Heartbreak* for a concert. “I actually didn’t get back to them for a couple of weeks,” Shaw said. “I was sort of depressed, and I didn’t know what I was doing with my life. I didn’t want to be the crossover thing. I want[ed] to make something new, something different.”

Eventually, she did. Instead of creating a straightforward orchestration, Shaw took her favorite track from the album, “Say You Will,” and improvised

a delicate, wordless vocal line to flutter around West’s verses. He “wrote back immediately the next morning and literally said, ‘This is going to be the greatest collaboration of all time.’”

Shaw talks fondly about West’s creative process. “What I love is that they’ll give me a raw song, where it’s pretty improvised and there’s maybe

KANYE WAS WORKING ON A VIDEO GAME THAT DEPICTED HIS LATE MOTHER’S ASCENT TO HEAVEN. SHAW SUPPLIED MUSIC FOR THE GAME’S TRAILER.

a beat going through, and he’s loosely improvising over it, just riffing, and then he hears possibility.” When the two met, Kanye was working on a video game that depicted his late mother’s winged ascent to heaven. Shaw later supplied music for the game’s trailer, which was screened at the *Life of Pablo* launch party in 2016. She also worked with West on that album, and on *ye* (2018), even performing with him on the *Pablo* tour. “I’d never been to an arena show, and there I was in front of 20,000 people,” she said.

The collaborations with West were at times disorienting, but Shaw maintained her creative independence. “I think he enjoys just having a lot of different voices in the room, and I never take any direction. I think that’s what

he likes about me.” In 2018, after working on *ye* in Wyoming, Shaw contacted West’s assistants to see the lyrics before production. “I’m not going to be part of something that says something that I don’t believe in,” she said.

In recent years, Shaw has pursued numerous other pop-culture collaborations. She did vocals for the score of the film *Bombshell*, working with the celebrated movie composer Theodore Shapiro. For the Amazon TV show *Mozart in the Jungle*, she wrote a small piece and even appeared as a fictional version of herself.

But for all these moves into the mainstream, Shaw doesn’t saddle herself with the expectation that her work might reverse the decline in classical music’s fortunes. The trend is too well established. What’s changed since Shaw’s childhood is that today, classical music is alternative. It’s a place where casual listeners go for contemplation, but also a place for pop musicians to look for innovative and unusual sounds.

And now there are more ways than ever to encounter classical music. It’s possible that the young people I saw at the Kings Place concert were drawn to Shaw’s music by hearing it on streaming services and social media, or on the soundtrack of the indie movie *Madeline’s Madeline*, or through her collaborations with West. Shaw’s career may be an exception, but if classical music is to endure, it could begin by embracing its improbable new status as a subculture. *A*

Jonathan Gharraie is a writer living in Derbyshire, England.

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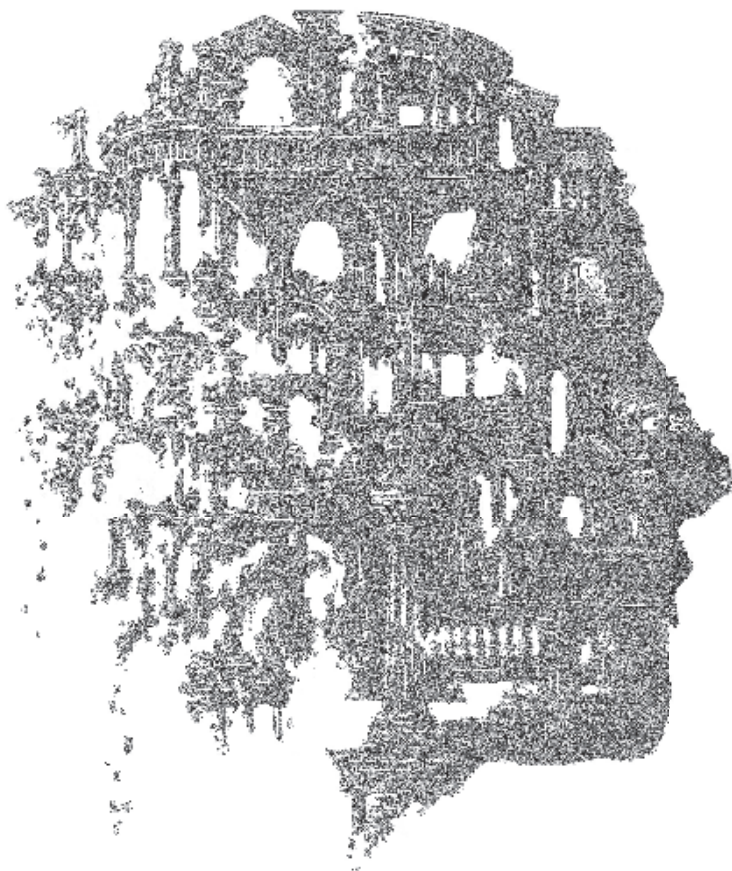
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BRING BACK THE NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

*It used to be okay to admit that the world
had simply become too much.*

BY JERRY USEEM

A

April 1935 was a nervous month. Unemployment in America stood at 20 percent. A potential polio vaccine was failing trials. The term *Dust Bowl* made its first appearance in newsprint. A thousand-mile storm carried away much of Oklahoma. And *Fortune* magazine introduced its readers to “The ‘Nervous Breakdown.’”

Soon reprinted as an 85-page book, the article cited experts “whose names loom largest in the fields of mental hygiene.” The takeaway? The nervous breakdown was deemed to be “as widespread as the common cold and the chiefest source of misery in the modern world.” Anyone could be susceptible; it could be precipitated by nearly anything, and it prevented one “from carrying on the business of normal living.” Resolution of the breakdown entailed a time-out, ideally at one of the deluxe sanitariums profiled a few pages in.

Right now—I think we can all agree—Americans are once again living in a nervous time. Pandemic. Wildfires. Indefinite homeschooling. Postelection political chaos. TikTok. Feelings of impending collapse have arguably never rested on firmer empirical ground. But today we no longer have recourse to the culturally sanctioned respite that the nervous breakdown once afforded. No longer can we take six weeks at the Hartford Retreat, one of the healing getaways described in *Fortune*—all long since closed or transmuted into psychiatric facilities

that require a formal mental-health diagnosis for admission. No restorative caesura is forthcoming for us. The nervous breakdown is gone.

For 80 years or so, proclaiming that you were having a nervous breakdown was a legitimized way of declaring a sort of temporary emotional bankruptcy in the face of modern life's stresses. John D. Rockefeller Jr., Jane Addams, and Max Weber all had acknowledged "breakdowns," and reemerged to do their best work. Provided you had the means—a rather big proviso—announcing a nervous breakdown gave you license to withdraw, claiming an excess of industry or sensitivity or some other virtue. And crucially, it focused the cause of distress on the outside world and its unmeetable demands. You weren't crazy; the world was. As a 1947 headline in the *New York Herald Tribune* put it: "Modern World Viewed as Too Much for Man."

The term *nervous breakdown* first appeared in a 1901 medical treatise for physicians. "It is a disease of the whole civilized world," its author wrote. This disquisition built on the work of a Gilded Age doctor, George Miller Beard, who posited that we all had a set amount of nerve force, which could be depleted, like a battery, by the stress of modern life. Beard had argued that an epidemic of nervous disease had been unleashed by technology and the press, which accelerated everything. "The chief and primary cause of this ... very rapid increase of nervousness is *modern civilization*," he wrote in *American Nervousness* in 1881.

This idea of the nervous breakdown as a natural response to modern life gained

currency through the go-go 1920s, and then achieved cultural ubiquity with the economic collapse of the 1930s. "Is a nervous breakdown a sign of weakness?" asked a 1934 book titled *Nervous Breakdown*.

Not at all. You have put up a good fight, but the odds were too heavy against you ... Nature has warned you and given you respite. The breakdown is a definite indication that you are still functioning, and have within you the material for recovery.

Famous cases illustrated this. Rockefeller's best-remembered achievements—the national parks, the art museums, Rockefeller Center—came after his breakdown in 1904, which sent him to the south of France for six months' relief from strain. Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* while prostrated by an excess of the very work ethos he described. (He recovered and resumed teaching just in time to die of the 1918 pandemic flu.)

BUT BY THE mid-1960s, when the Rolling Stones recorded "19th Nervous Breakdown," the concept was getting pushed to the margins by the rise of mass-market, prescription-driven psychiatry (presaged by another Stones single, "Mother's Little Helper"). The developing field had little use for an affliction that could be treated without the assistance of physicians. Diseases like major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder—diagnosed and treated by specialized doctors dispensing specialized

drugs—replaced the nervous-breakdown catchall.

This did quite a bit of good: Many people with psychological ailments gained access to medical treatments that could be effective. But something important was lost.

"The very general and ill-defined characteristics of the nervous breakdown were its benefits," Peter Stearns, a social and cultural historian of the nervous breakdown at George Mason University, told me. "It played a function we've at least partially lost. You didn't have to visit a psychiatrist or a psychologist to qualify for a nervous breakdown. You didn't need a specific cause. You were allowed

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to step away from normalcy. The breakdown also signaled a temporary loss of functioning, like a car breaking down. It may be in the shop, sometimes recurrently, but it didn't signal an inherited or permanent state such as terms like *bipolar* or *ADHD* might signal today."

The nervous breakdown was not a medical condition, but a sociological one. It implicated a physical problem—your "nerves"—not a mental one. And it was a onetime event, not a permanent condition. It provided sanction for a pause and reset that could

put you back on track. But as psychology eclipsed sociology in the late 20th century, it turned us inward to our personal moods and thoughts—and away from the shared economic and social circumstances that produced them.

"The psychiatric approach tends to say that you have a specific problem that other people don't have, and we're here to fix your problem independent of what's happening to everyone else," Stearns noted. The effect is atomizing even in normal times. Today, "everyone is so isolated that you have even less sense than usual as to what the collective mood is. So we may need something like the nervous breakdown—something that is less medically precise but encapsulates the way people are encountering the moment."

But in a society reflexively suspicious of rest, getting a restorative break tends to require a formal mental-health diagnosis. Otherwise, you risk getting called a slacker. That's what happened to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez a couple of years ago when she announced she was taking a few days off for "self-care" after a grueling election. "Congresswoman-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez hasn't yet started her new job," Fox News blared, "but she's already taking a break."

This got me thinking that maybe we need to bring back the nervous breakdown, to protect the nation's collective reserve of nerve force at a time when it's stretched so thin. What would the modern version of a culturally accepted, nervous-breakdown-precipitated time-out look like?

A century ago, the famous Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan marketed itself as a "Temple of Health." Under a

canopy of glass and hanging ferns, bathed in sunlight and the super-fresh air provided by elaborate ducts, patients—the diseased and the nervous; distinctions blurred—engaged in quiet conversation or opulent repose. In one building was the gymnasium, flanked on either side by the hydrotherapy wings. Other rooms housed vibrating chairs and therapeutic light baths. Outside, naturalist talks. And in the dining room, staff serenading diners with the Chewing Song. (The sanitarium's superintendent, John Harvey Kellogg, believed that each bite of food should be chewed no fewer than 40 times; to aid digestion, he had invented a special breakfast cereal, cornflakes.)

Sanitariums like Battle Creek became places to restore whatever ailed the body or spirit. To be sure, quackery abounded: Kellogg believed in spinal douches and eugenics. But with the right combination of relaxation, engagement, and yogurt enemas, you could leave feeling like Rockefeller, who came for a stay in 1922.

Sometimes, the treatments even worked. "People responded to the fact that something was being done for them," Edward Shorter, a medical historian and the author of *How Everyone Became Depressed: The Rise and Fall of the Nervous Breakdown*, told me. "The placebo is a very powerful treatment." And the experience of communal recuperation prevented the social isolation of private seclusion.

But the cost of a sanitarium stay in the 1930s could run as high as \$3,000 a week in today's dollars, putting it outside the reach of the comfortably middle class. That would still be true today. And even if

we could somehow eliminate the financial hurdles, we'd be faced with the cultural ones that Weber traced to Ben Franklin—time is money, idleness is sloth, and all that. Anything that smacked of, say, government-subsidized spa days, no matter how healthful those might be, would be considered un-American.

So rather than the nervous breakdown writ large,

WHEN DAIMLER
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we could introduce a more modestly scaled version of it: a series of buffers, firebreaks, or (to use a bankruptcy metaphor) bridge loans to stave off the full Chapter 11 scenario. The French lent us *reculer pour mieux sauter*—literally "to withdraw in order to make a better jump." We could slip something more muscularly American, like *power break* or *power-up*, into our national lexicon. "Boss, I need a power-up" isn't an admission of weakness; it's a simple statement of fact. Achieving widespread cultural acceptance of the practice may take less time than you'd expect—consider how swiftly paternity leave traversed the gap from unheard-of to expected.

The mini-break could insinuate itself into American life in bite-size increments.

When I asked an intensive-care nurse what a power break might look like for her, she said it could be small. A two-minute "debrief" after a death in the unit—a moment to stop, reflect, and connect with the constant and familiar—would go a long way in helping someone regroup before they have to lurch to the next crisis. Though the psychic needs of an ICU nurse are particular, the basic concept is generalizable.

Adam Waytz, a management professor at Northwestern, says that to be effective, breaks should entail true disconnection from work—which is to say we need to be able to slip off our electronic leashes. Both France and Spain have made "the right to disconnect" from after-hours work communication an actual legal right. Daimler, the German auto manufacturer, may have gone the furthest of any company toward establishing full mental-bankruptcy protection for its workers: When Daimler employees take time off, they can opt to have their incoming emails deleted on arrival, with senders getting politely notified that their message has been destroyed and that if they need something urgently, they can contact an alternate person. "The idea," Daimler has said, "is to give people a break and let them rest. Then they can come back to work with a fresh spirit."

Existing bits of U.S. legislation could augment efforts like this by private companies. For instance, an expiring provision of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act that reimburses employers for up to 12 weeks' paid leave if an employee's kid's school closes could be a starting point for

building broader availability of paid time off for family crises or restorative breaks.

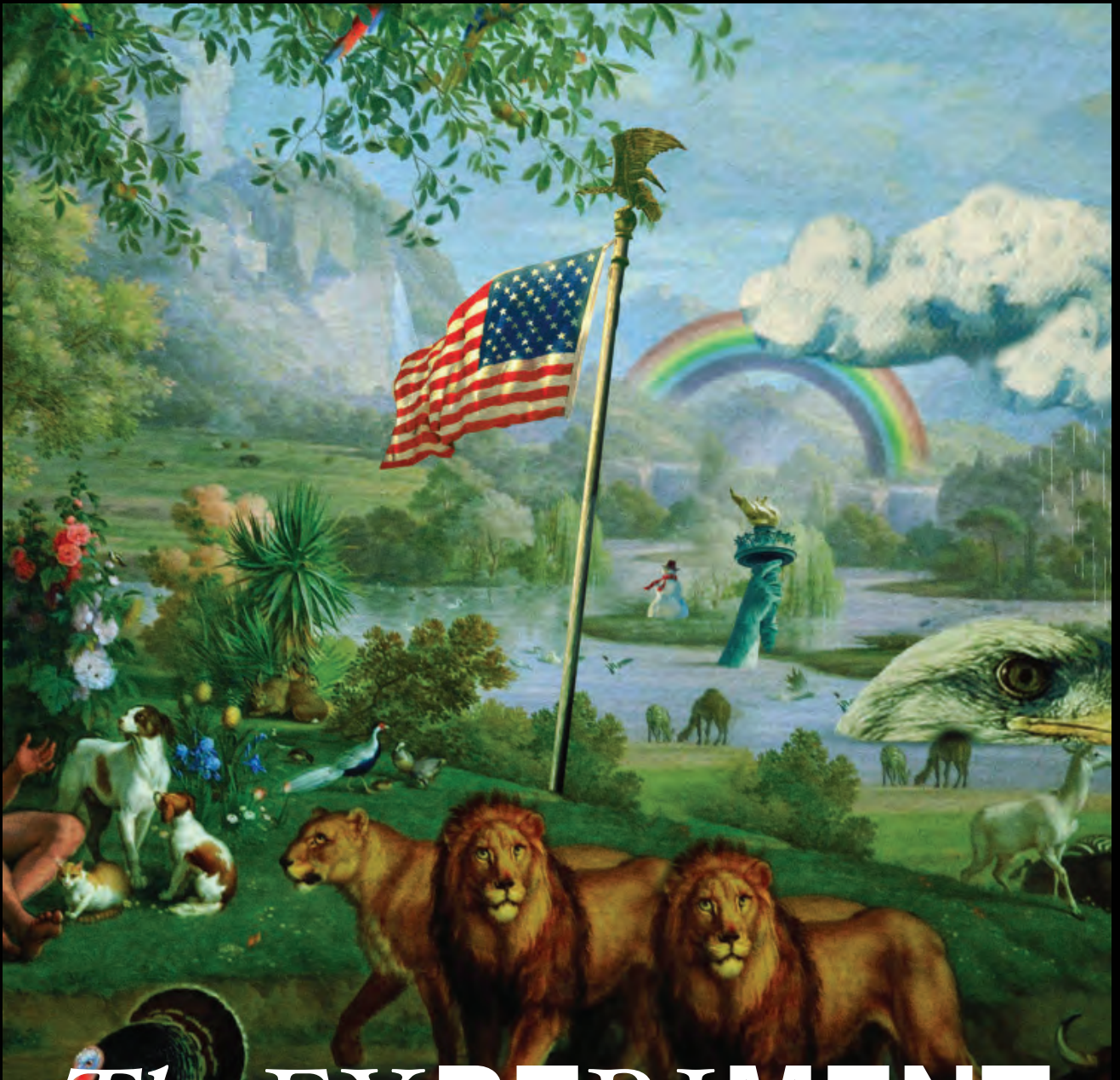
Nervous breakdowns, as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of his own in his 1936 essay "The Crack-Up," are "not a matter of levity." He'd found himself "like a man overdrawing at his bank"—"I began to realize that for two years my life had been a drawing on resources that I did not possess, that I had been mortgaging myself physically and spiritually up to the hilt." At that point, Fitzgerald was well into terminal alcoholic decline, and on his way to an early death.

The past year has made clear the tremendous emotional and social damage that accumulates when whole populations get pushed beyond easily endurable limits. Alcohol consumption is up; drug overdoses are up; reports of anxiety and depression are up. Even once this pandemic wanes, its psychic effects will linger. The previous century's flu pandemic lasted until 1920, but a spike in suicides was seen the following year, in 1921. Which is why, individually and collectively, we would be wise to do better than remain bundles of never-ending nervousness, too frayed to provide much solace or support for anyone, waiting for the psychiatric-industrial complex to handle America's growing mental-health crisis, and doing little or nothing to head it off.

Better a more economically feasible and culturally acceptable nervous breakdown now than something worse later on. *A*

Jerry Useem is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.

PROMOTION



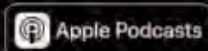
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Small crowd gathered outside Studio Dee, WHOD radio station, Herron and Centre Avenues, Hill District, August 1, 1951



CHARLES "TEENIE" HARRIS ARCHIVE / CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

Everybody Knew Teenie

Photograph by Charles "Teenie" Harris

A thing you should probably know about Black Pittsburgh's relationship with Teenie is that we love to lie about him. Charles "Teenie" Harris captured at least 125,000 people in the tens of thousands of photos he took during the 40 years he documented Black life for *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Thirty-five of those photos are now part of an ongoing exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art. To hear it today, everybody's grandma was shot by him, everybody's great-uncle played spades against him, and everybody's second cousin's third cousin got lit at the Crawford Grill with him. This is what happens when someone is magic like that. When the shadow of someone's work is so mammoth—such a part of how we see and love and regard and remember ourselves—we insert ourselves in its shade.

In this shot, from 1951, 45 or so people stand outside the Hill District studio of the iconoclastic DJ Mary Dee Dudley. Dudley was America's first Black female DJ, and her shows became impromptu block parties as crowds gathered in front of the studio's storefront windows to request songs, see Mary Dee, and be seen. The Hill of the early 20th century was an internationally renowned hub of Black culture, frequented by Duke and Satchmo, home to Greenlee Field and Madam C. J. Walker's Lelia College of Beauty Culturists, and later immortalized by August Wilson's *Century Cycle*.

In the late '50s, many of the Hill District living rooms, rib spots, corner stores, stoops, schools, basements, backyards, barstools, banks, and barbershops canonized by Teenie's lens were wiped away to build an arena that no longer exists. By the time he died, in 1998, at nearly 90 years old, the population of the Hill had dropped from 50,000 to 12,000.

Another thing you should probably know about Black Pittsburgh's relationship with Teenie is that those lies tell the truth. How did—how do—we survive in a city considered one of America's "Most Livable" but that's somehow one of the least livable for us? I don't know. But I do know that community, for Black Pittsburghers, is a proper noun and a shelter from the city. Even if we didn't actually find our way into his orbit, when Teenie caught one of us, he caught all of us.

—Damon Young

THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT SLAVE NARRATIVES
PROVIDE A WINDOW INTO OUR HERITAGE—TO
STORIES OF SUFFERING BUT ALSO OF LOVE, JOY, WONDER,
AND SURVIVAL. THEY'RE AN ALL-TOO-RARE LINK TO
ORDINARY BLACK LIVES GONE BY.



*Photograph
by*

AARON
TURNER



WE
MOURN
FOR
ALL
WE
DO
NOT
KNOW

By Clint Smith



On a rainy Thursday afternoon in November, I stepped inside the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, D.C. On past visits, I'd always encountered crowds of tourists and school groups, a space bursting with movement and sound. But on this day, the museum was nearly empty. It seemed to echo with all the people who had been there but were no longer. For the few of us inside, social distancing was dictated by blue circles scattered on the floor.

I made my way down to the bottom level, which documents the history of slavery in America. Masks were mandatory, and something about the pieces of cloth covering everyone's mouths seemed to amplify the silence and solemnity of what surrounded us.

I walked past the statue of Thomas Jefferson standing among bricks bearing the names of people he'd enslaved, past a cabin that enslaved people had slept in, and past the stone auction block upon which enslaved people had been sold and separated from their families.

Toward the end of a long corridor was a dimly lit room with sepia-toned photos on the walls. Photos of enslaved people holding their own children, or their enslaver's children. Photos of fresh wounds on the backs of those who'd been beaten. Photos of people bent over fields of cotton that hid their faces.

But what was most striking about the room was the voices running through it. The words of people who had survived slavery were running on a six-minute loop. Their voices floated through the air like ghosts.

"My father was not allowed to see my mother but two nights a week," said a woman in the voice of Mary A. Bell. "Dat was Wednesday and Saturday. So he often came home all bloody from his beatings."

"I had to wok evva day," said a woman in the voice of Elvira Boles. "I'd leave mah baby cryin' in the yard, and I'd be cryin', but I couldn't stay."

"My mudder word in de field," said Harrison Beckett. "Sometimes she come in 9 or 10 'clock at night. She be all wore out an' it be so dark she too tired to cook lots of times, but she hafter git some food so we could eat it. Us all 'round de table like dat was like a feast."



PREVIOUS AND CURRENT SPREADS:
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Portraits of formerly enslaved people, taken as part of the Federal Writers' Project. Left to right, top row: Willis Winn (Texas); James Green, seated, with an unidentified individual (Texas); Ben Kinchelow (Texas). Second row: Charles H. Anderson (Ohio); Mary Crane (Indiana); Daniel Taylor (Alabama); Simp Campbell (Texas); Orelia Alexia Franks (Texas). Third row: Harriet Jones (Texas); Patsy Moses (Texas); Gus Johnson (Texas). Fourth row: Ben Horry (South Carolina); William Henry Towns (Alabama); Maugan Shepherd (Alabama). Previous spread: Mollie Williams (Mississippi).



When I'd first encountered these floating voices years before, I was fascinated by how ordinary their stories were. These were not tales of daring escapes like those of Henry "Box" Brown, who in 1849 contorted his body into a wooden crate for 27 hours as it was delivered from the slave state of Virginia to abolitionists in Pennsylvania—mailing himself to freedom. Nor were they the stories of Frederick Douglass, who as a teenager, in 1833, fought his white slave breaker with such force that the man never hit Douglass again. Nor were they the stories of Harriet Jacobs, who, in an attempt to escape the physical and sexual abuses of slavery, hid in an attic for seven years.

Brown became a global celebrity who turned his escape routine into a one-man show that traveled throughout the United States and England. Douglass and Jacobs wrote autobiographies that became best sellers, and that today are staples in classrooms around the world. Theirs are the stories I learned as a child, and there's great value in teaching kids stories of resistance, of Black people not being passive recipients of violence. But I remember how, after reading them, I found myself wondering why every enslaved person didn't just escape like these famous figures did. The memory of that thought now fills me with shame.

The stories swirling about the room weren't famous accounts of extraordinary people; rather, they were the words of all-but-forgotten individuals who bore witness to the quotidian brutality of chattel slavery. These stories were the result of the Federal Writers' Project—a New Deal program that was tasked with collecting the oral histories of thousands of Americans. From 1936 to 1938, interviewers from the FWP gathered the firsthand accounts of more than 2,300 formerly enslaved people in at least 17 states. The members of the last generation of people to experience slavery were reaching the end of their lives, and so there was an urgency to record their recollections. In scale and ambition, the project was unlike any that had come before it. The Federal Writers' Project ex-slave narratives produced tens of thousands of pages of interviews and hundreds of photographs—the largest, and perhaps the most important, archive of testimony from formerly enslaved people in history.

While many of these narratives vividly portray the horror of slavery—of families separated, of backs beaten, of bones crushed—embedded within them are stories of enslaved people dancing together on Saturday evenings as respite from their work; of people falling in love, creating pockets of time to see each other when the threat of violence momentarily ceased; of children skipping rocks in a creek or playing hide-and-seek amid towering oak trees, finding moments when the movement of their bodies was not governed by anything other than their own sense of wonder. These small moments—the sort that freedom allows us to take for granted—have stayed with me.

When I first came across the narratives, I was confused as to why I had never, not once in my entire education, been made aware of their existence. It was as if this trove of testimony—accounts that might expand, complicate, and deepen my understanding of slavery—had purposefully been kept from view.

FOR MANY BLACK AMERICANS, there is a limit to how far back we can trace our lineage. The sociologist Orlando Patterson calls it *natal alienation*: the idea that we have been stripped of

social and cultural ties to a homeland we cannot identify. I have listened to friends discuss the specific village in Italy their ancestors came from, or the specific town in the hills of Scotland. No such precision is possible for Black Americans who are the descendants of enslaved people. Even after our ancestors were forcibly brought to the shores of the New World, few records documented their existence. The first census to include all Black Americans by name was conducted in 1870, five years after slavery ended. Trying to recover our lineage can be a process of chasing history through a cloud of smoke. We search for what often cannot be found. We mourn for all we do not know.

But the descendants of those who were interviewed for the Federal Writers' Project have been given something that has been denied to so many Black Americans: the opportunity to read the words, and possibly see the faces, of people they thought had been lost to history.

Because these narratives are not often taught in school, many people come across them for the first time later in life. Several historians told me that their encounters with these stories had shifted the trajectory of their personal and intellectual lives. Catherine A. Stewart, a historian at Cornell College, in Iowa, and the author of *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project*, remembers sitting in the basement of the university library as a graduate student, making her way through reels of microfilm. "I will just never forget this sensation I had of these stories—of these life histories of these individuals, personal stories and experiences of enslavement—just leaping off the page," she said.

For years, the collections had been largely ignored. As Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller note in *Remembering Slavery*, an edited volume of selected narratives, historians throughout the mid-20th century came up with a range of reasons not to take them seriously. Some argued that because the people who were interviewed, in the 1930s, had been children when slavery ended, their memories were unreliable. Others claimed that the narratives couldn't be trusted because they weren't an adequate statistical sample: Those who were interviewed represented approximately 2 percent of the formerly enslaved population still alive in 1930.

Perhaps the most insidious reason to dismiss the narratives came from the historian Ulrich B. Phillips, whose conception of slavery as a civilizing institution for the enslaved shaped many Americans' understanding of it in the early-to-mid-20th century. Phillips complained of "Negro bias," believing that Black Americans were "too close" to the subject of slavery and thus unable to be objective about it—a criticism that has been used to undermine Black writing and research on issues of racism since the earliest days of Black life in America.

That view began to change with the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, when historians, intellectuals, and activists came to see slavery as the root cause of racial inequality. Interest in the Federal Writers' Project narratives grew.

The Black Lives Matter movement has further pushed historians to revisit these stories. The past several years—and particularly the months since last summer's racial-justice protests—have prompted many people to question what we've been taught, to see our shared past with new eyes. The FWP narratives afford us

the opportunity to understand how slavery shaped this country through the stories of those who survived it.

My mammy Martha an' me we 'longed ter Mister Joshua Long in Martin County, an' my paw, Henry, 'longed ter Squire Ben Sykes in Tyrrell County. Squire Sykes lived in what was called Gum Neck, an' he owned a hundert slaves or more an' a whole passel of lan'.

Noah Lewis had been doing genealogical research for years, trying to learn as much as possible about his family history, when he discovered that his great-great-grandfather, a man named William Sykes, had been interviewed as part of the Federal Writers' Project ex-slave-narrative collection. He wanted to see the original documents himself, so he traveled from his home in Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., to visit the Library of Congress.

"It was an amazing experience," he told me. "I had never seen photographs of him before ... That was just mind-blowing all by itself."

In the black-and-white photograph of William Sykes that accompanies his narrative, he is 78 years old and facing the camera, his eyes hidden behind a pair of dark glasses. He has a white mustache that stretches over his mouth and a long goatee that hangs from his chin. He appears to be furrowing his brow.

"He kind of reminds me of my older brother, Jimmy," Lewis said.

Lewis had read books that detailed the physical and psychological violence of slavery; he had seen photos of enslaved people and understood the brutal conditions in which they worked. But there was something different about reading the narrative of his direct ancestor—someone from his own family who, only a few generations earlier, had been in chains.

In his narrative, William Sykes describes being a child in North Carolina and seeing the soldiers of the Union Army make their way into Confederate territory. Sykes's enslaver, fearful for his own life and worried that the Union soldiers might confiscate his human property, escaped with his enslaved workers into the mountains.

While we wus dar one day, an' while Mr. Jim Moore, de Jedge's daddy am in town de missus axes my cousin Jane ter do de washin'.

Jane says dat she has got ter do her own washin' an dat she'll wash fer de missus termorrer. De missus says "you ain't free yit, I wants you ter know."

"I knows dat I's not but I is 'gwine ter be free'", Jane says.

De missus ain't said a word den, but late Sadday night Mr. Jim he comes back from town an' she tells him 'bout hit.

Mr. Jim am some mad an' he takes Jane out on Sunday mornin' an' he beats her till de blood runs down her back.

Sykes was a child; the detail of blood running down Jane's back stayed with him the rest of his life.

Lewis said that, like me, he'd grown up with an incomplete understanding of slavery. "As a young child, I remember thinking

to myself, *You know, hey, if slavery was so bad, why didn't my people fight harder to try to get out of it?*" Jane's story showed that it wasn't so simple.

Lewis himself was born in 1953 on an Army base in Heidelberg, Germany, where his father was stationed. His family returned to the U.S. when he was just 10 months old. When he was 13, they moved to Aldan, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. As far as Lewis knows, his was the first Black family in Aldan, and he says they were not welcomed with open arms.

"A couple days after we moved in, we woke up that morning, and somebody had written on our car windshield I HATE NIGGERS." His father came out of the house with a shotgun and yelled loud enough for everyone in the neighborhood to hear: "I don't care if you don't like me, but if you start playing with my property, there will be trouble."

Lewis said that while the FWP narratives can be emotionally difficult to get through, he's also found "a certain joy" in reading them. "This is your relative, and it's them speaking, and it brings them to life. They remind you that they were a person, not a stat, not a little side note, not a little entry in a genealogical chart. They were a real, living, breathing human being. That's what that document kind of really hits you with."

But not everyone feels the way Lewis does. Six years ago, he attended a family reunion in New Jersey and decided to share what he'd discovered. Standing in front of about 30 people in folding chairs in a relative's backyard, Lewis read Sykes's words. Some of those present were old enough to have known Sykes when they were children—and some felt deeply hurt, and embarrassed, by parts of what Sykes was portrayed as having said.

For example, some sections of his narrative implied that life under slavery was good:

I knows dat Mister Long an' Mis' Catherine wus good ter us an' I 'members dat de food an' de clothes wus good an' dat dar wus a heap o' fun on holidays. Most o' de holidays wus celebrated by eatin' candy, drinkin' wine an' brandy. Dar wus a heap o' dancin' ter de music of banjoes an' han' slappin'. We had co'n shuckin's, an' prayer meetin's, an' sociables an' singin's. I went swimmin' in de crick, went wid old Joe Brown, a-possum huntin', an' coon huntin', an' I sometimes went a-fishin'.

Read one way, these sorts of details might be seen as softening the horrors of slavery, making the gruesome nature of the institution more palatable to readers who aren't prepared to come to grips with what this country has done. Read another way, though, they might reveal the humanity of those who were enslaved, and show that despite circumstances predicated on their physical and psychological exploitation, they were still able to laugh, play, celebrate, and find joy.

Other sections of Sykes's account, however, are more difficult to reconcile. Toward the end of the narrative he's depicted as having said:

We ain't wucked none in slavery days ter what we done atter de war, an' I wisht dat de good ole slave days wus back.

Dar's one thing, we ole niggers wus raised right an' de young niggers ain't. Iffen I had my say-so dey'd burn down de nigger schools, gibe dem pickanninies a good spankin' an' put 'em in de patch ter wuck, ain't no nigger got no business wid no edgercation nohow.

After Lewis finished, some of his relatives told him that he shouldn't have read the narrative to them. They felt that Sykes's words reflected poorly on them as a family and on Black people in general. But they didn't just blame Sykes; they blamed the white person who'd interviewed him, who

they believe must have manipulated Sykes or changed his words. "A typical example of white people trying to make us look ignorant," they told him.

This issue of manipulation in the interviews is something historians have had to wrestle with. The narratives were rarely verbatim transcriptions. Many interviewers altered their subjects' dialect to make it seem more "authentically" Black. As Catherine Stewart writes in her book, "FWP decisions about how to depict [dialect] on the page reveal more about how the black vernacular was used to represent black identity than about the actual speech patterns of ex-slave informants." And historians have worried that in a violent, segregated society, when white interviewers showed up on a Black person's doorstep, the formerly enslaved might have told the interviewers what they thought they wanted to hear, rather than what had actually happened.

The project did employ some Black interviewers, but the majority were white southerners. Some were the descendants of

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**THE DESCENDANTS
OF THOSE WHO
WERE INTERVIEWED
CAN READ THE WORDS
OF PEOPLE THEY
THOUGHT HAD BEEN
LOST TO HISTORY.**



Noah Lewis (above) discovered that his great-great-grandfather William Sykes (opposite page, left) was interviewed for the Federal Writers' Project. Opposite page, right: Lewis's parents in 1952, before moving to Germany.

slaveholders—in certain cases, descendants of the families that had enslaved the very same people they were sent to interview—or members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an organization known for pushing a narrative of slavery that was sympathetic to the Confederate cause.

When Stephanie Jones-Rogers, a historian at UC Berkeley and the author of *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, showed early portions of her book to friends, some questioned why she hadn't changed the language of the interviews. They worried that the narratives portrayed formerly enslaved people as uneducated and illiterate. "There may have been some manipulation," Jones-Rogers told me, and that should be accounted for and taken seriously. Still, she felt that changing the language would risk changing the specific meaning behind how these individuals wanted to tell their story. And it would ignore the fact that, unfortunately, many of them *were*, by nature of circumstance, uneducated and illiterate—a reflection of the way the insidious legacy of slavery had continued to shape their lives.

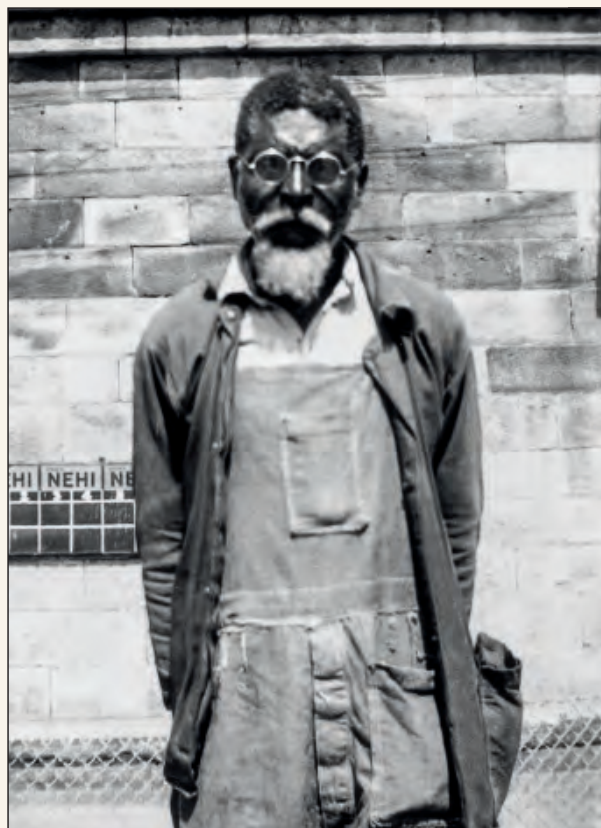
Daina Ramey Berry, the chair of the history department at the University of Texas at Austin, told me that there is no source a historian can use that isn't compromised by bias in some way, and the notion that we should ignore the narratives because of their imperfections would mean applying a standard to them that is not applied across the board. "The big excuses that people have as to why they push back against them is that they'll say, 'Well, they're biased,'" she said. "And I'm always like, 'I don't understand why you can read a plantation owner's letters, or his journal—or her journal—and not even question that.'"

LEWIS UNDERSTOOD his relatives' concerns. Still, he couldn't help but feel disappointed that they didn't appreciate how remarkable it was that this narrative existed at all. For Lewis, it was a piece of history, a piece of them. It was like finding treasure—even if the jewels aren't cut as cleanly as you'd like, they're still worth something.

Lewis's interest in history would ultimately change the course of his life. As he was doing his genealogical research, he went all the way back to the American Revolution, trying to discover whether he had relatives who had been enslaved in the British colonies. He came across the book *Black Genealogy*, by the historian Charles L. Blockson. There, Lewis encountered the story of a man named Edward "Ned" Hector, a Black soldier who fought in the Revolutionary War, one of thousands of Black people to fight on the side of the Americans. During the Battle of Brandywine, in September 1777, Hector and his regiment were under attack and ordered to abandon their guns and retreat for safety. Hector, however, seized as many abandoned guns as he could, threw them in his wagon, and warded off British soldiers to salvage the only equipment his company had left.

Learning about Hector was transformative for Lewis. He thought this history of Black contributions to the American project should be taught in his children's classrooms—but not just through books or lectures. The history had to be brought to life. It had to be made real. "So I figured it would be a much better way of getting across to the kids *about* Hector if I came *as* Hector," he said.

His first presentation was in his daughter's fifth-grade classroom, in a makeshift costume that he still laughs about today. His pants were blue hospital scrubs, with a pair of long white socks



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; COURTESY OF NOAH LEWIS

pulled over the bottoms of the legs. He wore a yellow linen vest, a souvenir-shop tricorned hat, and a woman's blouse. "It was very bad, extremely bad," he said. Still, the teachers and students loved his presentation, and he was asked to come back again. And again. "After a while, one of the teachers said, 'You got something really good here. Maybe you might want to consider taking this more public, out to other schools and places.' I thought about that. And I said, 'You know, that's not a bad idea.'"

About three years later, Lewis decided to leave his full-time job running an electronics-repair shop so he could dedicate more time to his reenactment work, which he had begun getting paid to do. Since then, he's performed as Ned Hector in classrooms, at memorial sites, and at community festivals and has become a staple of the colonial-reenactment community.

In a video of one performance, he's dressed in a blue wool jacket—typical of those worn by American soldiers during the Revolutionary War—and a matching tricorned hat with a large red feather. In his hands, the musket he holds is not simply a musket, but an instrument that helps him transport the audience back more than two centuries. It becomes a paddle, rising and falling in front of his chest as he tells the story of Black soldiers helping other American troops cross a river during battle. He places it just below his chin as if it were a microphone amplifying his story, or a light meant to illuminate his face in the darkness.

In another video, Lewis stands in front of a school group. "How would you like to have your families, your loved ones, dying for somebody else's freedom, only to be forgotten by them?" He pauses and scans the crowd. "If you are an *American*, you share in African American history, because these people helped *you* to be free."

Watching Lewis, I was impressed by how he brought the Revolution to life in ways that my textbooks never had. How he told stories of the role Black people played in the war that I had never heard before. How in school—except for Crispus Attucks's martyrdom during the Boston Massacre—I don't think I had ever been made to consider that Black people were part of the American Revolution at all. It reminded me of how so much of Black history is underreported, misrepresented, or simply lost. How so many stories that would give us a fuller picture of America are known by so few Americans.

*The horn to git up blowed 'bout four o'clock and if we
didn't fall out right now, the overseer was in after us.
He tied us up every which way and whip us, and at night
he walk the quarters to keep us from runnin' 'round.
On Sunday mornin' the overseer come 'round to each
nigger cabin with a big sack of shorts and give us 'nough
to make bread for one day. I used to steal some chickens,
'cause we didn't have 'nough to eat, and I don't think
I done wrong, 'cause the place was full of 'em.*

In the photograph accompanying the interview of Carter J. Johnson, he stands in front of a wooden cabin in the town of Tatum,

Texas. He wears denim overalls and a collared shirt. His head is cocked, his brow furrowed. On the porch behind him is a woman in a patterned dress.

Janice Crawford had never seen a photo of her mother's father. When she saw this picture, she told me, it was listed under the name Carter J. Jackson, but Crawford couldn't find a Carter Jackson in the census records for that area. She recognized some of the names he mentioned in his narrative from her genealogical research, and showed the photo to her mother, who immediately recognized her father. Carter J. Jackson was in fact Carter J. Johnson. The interviewer must have made a mistake.

Crawford's mother was born to two unwed parents. They lived nearby, but the man she called Papa, the man she always thought of as her father, was Carter Johnson. Johnson, a deacon in the local church, and his wife, Sally Gray Johnson (whom Crawford called Big Mama, and who is the woman on the porch in the photo), took her in and raised her as their own. Crawford never knew her grandfather—he died nine years before she was born—but his presence was still in the air as she grew up.

Crawford's mother didn't have a photograph of her father, and it meant a great deal to Crawford to be able to give her one. "It was very emotional to me," she said.

She remembers her mother telling her a story, long before she read it in the narrative, about how Johnson and other enslaved people had been forced to walk from Alabama to Texas while guiding their owner's cattle and horses and a flock of turkeys the entire way. She couldn't understand how someone could make other people walk so far, for so long.

In the narrative, Johnson says that his mother, a woman named Charlotte from Tennessee, and his father, a man named Charles from Florida, had each been sold to a man named Parson Rogers and that he'd brought them to Alabama, where Johnson was born.

Johnson says that in 1863—the year President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation—Rogers brought 42 of his enslaved workers to Texas, where the proclamation was not being enforced. There, they continued to be enslaved by Rogers for four years after the war ended.

What Johnson describes was not uncommon. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, enslavers throughout the Confederacy continued to hold Black people in bondage for the rest of the war. And even after General Robert E. Lee surrendered, on April 9, 1865, effectively signaling that the Confederacy had lost the war, many enslavers in Texas and other states did not share this news with their human property. In the narratives, formerly enslaved people recount how the end of their bondage did not correspond with military edicts or federal legislation. Rather, emancipation was a long, inconsistent process that delayed the moments when people first tasted freedom.

Johnson's narrative opens and closes with stories of separation. Near the beginning he says:

I had seven brothers call Frank and Benjamin and Richardson and Anderson and Miles, Emanuel and Gill, and three sisters call Milanda, Evaline and Sallie, but I don't know if any of 'em are livin' now.



Janice Crawford had never seen a photograph of her grandfather before she came across his narrative in the FWP archive. Through her research, she also got in touch with a descendant of the family that had enslaved hers.



Carter J. Johnson (left) described watching with his siblings as his mother was sold. Later, he took in Janice Crawford's mother, Emma Lee Johnson (right), and raised her as his own.

Then, toward the end, he speaks about the last time he saw his mother:

Me and four of her chillen standin' by when mammy's sold for \$500.00. Cryin' didn't stop 'em from sellin' our mammy 'way from us.

“The fact that his mother and several of his siblings were sold away, and he was standing there watching this happen,” Crawford said, her voice cracking. “That’s just—that’s just heartbreaking.”

I asked Crawford about the first line of Johnson’s narrative, a line striking in how direct it is:

If you’s wants to know 'bout slavery time, it was Hell.

“Well, you know, it’s just kind of gut-wrenching, isn’t it?” she said. “It was hell. And that’s the word. When my mother saw that word she just kind of jumped. Because she said she’d never heard him curse. And to her, he wasn’t talking about heaven and hell, in the way that, you know, a preacher or minister might. And it was jarring to her.”

Crawford’s genealogical research was driven in part by a desire to trace her biological lineage, because her mother had been adopted. But she also began searching for those who had enslaved her family. In the census records, she found a Rogers who matched her grandfather’s description of “Massa Rogers.” Then, in a Texas newspaper, she found an article written by one of Rogers’s descendants that celebrated the family’s local history, despite all that that history included.

“These folks are proud of their heritage,” Crawford told me. “Even though it includes the fact that their people enslaved other people.”

Crawford wrote to the newspaper, which put her in touch with the article’s author. She didn’t say that his family had enslaved hers. She simply said that, based on her research, the two families were “connected.” But she believes he understood. It was a small town, and the names she mentioned should have made the nature of the connection obvious.

I wondered what Crawford had been hoping to get from these exchanges. Did she want an apology? A relationship? Something else?

She told me she’d been looking for information about her family, trying to recover names of ancestors that had never entered the public record. The man promised to send her some documents from his family members but never did. More important, she added, “I was hoping that they’re acknowledging our humanity. And that just like he is interested in and proud of his ancestry, so am I.”

“I would *like* to say that I’m an observer, and that I can be emotionally detached,” she said, but “it just brings tears to my eyes, how they were treated.” One of the things that left Crawford most unsettled was that the Rogers family back then had claimed to espouse the principles of Christianity. “The people that enslaved my ancestors were ministers, pastors, preachers.”

For Crawford, reading Johnson’s words was the entry point into an entire world of ex-slave narratives. “They really weren’t fed well. They weren’t housed well. They were just required to work from sunup to sundown. They were whipped,” she told

me. “It is horrendous. But still, in all, I feel so blessed to have found that document.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Because it’s a link to our shared history,” she said. “We existed. We conquered. We overcame.”

*My mammy said dat slavery wuz a whole lot wusser
'fore I could 'member. She tol' me how some of
de slaves had dere babies in de fiel's lak de cows done,
an' she said dat 'fore de babies wuz borned dey tied
de mammy down on her face if'en dey had ter whup
her ter keep from ruinin' de baby.*

Lucy Brown didn't know her age when she was interviewed for the Federal Writers' Project on May 20, 1937, in Durham, North Carolina. She had no birth certificate, no sense of what year she'd come into this world. Brown's testimony is shorter than many of the others, in part because she was so young—perhaps only 6 or 7—as slavery entered its final days.

“I wuz jst a little thing when de war wuz over,” she said.

We belonged to John Neal of Person County. I doan know who my pappy wuz, but my mammy wuz named Rosseta an' her mammy's name 'fore her wuz Rosseta. I had one sister named Jenny an' one brother named Ben.

The narrative is a mix of small memories she carried with her from her early childhood and memories that had been passed on to her from her mother.

Gregory Freeland, like both Lewis and Crawford, came across the narrative of his great-great-grandmother while researching his family history. He was raised just outside Durham, where he lived with his mother and his great-grandmother—Lucy's daughter. He found the narrative only after she had died.

When Freeland was a child, his family members would tell stories about their lives, but he wasn't interested in hearing them. “I was sort of ready to get away from that, that slavery thing,” he told me. “So I never paid attention. It seemed like schoolwork.”

Now he wishes he'd asked his great-grandmother about her life, and her mother's life. He felt grateful for having stumbled onto this narrative, and for how connected it made him feel to a history that he'd previously taken for granted. “This is the link to the past,” he said.

Freeland was drafted in 1967 to serve in the Vietnam War. He was stationed in Korea when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and according to Freeland, the Army worked to “keep the temperature down” after King's death so that Black soldiers—who were fighting a war for a country that still didn't afford them basic rights—wouldn't get too upset. The strange dissonance of being sent to the other side of the world to fight for a country that had just killed the leader of your people stayed with Freeland long after he came back to the U.S.

The GI Bill paid for him to go to college, and covered most of graduate school, where he studied political science. For the past 30 years, he's been a professor at California Lutheran University, where he teaches courses on race, politics, and the civil-rights movement—subjects he feels are urgent and necessary for students at this college with a tiny Black population.

He told me he's “trying to keep this history alive, because it's getting further and further away.”

The Durham of Freeland's childhood smelled of tobacco. He remembers the ubiquity of chicken noises, mixed with music from people's houses as they sang while they cooked or listened to the radio on the porch. His family grew fruits and vegetables in their yard, and Freeland helped kill the chickens and hogs they raised. “I had to go out and wring the chickens' neck,” he told me. “I don't know if you've ever seen it happen, but you grab the chicken by the neck and wring it, wring it, wring it until the body pops off. And when the body pops off, it flops around for a while.”

“My students,” he said, “they can't fathom that life was like that.”

Freeland grew up in the same town where his great-great-grandmother had settled

after the Civil War. Known then as Hickstown—named for a white landowner, Hawkins Hicks—the community had begun as an agricultural settlement for the formerly enslaved on the western edge of Durham. Over the course of several decades, it became a self-reliant Black community where the formerly enslaved, their children, and their children's children all lived together. This history is reflected in Lucy Brown's narrative:

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**THE STRANGE
DISSONANCE OF BEING
SENT TO THE OTHER
SIDE OF THE WORLD
TO FIGHT FOR A
COUNTRY THAT HAD
JUST KILLED THE
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STAYED WITH
GREGORY FREELAND.**

I can't tell yo' my age but I will tell yo' dat eber'body what lives in dis block am either my chile or gran'chile. I can't tell yo' prexackly how many dar is o' 'em, but I will tell you dat my younges' chile's baby am fourteen years old, an' dat she's got fourteen youngun's, one a year jst lak I had till I had sixteen.

AS NEARBY DUKE UNIVERSITY GREW, so too did Hickstown, which became known as Crest Street. Residents served as food-service workers, housekeepers, maintenance staff. By the 1970s, the community had more than 200 households, and more than 60 percent of residents worked for the university, according to the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina. This included Freeland's mother, who walked every day from the dirt roads surrounding their home to the paved streets near Duke. And though many of the jobs available did not pay much, it was a tight-knit community of people deeply invested in one another, and in the history of the community their ancestors had built.

Crest Street came under threat in the 1970s with the planned expansion of the East-West Expressway, which would slice directly through the center of this century-old Black community. The residents decided to fight the plan. They hired a team of lawyers and filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Transportation, citing Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination "under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." In 1980, the U.S. Department of Transportation ruled that the highway project could not move forward as proposed, because it would disproportionately affect Black residents.

Representatives from the North Carolina Department of Transportation and members of the Crest Street community began meeting to see if

they could come to an agreement. Crest Street residents invited officials to visit their homes, so that they could see what the construction project would have demolished. Ultimately, a compromise was reached in which the residents would all move to an area that was adjacent to their original neighborhood, keeping the community largely intact.

Listening to Freeland tell this story, I thought about how remarkable it was that in this same place where formerly enslaved people



"This is the link to the past," Gregory Freeland says of the FWP narrative from his great-great-grandmother Lucy Brown, who was a young girl when slavery was ending.

had built a community for themselves after generations of bondage, Black people once again had to defend themselves against a government that was attempting to take away a sort of freedom.

For Freeland, stories of towns like Crest Street, and the activists who kept the community together, are just as essential to document as the stories of his formerly enslaved great-great-grandmother. “I’d like to interview people who lived through the segregationist era,” he told me. “And I’d like to interview those people who participated in making change—Black people who are maybe my age, who grew up in this kind of community—before we pass on.”

“Who is going to remember,” he said, “if nobody’s there to tell it?”

FREELAND IS RIGHT. There are other stories of the Black experience that should be collected—and soon. Recently, I’ve become convinced of the need for a large-scale effort to document the lives of people who lived through America’s southern apartheid; who left the land their families had lived on for generations to make the Great Migration to the North and West; who were told they were second-class citizens and then lived to see a person who looked like them ascend to the highest office in the land. Their stories exist in our living rooms, on our front porches, and on the lips of people we know and love. But too many of these stories remain untold, in many cases because no one has asked.

What would a new Federal Writers’ Project look like? How could we take the best of what the narratives of the 1930s did and build on them, while avoiding the project’s mistakes?

When I raised the idea with the historians I interviewed, their voices lit up with energy as they imagined what such a project might look like.

“Historians would definitely need to be in charge,” Stephanie Jones-Rogers told me. Specifically, Black scholars should lead the project. “There’s a way in which to not only center the Black experience, but also to privilege Black intellect, Black brilliance,” she said. “It would be a project like none we’ve ever seen.”

Daina Ramey Berry thought family members should conduct the interviews. “Almost like a StoryCorps on NPR,” she said, “because I think you’re going to get a more authentic story about what life was like.” Berry thought that even well-intentioned strangers might re-create some of the same dynamics in place in the 1930s. She worried about the implications, again, of having federal workers going into older Black folks’ homes and asking them deeply personal questions about what may have been a traumatic time in their lives.

Catherine Stewart believes that there would be important benefits to having such a project led by the federal government: “Funding, first and foremost, at a level other agencies and non-profit organizations simply don’t have.” She added that the federal government already has the infrastructure this sort of project would require—in places like the National Archives and Records Administration, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the Library of Congress. The government also has the ability to ensure that the public has access to it.

When I began reading the Federal Writers’ Project ex-slave narratives, I thought about my own grandparents. I thought about

my grandfather, and how *his* grandfather had been born into bondage. About my grandmother, and how the grandparents who raised her had been born just after abolition. About how, in the scope of human history, slavery was just a few moments ago. I thought, too, of everything my grandmother and grandfather have seen—born in 1939 Jim Crow Florida and 1930 Jim Crow Mississippi, respectively, and now living through the gravest pandemic in a century and watching their great-grandchildren, my children, grow up over FaceTime.

About a year ago, I decided to interview them. I spoke with them each individually, an audio recorder sitting on the table between us, and listened as they told me stories about their lives that I had never heard. My grandfather and his siblings hid in the back room under a bed while white supremacists rode on horseback through their community to intimidate Black residents. As my grandmother walked to school on the red-dirt roads of northern Florida, white children passing by on school buses would lower their windows and throw food at her and the other Black children. For as much time as I’d spent with them, these were the sorts of stories I hadn’t heard before. The sorts of stories that are not always told in large groups at Thanksgiving while you’re trying to prevent your toddler from throwing mac and cheese across the room.

My children will, in a few decades, be living in a world in which no one who experienced the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965 will still be alive. What happens to those people’s stories if they are not collected? What happens to our understanding of that history if we have not thoroughly documented it?

Some of this work is already being done—by the Southern Oral History Program and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, for instance—but not on a scale commensurate with what the Federal Writers’ Project did. That requires financial and political investment. It requires an understanding of how important such a project is.

Imagine if the government were to create a new Federal Writers’ Project. One committed to collecting, documenting, and sharing the stories of Black people who lived through Jim Crow, of Japanese Americans who lived through internment, of Holocaust refugees who resettled in America, of veterans who fought in World War II and the Vietnam War. And stories like those of the people in Freeland’s great-great-grandmother’s town, who fought to keep their community together when the state wanted to split it apart. There are millions of people who experienced extraordinary moments in American history, and who won’t be around much longer to tell us about them. Some of these moments are ones we should be proud of, and some should fill us with shame. But we have so much to learn from their stories, and we have a narrowing window of time in which to collect them.

I keep thinking of something Freeland told me, and how his words speak to both the stakes and the possibility of this moment.

“We survived,” he said. “And I’m still around.” *A*

Clint Smith is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

A
FORGOTTEN
FOUNDER

*By
Danielle
Allen*

PRINCE HALL WAS A FREE
AFRICAN AMERICAN IN
BOSTON AT A TIME OF
REVOLUTIONARY FERVOR—
AND A TRANSFORMATIVE
FIGURE WHOSE STORY
DESERVES TO BE REINSERTED
INTO THE TALE OF
AMERICA'S CREATION.



Illustration by
MATT
WILLIAMS



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Massachusetts abolished enslavement before the Treaty of Paris brought an end to the American Revolution, in 1783. The state constitution, adopted in 1780 and drafted by John Adams, follows the Declaration of Independence in proclaiming that all “men are born free and equal.” In this statement Adams followed not only the Declaration but also a 1764 pamphlet by the Boston lawyer James Otis, who theorized about and popularized the familiar idea of “no taxation without representation” and also unequivocally asserted human equality. “The Colonists,” he wrote, “are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black.” In 1783, on the basis of the “free and equal” clause in the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution, the state’s chief justice, William Cushing, ruled enslavement unconstitutional in a case that one Quock Walker had brought against his enslaver, Nathaniel Jennison.

Many of us who live in Massachusetts know the basic outlines of this story and the early role the state played in standing against enslavement. But told in this traditional way, the story leaves out another transformative figure: Prince Hall, a free African American and a contemporary of John Adams. From his formal acquisition of freedom, in 1770, until his death, in 1807, Hall helped forge an activist Black community in Boston while elevating the cause of abolition to new prominence. Hall was the first American to publicly use the language of the Declaration of Independence for a political purpose other than justifying war against Britain. In January 1777, just six months after the promulgation of the Declaration and nearly three years before Adams drafted the state constitution, Hall submitted a petition to the Massachusetts legislature (or General Court, as it is styled) requesting emancipation, invoking the resonant phrases and founding truths of the Declaration itself.

Here is what he wrote (I’ve put the echoes of the Declaration of Independence in italics):

The petition of A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of Slavery in the Bowels of a free & christian Country Humbly shuwith that your Petitioners Apprehend that They have in Common with all other men a *Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Grat — Parent of the Unavese hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind* and which they have Never forfeuted by Any Compact or Agreement whatever — but thay wher Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power from their Derest frinds and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents — from A popolous Plasant And plentiful cuntry And in Violation

of *Laws of Nature and off Nations* And in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brough hear Either to Be sold Like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemnd to Slavery for Life.

In this passage, Hall invokes the core concepts of social-contract theory, which grounded the American Revolution, to argue for an extension of the claim to equal rights to those who were enslaved. He acknowledged and adopted the intellectual framework of the new political arrangements, but also pointedly called out the original sin of enslavement itself.

Hall’s memory was vigorously kept alive by members and archivists of the Masonic lodge he founded, and his name can be found in historical references. But his life has attracted fresh attention in recent years from scholars and community leaders, both because he deserves to be widely known and celebrated and because inserting his story into the tale of the country’s founding exemplifies the promise of an integrated way of studying and teaching history. It’s hard enough to shine new light on an African American figure who has been long in the shadows, one who in important ways should be considered an American Founder. It can prove far more difficult to trace an individual’s “relationship tree” and come to understand that person, in a granular and even cinematic way, in the full context of his or her own society: family, school, church, civic organizations, commerce, government. Doing so—especially for figures and communities that have been overlooked—gives us a chance to tell a whole story, to weave together multiple perspectives on the events of our political founding into a single, joined tale. It also provides an opportunity to draw out and emphasize the agency of people who experienced oppression and domination. In the case of Prince Hall, the process of historical reconstruction is still under way.

When I was a girl, I used to ask what there was to know about the experience of being enslaved—and was told by kind and well-meaning teachers that, sadly, the lack of records made the question impossible to answer. In fact, the records were there; we just hadn’t found them yet. Historical evidence often turns up only when one starts to look for it. And history won’t answer questions until one thinks to ask them.

JOHN ADAMS AND PRINCE HALL would have passed each other on the streets of Boston. They almost certainly were aware of each other. Hall was no minor figure, though his early days and family life are shrouded in some mystery. Probably he was born in Boston in 1735 (not in England or Barbados, as some have suggested). It is possible that he lived for a period as a freeman before he was formally emancipated. He may have been one of the thousands of African Americans who fought in the Continental Army; his son, Primus, certainly was. As a freeman, Hall became for a time a leatherworker, passed through a period of poverty, and then ultimately ran a shop, from which he sold, among other things, his own writings advocating for African American causes. Probably he was not married to every one of the five women in Boston who were married to someone named Prince Hall in the years between 1763 and 1804, but he may have been. Whether he was married to Primus’s mother, a woman named Delia, is also unclear. Between 1780 and 1801, the city’s tax collectors found

their way to some 1,184 different Black taxpayers. Prince Hall and his son appear in those tax records for 15 of those 21 years, giving them the longest period of recorded residence in the city of any Black person we know about in that era. The DePaul University historian Chernoh M. Sesay Jr.'s excellent dissertation, completed in 2006, provides the most thorough and rigorously analyzed academic review of Hall's biography that is currently available. (The dissertation, which I have drawn on here, has not yet been published in full, but I hope it will be.)

Hall was a relentless petitioner, undaunted by setbacks. When Hall submitted his 1777 petition, co-signed by seven other free Black men, to the Massachusetts legislature, he was building on the efforts of other African Americans in the state to abolish enslavement. In 1773 and 1774, African Americans from Bristol and Worcester Counties as well as Boston and its neighboring towns put forward six known petitions and likely more to this end. Hall led the formation of the first Black Masonic lodge in the Americas, and possibly in the world. The purpose of forming the lodge was to provide mutual aid and support and to create an infrastructure for advocacy. Fourteen men joined Hall's lodge almost surely in 1775, and in the years from then until 1784, records reveal that 51 Black men participated in the lodge. Through the lodge's history, one can trace a fascinating story of the life of Boston's free Black community in the final decades of the 18th century.

Why did Hall choose Freemasonry as one of his life's passions? Alonza Tehuti Evans, a former historian and archivist of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, took up that question in a 2017 lecture. Hall and his fellow lodge members, he explained, recognized that many of the influential people in Boston—and throughout the colonies—were deeply involved in Freemasonry. George Washington is a prominent example, and symbolism that resonates with Masonic meaning adorns the \$1 bill to this day. Hall saw entrance into Freemasonry as a pathway to securing influence and a network of supporters.

In a world without stable passports or identification documents, participation in the order could provide proof of status as a free person. It offered both leverage and legitimacy—as when Prince Hall and members of his lodge, in 1786, offered to raise troops to support the commonwealth in putting down Shays's Rebellion.

In the winter and spring of 1788, Hall was leading a charge in Boston against enslavers who made a practice of using deception or other means to kidnap free Black people, take them shipboard, and remove them to distant locations, where they would be sold into enslavement. He submitted a petition to the Massachusetts legislature seeking aid—asking legislators to “do us that justice that our present condition requires”—and publicized his petition in newspapers in Virginia, New York, Pennsylvania, and Vermont.

In the summer of that year, a newspaper circulated an extract of a letter from a prominent white Bostonian who had assisted Hall on this very matter. The unnamed author of the letter reports that he had been visited by a group of free Black men who had been kidnapped in Boston and had recently been emancipated and returned to the city. They were escorted to his house by Hall, and they told the story of their emancipation. One of the men who had been kidnapped was a member of Hall's Masonic lodge.

Carried off to the Caribbean and put on the auction block, the kidnapped men found that the merchant to whom they were being offered was himself a Mason. Mutual recognition of a shared participation in Freemasonry put an end to the transaction and gave them the chance to recover their freedom.

PRINCE HALL'S WORK on abolition and its enforcement was just the beginning of a lifetime of advocacy. Disillusioned by how hard it was to secure equal rights for free Black men and women in Boston, he submitted a petition to the Massachusetts legislature seeking funds to assist him and other free Blacks in emigrating to Africa. That same year, he also turned his energies to advocating for resources for public education. Through it all, his Masonic membership proved both instrumental and spiritually valuable.

Founding the lodge had not been easy. Although Hall and his fellows were most likely inducted into Freemasonry in 1775, they were never able to secure a formal charter for their lodge from the other lodges in Massachusetts: Prejudice ran strong. Hall and his fellows had in fact probably been inducted by members of an Irish military lodge, planted in Boston with the British army, who had proved willing to introduce them to the mysteries of the order. Hall's lodge functioned as an unofficial Masonic society—African Lodge No. 1—but received a formal charter only after a request was sent to England for a warrant. The granting of a charter by the Grand Lodge of England finally arrived in 1787.

In seeking this charter, Hall had written to Masons in England, lamenting that lodges in Boston had not permitted him and his fellows a full charter but had granted a permit only to “walk on St John's Day and Bury our dead in form which we now enjoy.” Hall wanted full privileges, not momentary sufferance. In this small detail, though, we gain a window into just how important even the first steps toward Masonic privileges were. In the years before 1783 and full abolition of enslavement in Massachusetts, Black people in the state were subjected to intensive surveillance and policing, as enslavers sought to keep their human property from slipping away into the world of free Blacks. Membership in the Masons was like a hall pass—an opportunity to have a parade as a community, to come out and step high, without harassment. That's what it meant to walk on Saint John's Day—June 24—and to hold funeral parades for the dead.

Whether that stepping-out day remained June 24 is unclear. As Sesay writes, “Boston blacks, including Prince Hall, first applied to use Faneuil Hall in 1789 to hear an ‘African preacher.’ On February 25, 1789, the Selectmen accepted the application of blacks to use Faneuil Hall for ‘public worship.’” By 1820, the walk on Saint John's Day appears to have become African Independence Day and was celebrated on July 14, Bastille Day, much to the displeasure of at least one newspaper. An unattributed column in the *New-England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine* complained about the annual parade in recognizably racist tones (the mention of “Wilberforce” at the end is a reference to William Wilberforce, the British campaigner against enslavement):

This is the day on which, for unaccountable reasons or for no reasons at all, the Selectmen of Boston, permit the town to be

annually disturbed by a mob of negroes ... The streets through which this sable procession passes are a scene of noise and confusion, and always will be as long as the thing is tolerated. Quietness and order can hardly be expected, when five or six hundred negroes, with a band of music, pikes, swords, epaulettes, sashes, cocked hats, and standards, are marching through the principal streets. To crown this scene of farce and mummary, a clergyman is mounted in their pulpit to harangue them on the blessings of independence, and to hold up for their admiration the characters of "Masser Wilberforce and Prince Hall."

Well after Hall's death, the days for stepping out continued in Boston—an expression of freedom and the claiming of a rightful place in the polity. The lodge that Hall founded continued too. It is the oldest continuously active African American association in the U.S., with chapters now spread around the country. Its work in support of public education has endured. In the 20th century the Prince Hall Freemasons made significant contributions to the NAACP, in many places hosting the first branches of the organization. In the 1950s alone, the group donated more than \$400,000 to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (equivalent to millions of dollars today). Thurgood Marshall was a member.

FOR ALL OF what we now know to be Prince Hall's importance, I learned of him only recently. In 2015 the National Archives held a conference about the Declaration of Independence, inspired by my own research on the document. At the conference, another colleague presented a paper on how abolitionists had been the first people to make use of the Declaration for political projects other than the Revolution itself. A few months earlier I had come across the passage from Hall's 1777 petition that I shared above, and that so beautifully resonates with the Declaration; at that conference, I suddenly learned the important political context in which it fit. I had published a book on the Declaration of Independence—*Our Declaration*—in 2014, but until the spring of 2015, I had never heard of Hall.

Yet I have been studying African American history since childhood. When I was in high school, my school didn't do anything to celebrate Black History Month. My father encouraged me to take matters into my own hands and propose to the school that I might curate a weekly exhibit on one of the school's bulletin boards. The school was obliging. It offered me the one available bulletin board—in a dark corner in the farthest remove of the

school's quads. This was not the result of malice, just of a lack of attention to the stakes. But I was glad to have access to that bulletin board, and I dutifully filled it with pictures of people like Carter G. Woodson and Mary McLeod Bethune and Thurgood Marshall, and with excerpts from their writings.

I am deeply aware of how much historical treasure about Black America is hidden, and have been actively trying to seek it out. While I was on the faculty of the University of Chicago, I helped found the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, a network of archival organizations in Chicago dedicated to connecting "all who seek to document, share, understand and preserve Black experiences." And while I was at Chicago—somewhat in the spirit of that old bulletin board—I curated an exhibit for the special-collections department of the campus library on the 45 African Americans who'd earned a doctorate at the university prior to 1940—the

largest number of doctorates awarded to African Americans up to that time by any institution in the world. Even so, I had not known about Prince Hall.

Having discovered Hall at the ridiculous age of 43, I have since made it a mission to teach others about him. At Harvard's Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, we have undertaken a major initiative to develop civic-education curricula and resources. Among the largest projects is a year-long eighth-grade course called "Civic Engagement in Our Democracy." One of the units in that course is centered on Hall's life. Through him and his exploration of the meaning of social contracts and natural rights, and of opportunity and equality,

we teach the philosophical foundations of democracy, reaching through Hall to texts that he also drew on, and whose authors are required reading for eighth graders in Massachusetts—for instance, Aristotle, Locke, and Montesquieu. These writers and thinkers were important figures to Freemasons in Hall's time.

Too much treasure remains buried, living mainly in oral histories, not yet integrated into our full shared history of record. That history can strike home in unexpected ways. Not long ago, I was talking with my father about Prince Hall and the curriculum we were developing. His ears pricked up. Only then did I learn that my grandfather, too, had been a member of the Prince Hall Freemasons. *A*

Danielle Allen is a political philosopher and the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard. She is the author of Talking to Strangers, Our Declaration, and Cuz.

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**HALL SUBMITTED
A PETITION TO THE
MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATURE
REQUESTING EMANCIPATION,
INVOKING THE RESONANT
PHRASES AND FOUNDING
TRUTHS OF THE DECLARATION
OF INDEPENDENCE.**



What is stronger than a pandemic? **People.**

We've spent the last year adjusting to and overcoming all the obstacles brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. But in a world overcome with hardship and hurdles, humanity let its best qualities shine: **Resilience. Innovation. Persistence. Compassion.**

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WHEN AMERICA BECAME A DEMOCRACY

By Vann R. Newkirk II

THE VOTING RIGHTS
ACT OF 1965 FINALLY
DELIVERED ON THE
STATED IDEALS OF
THIS COUNTRY. NOW IT
HANGS BY A THREAD.





I

To My Mother

You were born on July 9, 1964, in Greenwood, Mississippi, delivered into the cradle of white supremacy. Listening to the stories of terror and hope woven into the story of your birth used to frighten me. The year before you entered the world, white supremacists were blocking food aid to Greenwood, trying to starve Black sharecroppers who were demanding their civil rights. You were carried home in the middle of Freedom Summer, right down the street from where Fannie Lou Hamer led a movement that included your neighbors and cousins to demand self-determination. You suckled and wailed, oblivious to your membership in the final group of Black babies born under Jim Crow. There were many such children, born just on the wrong edge of the fight for freedom. But only one of them was my mama.

The marrow of your bones carried generations of struggle, and a year after your birth, that struggle helped bring forth something new. Acceding to the demands of your kin in Mississippi and of many others, President Lyndon B. Johnson and the white folks up in Washington passed the Voting Rights Act. The signing ceremony was in August 1965, just a month after your first birthday. Nobody knew exactly how the act would work, or what would happen when federal agents came down to the state to try to enforce it. But the local paper made things plain and simple: “President Signs Voting Law Declaring That Negroes Free.”

The VRA was historic legislation, but it was still an infant, vulnerable and soft. White leaders in Jackson and other state capitals across the South worked hard to stunt it. White supremacists found new ways to lean on and intimidate Black voters while scrambling to register poor white people. The cotton oligarchs took political offices in local districts and made them countywide offices, hoping to “dilute” new Black votes with white votes. They took other offices, traditionally elective, and made them appointed—then stocked them with white

politicians. They gerrymandered districts to sequester Black voters together when it suited them, or to crack apart growing Black political bastions.

But, slowly and painfully, the act cut its teeth. Black activists mobilized the people to seize the franchise. Examiners sent by Washington registered thousands of Black voters directly. Federal observers and Justice Department lawyers rooted out illegal disenfranchisement, often case by case and person by person. Black Mississippians dragged the state to federal court, over and over.

I’ve got pictures of you in the 1970s, in frills and patent-leather dress shoes. You had the same smile in miniature, the smile I now recognize as my own. You had the same eyes, wide and alert, and the same hands, wiry and knobby. You and the Voting Rights Act grew up together. The VRA was extended by Congress in 1970 and then given new purpose and extended again in 1975, when its provisions were broadened beyond preventing Black disenfranchisement to cover non-English speakers. In 1982, when you went off to college, in Coke-bottle glasses, Congress expanded the act’s coverage beyond purposeful, intentional bigotry to consider voting laws that had disparate, discriminatory effects—such as dilution—regardless of intent. The Supreme Court added to the arsenal with decisions that specified the VRA’s reach over redistricting and racial gerrymandering. The act became an integral part of the machinery of politics at every level in every state.

There were growing pains. There always are. Voting-rights opponents poked and prodded, looking for areas where the courts and the Department of Justice were not so vigilant. They continued to fight any law that might make it easier to vote. As ever, Mississippi led the way. The state still made voters register separately for state and municipal elections, a holdover from the “Mississippi plan,” a strategy to deny African Americans the right to vote. When the Justice Department blocked a 1991 Mississippi redistricting scheme because it would have disenfranchised Black voters, a state representative told *The New York Times* that white politicians privately disparaged the remedy favored by Black legislators as the “nigger plan.” Even as legislation, courts, and the Justice Department secured enormous increases in Black registration and turnout, racial gaps in both measures persisted.

When I think about it all, I think about you, Mama. You had always wanted to be a teacher. You always *were* a teacher, the bright girl tutoring your siblings and cousins. But educating was more than a profession. Rather, it was halfway between divine purpose and civic duty, part of your drive to help set the world right—a drive I knew was connected to the circumstances of your birth and childhood.

That drive took you to North Carolina. You lived in a house with bad wiring and a bathroom not big enough to sneeze in,

Opening spread: *Ten-year-old Quintella Harrell (center) and other students at a voting-rights demonstration at the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. African Americans in Alabama (left and right) registering to vote after the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965.*

commuting 30 minutes across town every morning to teach at your school. You were 24 when you had me, your first child; American democracy, as I think of it, had just turned 23. Democracy is central to America's idea of itself, but that idea had never been a reality until the VRA. You always reminded me of the precariousness and the novelty of this experiment—of the fact that I had been granted a franchise that wasn't even yours when you were born. In school textbooks, the black-and-white photographs of civil-rights protests suggested that America had vanquished its demons ages ago. But you told me that the people marching in those photographs were the people who sang in the choir at church and who brought chitlins to family reunions. We were taught that Black folks had been granted a fundamental right in perpetuity, but in truth the boundaries and contours of that right were in flux and constantly being negotiated, renegotiated, and sometimes overruled.

There were reauthorizations and court challenges, gerrymanders and consent decrees. But you were optimistic. So much of what I remember of you comes back to your faith in this country, and your steadiness in contributing to it. My own first time voting was in 2008, when Barack Obama was elected president. That was the night the spirit of the VRA came closest to being realized, perhaps. Black turnout was now eclipsing white turnout. I called you from college as you cried on your couch. You were 44, born dispossessed and disenfranchised in a county where only 250 Black adults out of more than 13,000 were registered to vote. It felt as if your own steadfastness had won out against every obstacle.

Of course, there were more obstacles to come. Five years later, in 2013, the Supreme Court heard a challenge from a county in Alabama, arguing that Section 4(b) and Section 5 of the VRA were unconstitutional. Section 5 had forced certain jurisdictions to submit all potential changes in voting laws to the Justice Department or a federal court for review, a process known as "preclearance." Section 4(b) included the formula that was used to identify the target jurisdictions; a history of Jim Crow-era policies was a key component of that formula. In *Shelby County v. Holder*, with Chief Justice John Roberts writing for the majority, the Supreme Court ruled that the aggressive, preemptive measures that had been crucial to ensuring the Black vote were no longer warranted—precisely because they had worked so well.

The Court's reasoning crumbled immediately, as Republicans in North Carolina moved that same week to implement a voter-ID law that activists argued would create a special burden on voters of color. A ruling by a federal appeals court held that the North Carolina law targeted voters like you with "almost surgical precision." "Once the bonds of Section 5 were released," Sherrilyn Ifill, the president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, told me recently, "the rest of the country learned from the South how to engage in voter suppression." A torrent of voter-ID laws, gerrymanders, and other election changes would steadily erode the Voting Rights Act over the next few years in states both within and beyond the South, including Indiana, Kansas, and Wisconsin. The Republican Party adopted a facsimile of the white-supremacist strategy that had ruled Mississippi.

Then it was 2016 and, well, you know what happened in 2016. But by then you were occupied with more important things. I remember how the fear rattled in your voice when you

called me that summer and let me know that doctors had found cancer, and that it had already spread. You fought, as stoically and bravely as you'd done everything else in your life. You continued educating and mentoring as best you could between injections. You stood up to sing in church, even when the tumors broke bones in your spine. You became a grandmother, traveling to hold my son even as medications withered your hands and cracked your skin.

More and more Americans and institutions aligned themselves against your ballot, but you still voted. You intended not only to live, but to live on your own terms, as a citizen. You steeled yourself as an antidemocratic movement swept the courts, as the Justice Department's guid-

ing hand disappeared, as people waited in long lines, as "voter purges" made the news. We watched protests on TV together in the hospital. We talked about whether things were heading toward the electoral confusion of fragile foreign governments, as pundits liked to say, or toward the kind of corrupt state that Mississippi was in 1964. Even knowing what I know, I tried to believe that democracy was too robust for that. You laughed at my naïveté. You'd been there before.

In the fall of 2020, you tried to schedule your chemotherapy appointments so that you'd be able to cast your ballot in person, as you'd always done. When I got a call as I watched the results

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roll in on Election Night, I thought it was going to be you telling me about how you'd voted, and how closely you were watching on television. The call was a bit more urgent than that. I flew a day later to your side, and held your hands and gave you sips of water as the counts in Georgia and Pennsylvania and Nevada and Arizona all dragged on. We saw the early indications of record turnout, watched news reports about people with a felony conviction voting for the first time, saw the footage of lines at the polls stretching down streets.

You died early in the morning, before we knew who won. You lived 56 years. You witnessed the entirety of what might be considered genuine democracy in America. I fear that era might not last much longer.

II. How the Ballot Was Won

A year before my mother was born, Constance Slaughter-Harvey met Medgar Evers. She hadn't yet become the first Black woman

soon after. She shifted her ambitions from medicine to law and worked to register Black people to vote in every election. She served as a poll watcher for the legendary Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), helping Fannie Lou Hamer in a 1964 bid for Congress, a bid that died in the primary because fewer than 7 percent of ostensibly eligible Black people were registered to vote. Hamer's protest run came as civil-rights organizations were preparing for the Freedom Summer project, designed to register as many Black voters in Mississippi as possible, in defiance of Jim Crow.

Slaughter-Harvey, Hamer, and the MFDP fought both for justice and for accountability. They favored decisive action to overturn Mississippi's illegitimate regime, not only guaranteeing the right to vote but ousting white supremacists and establishing Black political power. What they got was something less. In 1965, after "Bloody Sunday," when Alabama police attacked Black marchers during the Selma voting-rights campaign,



Left: After passage of the Voting Rights Act, an organizer explains a ballot to new voters—part of an outreach campaign to ensure that Black voters would not be disqualified. Right: An elderly woman holds a sample ballot in 1965.

to get a degree from the University of Mississippi School of Law or the high-powered advocate who sued to desegregate the Mississippi Highway Safety Patrol. Back then, she was a teenager, attending a precollege program at Tougaloo College, in Jackson. Medgar was already the kind of guy people referred to by one name; he was Mississippi's first NAACP field secretary and perhaps the most famous Black man in the state. "He was the only Black man who would come on TV other than Amos and Andy and all that," Slaughter-Harvey told me recently. During a school visit in June 1963, Medgar told her and other students some version of a familiar refrain: "Hands that once picked cotton can now pick elected officials." Days later, Byron De La Beckwith, a White Citizens' Council member, shot him dead in his driveway.

Slaughter-Harvey decided to dedicate her life to the cause of voting rights. She turned 17 that June and entered Tougaloo

President Johnson rushed forward with voting legislation that Black activists had long demanded. But whatever its deficiencies, the Voting Rights Act was a singularly aggressive piece of legislation, wielding federal muscle to protect Black voters in a way that hadn't been seen since Reconstruction.

Across a career spent in Mississippi as an attorney at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, as a state election official, and in private practice, Slaughter-Harvey has poll-watched, registered voters, challenged gerrymandered maps, and represented people brutalized by police. Her life's work is a manifestation of a simple fact: Defending the VRA and the proto-democracy it created required continued individual sacrifice, election after election. And one thing Slaughter-Harvey stressed to me is that this sacrifice was frequently borne by Black women, who so often led the local effort to register and organize—and who, in Mississippi, ran for office themselves.

The early days of the VRA saw robust federal backing. Federal examiners could directly register Black voters, and federal observers were so effective that Slaughter-Harvey and other election officials called them “federal protectors.” The mere threat of sending them in would generally keep active resistance to Black voting at bay. But the success of those observers and activists underlined the fact that the Voting Rights Act was always an incomplete framework, a scaffolding for an edifice that has been in various stages of construction and demolition for the past 55 years.

The act would be strengthened by Congress, and by additional laws standardizing certain election practices and mandating registration opportunities at state DMVs. But it was not designed to create the kind of durable participatory democracy that Black people deserved. The most expedient political solution in 1965 was to address the practical factors that limited political participation *then*. That meant strict scrutiny of much

activity, and, above all, national attention. Over time, the intricate array of forces amplifying the VRA’s effectiveness began to come apart. As Guy-Uriel Charles, a law professor at Duke and a co-director of the law school’s Center on Law, Race and Politics, told me, the VRA is now “at best a second-best tool.” Congress phased out the aggressive use of federal examiners, and public opinion in favor of the act faded. In 1965, more than 90 percent of Americans surveyed in a national poll were in favor of the Voting Rights Act. Even a plurality of white southerners favored it. By 2015, according to CBS News, only 55 percent of the country believed that the VRA was still necessary. The original bill received bipartisan support, and each subsequent reauthorization sailed through both houses of Congress with little opposition. But by the time *Shelby County* was decided, America had changed. “The Supreme Court’s decision releasing certain states from preclearance just destroyed me,” Slaughter-Harvey told me. “It really destroyed me.” No bipartisan coalition



Left: A plainclothes police officer, in an act of intimidation, observes activists meeting in a Selma church to plan a voting-rights demonstration in 1964. Right: March Against Fear participants in Mississippi in 1966.

of the South—where the majority of Black people lived, and where Jim Crow laws had been most prevalent. It meant mounting challenges to laws already in place. The VRA did nothing to deal with disenfranchisement by way of incarceration or felony charges, forms of targeted racial disenfranchisement that preceded Jim Crow even in states outside the South.

Section 2 of the law, which bans voting measures that “deny and abridge” the right to vote on account of race, provided some flexibility to confront future, yet-to-be-imagined forms of discrimination—and it was applicable nationwide, broadening the scope of enforcement. Many courts and advocates have interpreted denial and abridgement to mean policies—clever ones that didn’t mention race at all, and didn’t exactly bar people from registering—that placed a greater burden on people of color. But even that standard has required a constant concert of executive will, federal jurisprudence, congressional

would be coming to the rescue. After the Court put the onus back on Congress to redesign the VRA’s coverage formula, only one Republican, Representative Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, voted in favor of a 2019 Democratic-led effort to do so. Under Donald Trump, the vaunted Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, long the most active national guarantor of voting rights, withered. An open antipathy to voting rights and a stated fear of minority-driven voter fraud had migrated all the way from the 19th century to become the central organizing principle of one of our two major parties.

III. Democracy in the Crosshairs

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic created obstacles to safely voting that the country had never before faced in a presidential-election year, and yet more people voted than ever. Turnout was higher than it had been in at least a century, and extraordinary

MATT HERRON / TAKE STOCK / TOPFOTO; MARIA VARELA / TAKE STOCK / TOPFOTO

levels of Black turnout in particular gave Democrats control of the White House and the Senate. Democratic voters overcame so many barriers to voting and, at the presidential level, achieved such a powerful victory that, to some, it might feel alarmist to worry about voting rights. But complacency would be a mistake.

“That always happens,” Janai Nelson, of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, pointed out when I raised this subject not long ago. “We sound the alarm on ‘racism,’ ‘discrimination,’ ‘voter suppression.’ And then Black folks turn out despite all the odds, and they break records and create new milestones for participation. And that somehow creates a narrative that, you know, we cried wolf. And nothing could be further from the truth.”

Record turnout in 2020 was the fruit of the immense investment by voting-rights organizations in participation, something that is not sustainable and will likely falter in less pivotal elections. More important, conspiracy theories among Trump’s camp about widespread fraud and cheating were animated primarily by voting in places with a large Black population, and fueled an insurrection in January, when hundreds of rioters overran the United States Capitol, waved the Confederate battle flag in its halls, and disrupted the congressional electoral count by force. Opposition to Black electoral power propels an antidemocratic front that will not likely dissipate with Trump gone. In fact, conservative lawmakers are currently targeting the very changes that helped more citizens vote in 2020.

To wit, in Georgia, where Joe Biden won on the strength of absentee ballots and where Senators Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff won riding a record wave of Black votes, Republicans have vowed to pass legislation making absentee voting more difficult, including potentially ending at-will absentee voting and eliminating ballot drop boxes. Texas, Pennsylvania, and Michigan face GOP-led efforts to limit mail-in voting. Even in the middle of an emergency expansion of ballot access necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic, a handful of red states actually tried to make it *harder* to vote.

“This is a project to chip away at the Voting Rights Act,” Sherrilyn Ifill told me. “It is one of the most effective pieces of civil-rights legislation ever, and it goes to the heart of challenging white supremacy and white political power. We’ve always known that it’s in the crosshairs.” Today, even with Trump out of the White House, the VRA is in immediate danger. Politicians who want to constrain the electorate will benefit from his efforts. They will find the legal framework of voting rights to be fragile and contingent. The federal judiciary, as reshaped by Trump, is a machine that has been purpose-built for many things, among them rolling back the right to vote. And there will be no shortage of opportunities for that machine to do its damage.

The engine of disenfranchisement was primed by *Shelby County*, which left Section 2, the component broadly banning nebulous voter discrimination in all parts of the country, as the only major

At the 1964 Democratic National Convention, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (including Victoria Gray Adams, an MFDP leader, center) challenge the official Mississippi delegation.





federal enforcement mechanism. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's dissent has proved prescient: "Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet," she wrote.

For nearly eight years now, it has been raining. In that time, predictably, more restrictive voting laws have proliferated, often rationalized by Republican officials as necessary to fight voter fraud, which is neither widespread nor escalating. According to the non-partisan Brennan Center for Justice, at NYU's law school, half of all states have passed laws since 2010 that increase the burden on would-be voters, including laws requiring strict voter-identification procedures and laws making it more difficult for third parties to register voters. Both of these practices have been met by challenges based on Section 2.

But every such challenge risks triggering a Supreme Court reaction against what remains of the Voting Rights Act. "We don't

cast in the wrong precinct, and a restriction intended to ban the collection of completed ballots by third parties, a practice known as "ballot harvesting."

Democrats have argued that the restrictions create unfair burdens for Black, Latino, and Indigenous voters. According to the Leadership Conference Education Fund, election officials in Maricopa County, whose population is nearly a third Latino, have closed more than 150 polling places since 2012. Meanwhile, ballot collection by community groups and other nonprofits has helped enable minority voting across the country, allowing communities to effectively overcome Election Day obstacles posed by work, lack of transportation, and the sheer sparseness of polling places.

Without evidence, Republicans have targeted ballot harvesting as potential vectors of fraud. They have resorted to racial innuendo: GOP officials circulated a 2014 video suggesting that legal and innocuous ballot harvesting by a volunteer might have been the fraudulent work of an "illegal alien" or a "thug." In January 2020,



Left: *White counterprotesters at the March Against Fear in 1966.* Right: *Members of the neofascist Proud Boys rally in Washington, D.C., in December 2020 in support of Donald Trump after his electoral loss.*

have any reason to know for sure whether the Court has fully understood the error of its ways," Nelson told me, noting that the Court has only become more conservative in the years following *Shelby County*. The Court may well continue what it started in 2013. If Roberts led the fight to strike down Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act, Guy-Uriel Charles, at Duke, told me, "it's hard to fathom that then he would think that Section 2 is constitutional." Already, most of the conservative members of the Court have signaled that they oppose findings of discrimination that rely on the disparate racial impact of policies, and seem to be moving away from ruling against anything but deliberate and blatant racism in the present.

The Court will consider a pair of Section 2 cases this term, consolidated from two legal controversies in Arizona. The cases involve a restriction that invalidates every voting choice, even for national and statewide offices, on a ballot that has been accidentally

the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit Court found that Arizona's restrictions on ballot harvesting and out-of-precinct votes had clearly produced discriminatory results. Additionally, the ballot-harvesting restriction possessed discriminatory intent. The ruling was a straightforward application of the protections provided by Section 2 of the VRA.

In a brief backing Arizona's restrictive laws, Republican politicians have made clear that they want to disable Section 2. Twenty states supported Arizona, claiming that using only "disparate impacts" to gauge the discriminatory effects of voting laws is unconstitutional.

Despite the Supreme Court's rejection, in December, of an attempt by Trump supporters to overturn the presidential-election result, the 18 Republican state attorneys general who backed the effort are still free to push antidemocratic measures in their own states. According to one recent opinion survey, just over half of

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Republicans agree that “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.” In this climate, the bureaucratic tinkering once relied on to restrict voting by the wrong kinds of people might look less and less controversial, and more and more attractive.

We don’t know what the Supreme Court will do. The addition of the conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett, replacing the liberal Justice Ginsburg, only heightens the uncertainty. When the Court had a one-seat conservative tilt, Roberts, perhaps with an eye on the judgment of history, sometimes sided with the liberals to maintain the status quo or to guide the Court to narrow decisions that softened the legal impact. But even if Roberts still wanted to take that tack, it’s probably unavailable to him now. Justices Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch have indicated in the past that Section 2’s scope should be radically diminished. Justice Samuel Alito has written in favor of presuming “good faith” on the part of lawmakers in redistricting cases, which would effectively preclude

effective but unsubtle tools, designed to overtly deny Black people the opportunity even to register to vote. Today, disenfranchisement is algorithm-aided and technocratic, with highly paid lawyers and consultants seeking to find ways to raise the individual cost of each minority vote, while at the same time diminishing the electoral impact of each minority vote—creating the illusion of participation while perpetuating advantages for white voters. Architects of gerrymanders and ostensibly “race neutral” voting laws have many ways to target Black, Latino, and Indigenous voters in a manner that doesn’t seem to involve race or ethnicity at all. For instance, according to voting-rights activists, a Georgia policy requiring exact spelling matches for voter registration and identification affected nonwhite voters more than white ones because officials are more likely to misspell the names of nonwhite voters.

An America without robust legal tools to challenge such practices does not need cruder devices to disempower people of color. The future becomes one of tyranny by gaslight.



Left: *Before passage of the Voting Rights Act, prospective first-time voters take a registration oath at the Montgomery County Courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965.* Right: *Protesters in Manhattan march in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020.*

federal intervention in all but the most blatant instances of electoral bigotry. During his tenure as a federal judge, Justice Brett Kavanaugh issued a decision that allowed for implementing a voter-ID law. The wild card would appear to be Barrett, and many observers don’t expect a liberal defection by her, although Charles, who knew her when she was a law professor, says he wouldn’t be surprised if she ended up playing a similar swing-vote role as Justice Anthony Kennedy in race-related cases. It could be only a matter of time before Section 2 falls. When it comes to voting, the majority of states have few tools to address anything but purposeful, directly targeted racism—the kind that southern leaders learned to avoid after the civil-rights victories of the 1960s.

With a gutted VRA, we will have a country where the forces of disenfranchisement are nearly unstoppable. The result could prove to be more durable and intractable than Jim Crow at its worst. Literacy tests, felony disenfranchisement, and grandfather clauses were

IV. The Path to a New Country

In 1966, James Meredith, the man who a few years earlier had integrated the University of Mississippi, was shot and wounded by a sniper as he undertook a personal protest march from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson. One of Meredith’s goals had been to urge Black Mississippians to register to vote. The big civil-rights organizations decided to pick up the torch, turning a one-man statement into a massive, three-week operation. More than a week into the march, there was a nighttime rally in Greenwood. The chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 24-year-old Stokely Carmichael (known later as Kwame Ture), addressed the crowd: “We want Black power!” The crowd said back, according to *The New York Times*: “Black power!” A new phase in the Black civil-rights movement had begun.

Among those at the rally was Charles V. Hamilton, a lawyer and an academic who served as an unofficial adviser to SNCC. In 1967,

Hamilton and Carmichael published the book *Black Power*, which sought to diagnose the contagion of American racism and crystallize a new, radical Black consciousness. Hamilton's interest in the constitutional underpinnings of American white supremacy pulled his and Carmichael's work toward a study of the history of voting rights. In the book, Hamilton and Carmichael argued that gaining access to the ballot box was the first step in ending "centuries of fear" and achieving "political modernization." To paraphrase the historian David Garrow, *Black Power* illustrated that voting was not only *instrumental*, or useful to effect change, but also *consummative*, or radically self-affirming.

I spoke with Hamilton several times this summer, sometimes calling him from outside my mother's hospital room. He spent the past 45 years as a professor at Columbia University, continuing to track Black political power in America but also keeping an eye on international freedom movements, especially in South Africa. He is in his early 90s, retired, and living in an assisted-care facility in Manhattan. On days when he felt up to it, attendants or friends would wheel him outside with his iPhone, to a place under some trees, and he and I would talk. He has good days for talking and not-so-good days for talking, but especially on the subject of voting rights and elections, he's still clear and fierce.

"We need to change the Constitution," he told me during our initial conversation. The first thing Hamilton thinks Democrats should do is push for an overhaul of the election system, making voting easier while at the same time reforming or replacing the Electoral College. He believes that the Constitution, the nation's foundational document, has to be revised so it can play a more active role in securing and protecting the right to vote. When I asked why he favors the arduous—and likely impossible, under current partisan circumstances—process of amending the Constitution instead of just passing legislation, his answer was short:

"That's the only way to ensure it."

"Ensure what?" I asked.

"Posterity," he responded.

It was fitting that a constitutional scholar should evoke the preamble—with its language about securing "the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." But, in notes and unpublished essays written over the past two years that

he shared with me, it's clear that "posterity" for Hamilton is also somewhat subversive. The Founders were not uniform in their views, but the document they created did not propose anything like universal suffrage, and it embodied skepticism, if not fear, of an active, powerful federal government. To Hamilton, "posterity" would give Black Americans a claim to changes that challenge the Founders' conception of limited govern-

ment and individual liberty. In his writings, he stresses his belief that a strong, interventionist national government is the only kind capable of protecting Black civil rights. Even a Voting Rights Act at full strength is not strong enough, Hamilton would argue. And it is certainly not at full strength now.

The most direct way to shore up the VRA would be to restore the elements curtailed by the Supreme Court. Technically, Roberts did not discard preclearance itself in his *Shelby County* opinion; he merely disagreed with the existing language detailing which jurisdictions were subject to it. Representative Terri Sewell of Alabama and Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, both Democrats, have put forward the Voting Rights Advancement

Act, now renamed after John Lewis, the late congressman and civil-rights hero. The proposed law would scrap the old basis for preclearance and would instead apply strict oversight to any jurisdiction that has committed repeated voting-rights violations in the previous 25 years. The law would restore some of the punch of the VRA's federal-observers program and would focus on insidious innovations in voting laws that have been shown to increase burdens on people of color.

The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act cannot be fully considered without its legislative sibling, the For the People Act, championed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The voting-rights components of this bill would establish nationwide automatic voter registration, state-level redistricting commissions, and voting by mail, and it would fend off efforts such as voter-ID and anti-ballot-harvesting laws. In essence, the For the People Act would nationalize many of the reforms that states experimented with during the pandemic.

If both pieces of legislation were passed, they would represent the most significant expansion of federal voting-rights protections in at least a generation. But in a political climate where meaningful legislative action is almost impossible and

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party fortunes rise and fall every two years, getting the two bills through Congress may be a stretch goal. Meanwhile, the courts will remain a threat. The American right still has plenty of energy for abolishing preclearance and curbing proactive federal oversight. The VRA's premise and constitutionality are still debated in conservative circles. And the Supreme Court and other federal courts now have a decidedly rightward bent.

Black Americans deserve better. Their struggle over the centuries helped create essentially all of the measures that we now associate with suffrage—the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; the Twenty-Fourth Amendment; the Voting Rights Act; the “one person, one vote” principle; and the Nineteenth Amendment, which Black women fought to secure. Black Americans should be counted above the Athenians as progenitors of democracy. Widespread political participation was simply not anticipated in the Constitution—least of all for Black Americans—and Americans have done well to retrofit its chassis into something resembling universal suffrage and representative democracy. But what Charles Hamilton and the people who marched with him always knew is that the vehicle is still flawed.

Despite the Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Nineteenth Amendments, which prevented states from denying the ballot on account of race or gender, and the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which eliminated poll taxes in federal elections, the Constitution doesn't guarantee the right to vote in all cases, and only provides a tenuous framework—dependent on the interpretation of the three branches—for understanding what counts as discrimination or unlawful levels of voter dilution. Moreover, the way we currently fight unlawful practices often requires that people experience disenfranchisement, dilution, or undue burden first; in the worst cases, entire governments can be, and are, elected under illegitimate circumstances. There is no universally accepted way to penalize bad actors. States so inclined can experiment with the most extreme and shocking antidemocratic measures, knowing that court decisions will eventually lead them to find out exactly how much tyranny is permissible. And, as the events of January showed, white backlash against Black voting is still too powerful to leave the franchise in the hands of states.

One simple way to amend the Constitution in order to counter these dynamics would be to guarantee everyone over 18 the right to vote, and to specify a bare-minimum national electoral infrastructure. One further step would be to outlaw measures at the state level that dilute the votes of a specific racial group, ethnicity, or political party. Finally, the amendment should eliminate felony disenfranchisement. An amendment that accomplished all of this would replicate or enhance the strongest interpretations of the VRA, without the specter of an unfavorable Court or obstructionist politicians weakening its protections.

There are other possibilities. A prodemocracy amendment could also reform or dismantle the Electoral College and could standardize the way House districts are drawn, creating non-partisan redistricting. Each of these changes would push the country closer to true representative democracy, premised on an equal weighting of votes across states, regions, and races. This amendment would mandate that states collect information on

voting activity and would automatically trigger reductions in congressional apportionment, under the Fourteenth Amendment, if a state is known to discriminate.

It has been 50 years since an amendment was last proposed by two-thirds of both houses and ratified by three-quarters of all states. It's almost laughable to even consider the idea now, with congressional votes becoming ever more polarized along party lines and most states embracing hard identities as either red or blue. If I didn't exactly laugh at me when I asked about the idea of a constitutional amendment, but she was skeptical about “going to the hardest part of the solution first.” She also warned that, with conservatives dominating many state governments, opening up the Constitution for amendment could push momentum in the other direction—against an expansion of voting rights.

Achieving a more straightforwardly democratic Constitution involves playing the long game, as previous suffrage movements have. The long game would mean prioritizing the two bills now in Congress, then pushing long-overdue extensions of real political power to the District of Columbia and the American territories, should they choose to have it. The states of Washington and California have implemented their own statewide versions of the VRA, and New York is considering a similar measure. States interested in joining the democracy project could go even further, creating their own interstate networks of standardized election practices, amplifying pressure on states with more burdensome laws.

Charles Hamilton, who once ate sandwiches with sharecroppers on the road to Jackson, told me that he maintains “continued faith in the representative route to power,” and could see a future of “mass democratic pressure” reshaping American government. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund's Nelson believes we are in a moment when ambition and dramatic change are possible. “This is the time for a new democracy movement,” she said. “I feel confident that we are in the midst of one and haven't seen the end of it yet.” Constance Slaughter-Harvey told me, “I worried a long time about whether or not there would be any responsible person to take up where we left off. But it was not until I saw those kids—with the pandemic—walking, protesting, did I realize that, Lord, it has not been in vain. And young people are realizing that they are going to be responsible for this country, and that if they let this country be taken to hell, they can never get it back on the right track.”

The package of provisions outlined here would fundamentally restructure the nature of political engagement in America and put a final nail in the coffin of the idea of the republic as laid out by the Founders. It would create a true birthright and for the first time make American citizenship and American political participation roughly coterminous. To create a true democracy in this country would be to create a new country.

It's a long shot, but so was the Voting Rights Act. *A*

Vann R. Newkirk II is a senior editor at The Atlantic.

▼
**The Dark Secrets
of the Earth's
Deep Past**



▼
The ancient climates in the geologic record suggest that something catastrophic could await us in the future.

▼
By Peter Brannen

▼
Photo illustrations by Brendan Pattengale





WE LIVE ON a wild planet, a wobbly, erupting, ocean-sloshed orb that careens around a giant thermonuclear explosion in the void. Big rocks whiz by overhead, and here on the Earth's surface, whole continents crash together, rip apart, and occasionally turn inside out, killing nearly everything. Our planet is fickle. When the unseen tug of celestial bodies points Earth toward a new North Star, for instance, the shift in sunlight can dry up the Sahara, or fill it with hippopotamuses. Of more immediate interest today, a variation in the composition of the Earth's atmosphere of as little as 0.1 percent has meant the difference between sweltering Arctic rainforests and a half mile of ice atop Boston. That negligible wisp of the air is carbon dioxide.

Since about the time of the American Civil War, CO₂'s crucial role in warming the planet has been well understood. And not just based on mathematical models: The planet has run many experiments with different levels of atmospheric CO₂. At some points in the Earth's history, lots of CO₂ has vented from the crust and leaped from the seas, and the planet has gotten warm. At others, lots of CO₂ has been hidden away in the rocks and in the ocean's depths, and the planet has gotten cold. The sea level, meanwhile, has tried to keep up—rising and falling over the ages, with coastlines racing out across the continental shelf, only to be drawn back in again. During the entire half-billion-year Phanerozoic eon of animal life, CO₂ has been the primary driver of the Earth's climate. And sometimes, when the planet has issued a truly titanic slug of CO₂ into the atmosphere, things have gone horribly wrong.

Today, atmospheric CO₂ sits at 410 parts per million, a higher level than at any point in more than 3 million years. And

humans are injecting more CO₂ into the atmosphere at one of the fastest rates ever over this entire, near-eternal span. When hucksters tell you that the climate is always changing, they're right, but that's not the good news they think it is. "The climate system is an angry beast," the late Columbia climate scientist Wally Broecker was fond of saying, "and we are poking it with sticks."

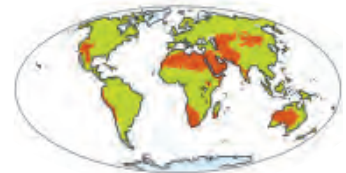
The beast has only just begun to snarl. All of recorded human history—at only a few thousand years, a mere eyeblink in geologic time—has played out in perhaps the most stable climate window of the past 650,000 years. We have been shielded from the climate's violence by our short civilizational memory, and our remarkably good fortune. But humanity's ongoing chemistry experiment on our planet could push the climate well beyond those slim historical parameters, into a state it hasn't seen in tens of millions of years, a world for which *Homo sapiens* did not evolve.

When there's been as much carbon dioxide in the air as there already is today—not to mention how much there's likely to be in 50 or 100 years—the world has been much, much warmer, with seas 70 feet higher than they are today. Why? The planet today is not yet in equilibrium with the warped atmosphere that industrial civilization has so recently created. If CO₂ stays at its current levels, much less steadily increases, it will take centuries—even millennia—for the planet to fully find its new footing. The transition will be punishing in the near term and the long term, and when it's over, Earth will look far different from the one that nursed humanity. This is the grim lesson of paleoclimatology: The planet seems to respond far more aggressively to small provocations than it's been projected to by many of our models.

To truly appreciate the coming changes to our planet, we need to plumb the history of climate change. So let us take a trip back into deep time, a journey that will begin with the familiar climate of recorded history and end in the feverish, high-CO₂ greenhouse of the early age of mammals, 50 million years ago. It is a sobering journey, one that warns of catastrophic surprises that may be in store.

The first couple of steps back in time won't take us to a warmer world—but

they will illuminate just what sort of ill-tempered planet we're dealing with. As we pull back even slightly from the span of recorded history—our tiny sliver of geologic time—we'll notice almost at once that the entire record of human civilization is perched at the edge of a climate cliff. Below is a punishing ice age. As it turns out, we live on an ice-age planet, one marked by the swelling and disintegration of massive polar ice sheets in response to tiny changes in sunlight and CO₂ levels. Our current warmer period is merely one peak in a mountain range, with each summit an interglacial springtime like today, and each valley floor a deep freeze. It takes some doing to escape this cycle, but with CO₂ as it is now, we won't be returning to an ice age for the foreseeable future. And to reach analogues for the kind of warming we'll likely see in the coming decades and centuries, we will need to move beyond the past 3 million years of ice ages entirely, and make drastic jumps back into the alien Earths of tens of millions of years ago. Our future may come to resemble these strange lost worlds.



The First Leap Back

PRESENT DAY.....CO₂ AT 410 PPM
9,630 B.C.....CO₂ AT 280 PPM

Before we move more dramatically backwards in time, let us briefly pause over the history of civilization, and then some. Ten thousand years ago, the big mammals had just vanished, at human hands, in Eurasia and the Americas. Steppes once filled with mammoths and camels and wetlands stocked with giant beavers were suddenly, stunningly vacant.

The coastlines that civilization presumes to be eternal were still far beyond today's horizon. But the seas were rising. The doomed vestiges of mile-thick ice sheets that had cloaked a third of North American land were retreating to the far corners of



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¹ Science Magazine, "Predicted growth in plastic waste exceeds efforts to mitigate plastic pollution," September 18, 2020.
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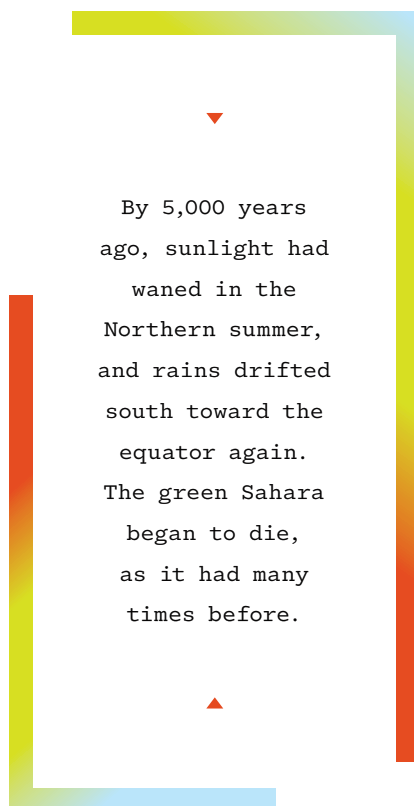
Canada, chased there by tundra and taiga. The roughly 13 quintillion gallons of meltwater these ice sheets would hemorrhage, in a matter of millennia, raised the sea level hundreds of feet, leaving coral reefs that had been bathed in sunlight under shallow waves now drowned in the deep.

By 9,000 years ago, humans in the Fertile Crescent, China, Mexico, and the Andes had independently developed agriculture and—after 200,000 years of wandering—had begun to stay put. Sedentary settlements started to blossom. Humans, with a surfeit of calories, began to divide their labor, and artisans plied new arts. The Earth's oldest cities, such as Jericho, were bustling.

It's easy to forget that the Earth—cozy, pastoral, familiar—is nevertheless a celestial body, and astronomy still has a vote in earthly affairs. Every 20,000 years or so the planet swivels about its axis, and 10,000 years ago, at civilization's first light, the Earth's top half was aimed toward the sun during the closest part of its orbit—an arrangement today enjoyed by the Southern Hemisphere. The resulting Northern-summer warmth turned the Sahara green. Lakes, hosting hippos, crocodiles, turtles, and buffalo, speckled North Africa, Arabia, and everywhere in between. Lake Chad, which today finds itself overtaxed and shrinking toward oblivion, was "Mega-Chad," a 115,000-square-mile freshwater sea that sprawled across the continent. Beneath the Mediterranean today, hundreds of dark mud layers alternate with whiter muck, a barcode that marks the Sahara's rhythmic switching from lush green to continent-spanning desert.

Imprinted on top of this cycle were the last gasps of an ice age that had gripped the planet for the previous 100,000 years. The Earth was still thawing, and amid the final approach of the rising tides, enormous plains and forests like Doggerland—a lowland that had joined mainland Europe to the British Isles—were abandoned by nomadic humans and offered to the surging seas. Vast islands like Georges Bank, 75 miles off Massachusetts—which once held mastodons and giant ground sloths—saw their menagerie overtaken. Scallop draggers still pull up their tusks and teeth today, far offshore.

By 5,000 years ago, as humanity was emerging from its unlettered millennia, the ice had stopped melting and oceans that had been surging for 15,000 years finally settled on modern shorelines. Sunlight had waned in the Northern summer, and rains drifted south toward the equator again. The green Sahara began to die, as it had many times before. Hunter-fisher-gatherers who for thousands of years had littered the verdant interior of North Africa with fishhooks and harpoon points abandoned the



By 5,000 years ago, sunlight had waned in the Northern summer, and rains drifted south toward the equator again. The green Sahara began to die, as it had many times before.

now-arid wastelands, and gathered along the Nile. The age of pharaohs began.

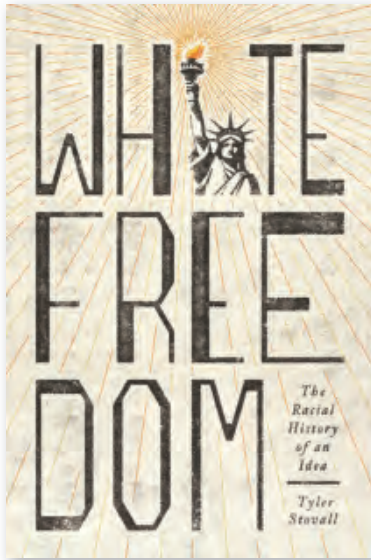
By geologic standards, the climate has been remarkably stable ever since, until the sudden warming of the past few decades. That's unsettling, because history tells us that even local, trivial climate misadventures during this otherwise peaceful span can help bring societies to ruin. In fact, 3,200 years ago, an entire network of civilizations—a veritable globalized economy—fell apart when minor climate chaos struck.

"There is famine in [our] house; we will all die of hunger. If you do not quickly arrive here, we ourselves will die of hunger.

You will not see a living soul from your land." This letter was sent between associates at a commercial firm in Syria with outposts spread across the region, as cities from the Levant to the Euphrates fell. Across the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, dynasties that had ruled for centuries were all collapsing. The mortuary-temple walls of Ramses III—the last great pharaoh of Egypt's New Kingdom period—speak of waves of mass migration, over land and sea, and warfare with mysterious invaders from afar. Within decades the entire Bronze Age world had collapsed.

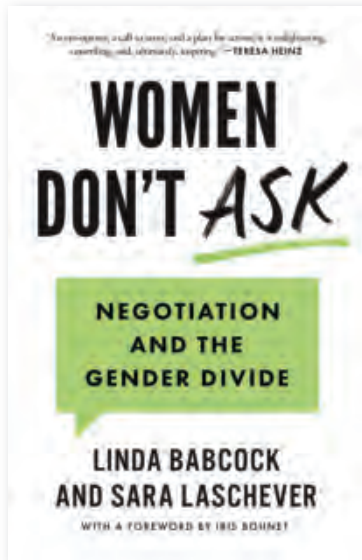
Historians have advanced many culprits for the breakdown, including earthquakes and rebellions. But like our own teetering world—one strained by souring trade relations, with fractious populaces led by unsteady, unscrupulous leaders and now stricken by plague—the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean were ill-prepared to accommodate the deteriorating climate. While one must resist environmental determinism, it is nevertheless telling that when the region mildly cooled and a centuries-long drought struck around 1200 B.C., this network of ancient civilizations fell to pieces. Even Megiddo, the biblical site of Armageddon, was destroyed.

This same story is told elsewhere, over and over, throughout the extremely mild stretch of time that is written history. The Roman empire's imperial power was vouchsafed by centuries of warm weather, but its end saw a return to an arid cold—perhaps conjured by distant pressure systems over Iceland and the Azores. In A.D. 536, known as the worst year to be alive, one of Iceland's volcanoes exploded, and darkness descended over the Northern Hemisphere, bringing summer snow to China and starvation to Ireland. In Central America several centuries later, when the reliable band of tropical rainfall that rings the Earth left the Mayan lowlands and headed south, the megalithic civilization above it withered. In North America, a megadrought about 800 years ago made ancestral Puebloans abandon cliffside villages like Mesa Verde, as Nebraska was swept by giant sand dunes and California burned. In the 15th century, a 30-year drought bookended by equally unhelpful deluges brought the Khmer at Angkor



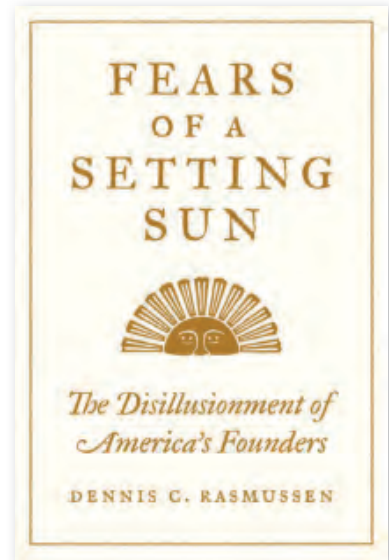
“Ambitious in scope, *White Freedom* traces the racially selective course of the historic expansion of individual freedom . . . An impressive work.”

—Thomas C. Holt, author of *Children of Fire: A History of African Americans*



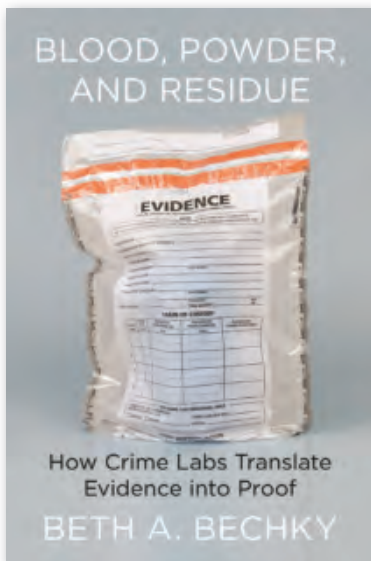
“The first book to adequately explain the dramatic differences in how men and women negotiate and why women so often fail to ask for what they want at work.”

—*Fortune*



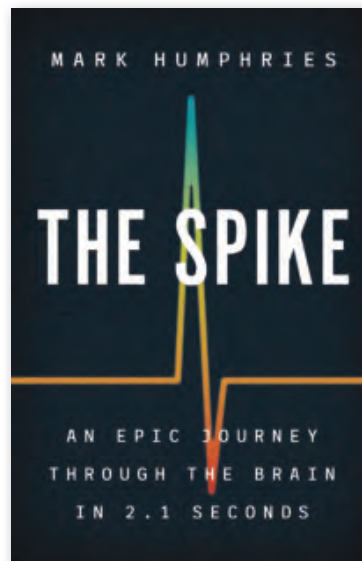
“Making the striking argument that all but one of the major founders of the U.S. died disillusioned with their creation, Rasmussen nevertheless offers hope for our current predicaments.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*



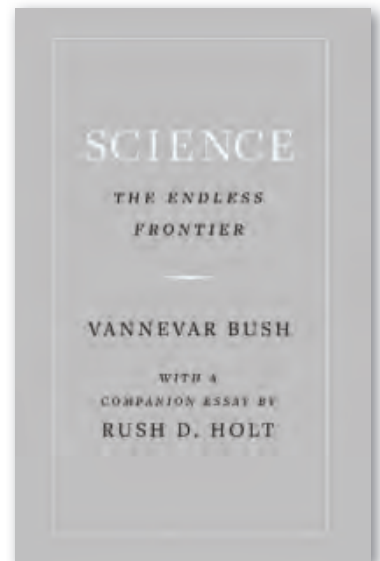
“Bechky introduces readers to the intricacies of a high-stakes job that can change the outcome of some of the most important court cases.”

—*Discover Magazine*



“Mark Humphries takes us to the frontiers of neuroscience. A brilliant achievement.”

—Matthew Cobb, author of *The Idea of the Brain*



“This excellent reissue of Vannevar Bush’s visionary work comes at a pivotal moment for our nation . . . A forceful declaration of the value of science.”

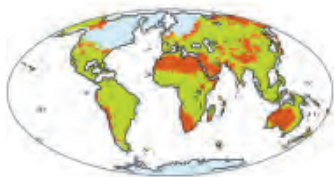
—Speaker Nancy Pelosi

low. The “hydraulic empire” had been fed and maintained by an elaborate irrigation system of canals and reservoirs. But when these canals ran dry for decades, then clogged with rains, invaders easily toppled the empire in 1431, and the Khmer forfeited their temples to the jungle.

Hopscotching through these human disasters to the present day, we pass perhaps the most familiar historical climate event of all: the Little Ice Age. Lasting roughly from 1500 to 1850, the chill made ice rinks of Dutch canals, and swelled up Swiss mountain glaciers. Tent cities sprung up on a frozen Thames, and George Washington endured his winter of cold and privation at Valley Forge in 1777 (which wasn't even particularly harsh for the times). The Little Ice Age might have been a regional event, perhaps the product of an exceptional run of sunlight-dimming volcanism. In 1816, its annus horribilis, the so-called year without a summer—which brought snows to New England in August—global temperatures dropped perhaps a mere half a degree Celsius. While it is perennially plumbed by historians for insights into future climate change, it is not even remotely on the same scale of disruption as that which might lie in our future.

As Europe emerged from its chill, coal from 300-million-year-old jungles was being fed into English furnaces. Although the Earth was now in the same configuration that, in the previous few million years, had invited a return to deep, unthinkable ice ages, for some reason the next ice age never took. Instead the planet embarked on an almost unprecedented global chemistry experiment. Halfway through the 20th century, the climate began behaving very strangely.

So this is the climate of written history, a seemingly eventful stretch that has really been the random noise and variability of a climate essentially at peace. Indeed, if you were to find yourself in an industrial civilization somewhere else in the universe, you would almost certainly notice such similarly strange and improbably pleasant millennia behind you. This kind of climate stability seems to be a prerequisite for organized society. It is, in other words, as good as it gets.



The Second Leap Back

PRESENT DAY.....410 PPM
18,000 B.C.....180 PPM

As we jump back 20,000 years—to yesterday, geologically—the world ceases being recognizable. Whereas all of recorded history played out in a climate hovering well within a band of 1 degree Celsius, we now see what a difference 5 to 6 degrees can make—a scale of change similar to the one that humans may engineer in only the next century or so, though in this case, the world is 5 to 6 degrees colder, not warmer.

An Antarctica's worth of ice now rests atop North America. Similar sheets smother northern Europe, and as a result, the sea level is now 400 feet lower. The midwestern United States is carpeted in stands of stunted spruce of the sort that would today look at home in northern Quebec. The Rockies are carved up, not by wildflower-dappled mountain valleys, but by overflowing rivers of ice and rock. California is a land of dire wolves. Where the Pacific Northwest edges up against the American Antarctica, it is a harsh and treeless place. Nevada and Utah fill up with cold rains.

During World War II, at Topaz, the desolate Japanese American internment camp in Utah, prisoners combed the flats of the Sevier Desert for unlikely seashells, fashioning miraculous little brooches from tiny mussel and snail shells to while away their exile. The desert seashells were roughly 20,000 years old, from the vanished depths of the giant Pleistocene-era Lake Bonneville—the product of a jet stream diverted south by the ice sheet. This was once a Utah Lake Superior, more than 1,000 feet deep in places. It was joined by endless other verdant lakes scattered across today's bleak Basin and Range region.

Elsewhere, the retreat of the seas made most of Indonesia a peninsula of

mainland Asia. Vast savannas and swamps linked Australia and New Guinea, and of course Russia shared a tundra handshake with Alaska. There were reindeer in Spain, and glaciers in Morocco. And everywhere loess, loess, and more loess. This was the age of dust.

Ice is a rock that flows. Send it in massive sterilizing slabs across the continents, and it will quarry mountainsides, pulverize bedrock, and obliterate everything in its path. At the height of the last ice age, along the crumbling margins of the continental ice sheets, the rocky, dusty spoils of all this destruction spilled out onto the tundra. Dry winds carried this silt around the world in enormous dust storms, piling it up in seas of loess that buried the central U.S., China, and Eastern Europe under featureless drifts. In Austria, not far from the site of the voluptuous Venus of Willendorf figurine, carved some 30,000 years ago, are the remains of a campground of the same age—tents, hearths, burnt garbage pits, hoards of ivory jewelry—all abandoned in the face of these violent, smothering haboobs. Ice cores from both Antarctica and Greenland record a local environment that was 10 times dustier than today. All of this dust seeded the seas with iron, a vital nutrient for carbon-hogging plankton, which bloomed around Antarctica and pulled gigatons of CO₂ out of the air and deep into the ocean, freezing the planet further.

This parched Pleistocene world would have appeared duller from space, hosting as it did a quarter less plant life. CO₂ in the atmosphere registered only a paltry 180 ppm, less than half of what it is today. In fact, CO₂ was so low, it might have been unable to drop any further. Photosynthesis starts to shut down at such trifling levels, a negative-feedback effect that might have left more CO₂—unused by plants—in the air above, acting as a brake on the deep freeze.

This was the strange world of the Ice Age, one that, geologically speaking, is still remarkably recent. It's so recent, in fact, that today, most of Canada and Scandinavia is still bouncing back up from the now-vanished ice sheets that had weighed those lands down.



In 2021, we find ourselves in an unusual situation: We live on a world with massive ice sheets, one of which covers one of the seven continents and is more than a mile deep. For most of the planet's past, it has had virtually no ice whatsoever. The periods of extreme cold—like the ultra-ancient, phantasmagoric nightmares of Snowball Earth, when the oceans might have been smothered by ice sheets all the way to the tropics—are outliers. There were a few other surprising pulses of frost here and there, but they merely punctuate the balmy stretches of the fossil record. For almost all of the Earth's history, the planet was a much warmer place

than it is today, with much higher CO₂ levels. This is not a climate-denying talking point; it's a physical fact, and acknowledging it does nothing to take away from the potential catastrophe of future warming. After all, we humans, along with everything else alive today, evolved to live in our familiar low-CO₂ world—a process that took a long time.

How long, exactly? Fifty million years ago, as our tiny mammalian ancestors were still sweating through the jungly, high-CO₂ greenhouse climate they had inherited from the dinosaurs, India was nearing the end of an extended journey. Long estranged from Africa

Brendan Pattengale is a photographer who explores how color can convey emotions in an image. In his photo illustrations throughout this article, the colors of the original photos have been adjusted, but the images are otherwise unaltered.

Left: Glacial ice near the Torfajökull volcano, in Iceland. Opening spread: Glaciers from the Vatnajökull ice cap, also in Iceland.

and the august, bygone supercontinent of Gondwana, the subcontinent raced northeast across the proto-Indian Ocean and smashed into Asia in slow motion. The collision not only quieted CO₂-spewing volcanoes along Asian subduction zones; it also thrust the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau toward the stars, to be continually weathered and eroded away.

As it turns out, weathering rocks—that is, breaking them down with CO₂-rich rainwater—is one of the planet's most effective long-term mechanisms for removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, one that modern geoengineers are frantically trying to reproduce in a lab, for obvious reasons.

Adding to this colossal Himalayan CO₂ sink, the more recent buckling, tectonic mess that lifted Indonesia and its neighbors from the sea over the past 20 million years or so also exhumed vast tracts of highly weatherable ocean crust, exposing it all to the withering assault of tropical rainstorms. Today this corroding rock accounts for roughly 10 percent of the planet's carbon sink. Over tens of millions of years, then, the stately march of plate tectonics—the balance of volcanic CO₂ and rock weathering—seems to have

driven long-term climate change, in our case toward a colder, lower-CO₂ world. As we'll see, humans now threaten to undo this entire epic, geologic-scale climate evolution of the Cenozoic era—and in only a few decades.

When Earth's blanket of CO₂ was finally thin enough, the planet's regular wobbles were at long last sufficient to trigger deep glaciations. The ice ages began. But the climate was not stable during this period. The ice advanced and retreated, and while the descent into the wild episodes of the Pleistocene epoch could be leisurely—the depths of planetary winter taking tens of thousands of years to arrive—the leap out of the cold tended to be sudden and violent. This is where positive feedback loops come in: When the last ice age ended, it ended fast.

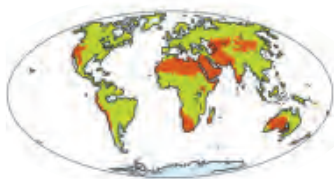
Coral reefs marking the ancient sea level—but today lying deep off the coasts of Tahiti and Indonesia—reveal that about 14,500 years ago, the seas suddenly jumped 50 feet or so in only a few centuries, as meltwater from the late, great North American ice sheet raged down the Mississippi. When a 300-foot-deep lake of glacial meltwater spanning at least 80,000 square miles of central Canada catastrophically drained into the ocean, it shut down the churn of the North Atlantic and arrested the seaborne flow of heat northward. As a result, tundra advanced to retake much of Europe for 1,000 years. But when ocean circulation kicked back into gear, and the dense, salty seawater began to sink again, the system rebooted, and currents carried the equator's heat toward the Arctic once more. Temperatures in Greenland suddenly leaped 10 degrees Celsius in perhaps a decade, fires spread, and revanchist forests reclaimed Europe for good.

In Idaho, ice dams that had held back giant lakes of glacial meltwater about six times the volume of Lake Erie collapsed as the world warmed, and each released 10 times the flow of all the rivers on Earth into eastern Washington. The floods carried 30-foot boulders on biblical waves, through what were suddenly the world's wildest rapids. They left behind a labyrinth of bedrock-scoured canyons that still covers the entire southeastern corner of the state like a scar.

When the Earth's climate changes, this is what it can look like on the ground.

As the ice sheets of the Northern Hemisphere finally lost their grip, darker land around the melting margins became exposed to the sun for the first time in 100,000 years, accelerating the ice's retreat. Permafrost melted, and methane bubbled up from thawing bogs. Colder, more CO₂-soluble oceans warmed, and gave up the carbon they'd stolen in the Ice Age, warming the Earth even more. Relieved of their glacial burden, volcanoes in Iceland, Europe, and California awoke, adding even more CO₂ to the atmosphere.

Soon the Sahara would green again, Jericho would be born, and humans would start writing things down. They would do so with the assumption that the world they saw was the way it had always been. "We were born only yesterday and know nothing," one of them would write. "And our days on earth are but a shadow."



The Third Leap Back

PRESENT DAY.....	410 PPM
127,000 B.C.....	280 PPM

As we leap back in time again, we emerge before the final Pleistocene glaciation. We've gone tremendously far back, 129,000 years, though in some ways we've only returned to our own world. This was the most recent interglacial period, the last of many breaks between the ice ages, and the last time the planet was roughly as warm as it is today. Once more, the seas have risen hundreds of feet, but something is awry.

As the Earth's wobble and orbit conspired to melt more ice than the poles have shed so far today, the planet absorbed more sunlight. As a result, global temperatures were little more than 1 degree warmer than today's Anthropocene chart-toppers—or maybe even the same. But sea level was 20 to 30 feet higher than it is now. (A full third of Florida was sunk

▼

The floods carried 30-foot boulders on biblical waves, through what were suddenly the world's wildest rapids.

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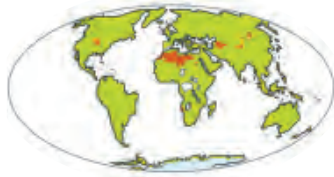
beneath the waves.) This is "sobering," as one paper put it.

Modelers have tried and mostly failed to square how a world about as warm as today's could produce seas so strangely high. Provisional, if nightmarish, explanations like the runaway, catastrophic collapse of monstrous ice cliffs more than 300 feet tall in Antarctica, which may or may not be set into motion in our own time, are fiercely debated in conference halls and geoscience departments.

Very soon, we may well have warmed the planet enough to trigger similarly dramatic sea-level rise, even if it takes centuries to play out. This is what the Exxon scientist James Black meant in 1977 when he warned higher-ups of the coming "super-interglacial" that would be brought about—as a matter of simple atmospheric physics—from burning fossil fuels. But our trajectory as a civilization is headed well beyond the warmth of the last interglacial, or any other interglacial period of the Pleistocene, for that matter. So it's time to keep moving. We must take our first truly heroic leap into geologic time, millions of years into the past.

Opposite page: *The Dallol sulfur springs in the Danakil Depression, Ethiopia, one of the hottest places on Earth*





The Fourth Leap Back

PRESENT DAY.....410 PPM
3.2 MILLION B.C.....400 PPM

We're more than 3 million years in the past now, and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is at 400 parts per million, a level the planet will not again see until September 2016. This world is 3 to 4 degrees Celsius warmer than ours, and the sea level is up to 80 feet higher. Stunted beech trees and bogs line the foothills of the Transantarctic Mountains not far from the South Pole—the last members of a venerable line of once-majestic forests that had existed since long before the age of the dinosaurs.

What we've glossed over in our journey back to this ancient present: the entire evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*, three Yellowstone super-eruptions, thousands of megafloods, the last of the giant terror birds, a mass extinction of whales, and the glacial creation and destruction of innumerable islands and moraines. As we make our way backwards in time to the Pliocene, the glaciations get briefer, and the ice sheets themselves become thinner and more temperamental. About 2.6 million years ago they all but disappear in North America, as CO₂ levels continue their slow climb.

When we arrive in the middle of the Pliocene, just over 3 million years ago, CO₂ levels are high enough that we've escaped the cycle of ice ages and warm interglacials altogether. Lucy the *Australopithecus* roams a heavily forested East Africa. We are now outside the evolutionary envelope of our modern world, sculpted as it was by the temperamental northern

ice sheets and deep freezes of the Pleistocene. But as to atmospheric carbon dioxide, 3 million years is how far back we have to go to arrive at an analogue for 2021.

Despite the similarities between our world and that of the Pliocene, the differences are notable. In the Canadian High Arctic—where today tundra spreads to the horizon—evergreen forests come right to the edge of an ice-free Arctic Ocean. Though the world as a whole is only a few degrees warmer, the Arctic, as always, gets the brunt of the extra heat. This is called “polar amplification,” and it's why maps of modern warming are crowned by a disturbing fog of maroon. Models struggle to reproduce the extreme level of warming in the Pliocene Arctic. It's a full 10 to 15 degrees Celsius warmer in the long twilight of northern Canada, and the pine and birch woodlands of these Arctic shores are filled with gigantic forest-dwelling camels. Occasionally this boreal world erupts in wildfire, a phenomenon echoed by the blazes that today sweep ever farther north. Elsewhere, West Antarctica's ice sheet may have disappeared entirely, and Greenland's, if it exists at all, is shriveled and pathetic.

A common projection for our own warming world is that, while the wet places will get wetter, the dry places will get drier. But the Pliocene seems to defy this saw for reasons not yet fully understood. It's a strangely wet world, especially the subtropics, where—in the Sahara, the Outback, the Atacama, the American Southwest, and Namibia—lakes, savannas, and woodlands replace deserts. This ancient wetness might come down to inadequacies in how we model clouds, which are under no obligation to behave in physical reality as they do in simplified lines of computer code. Hurricanes were almost certainly more consistently punishing 3 million years ago, just as our

storms of the future will be. And a more sluggish circulation of the atmosphere might have lulled the trade winds, turning El Niño into “El Padre.” Perhaps this is what brought rains—and lakes—to the Mojave at this time.

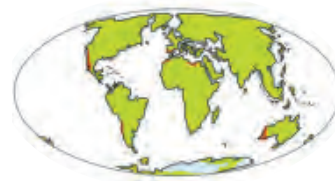


Angeles National Forest, California

Our modern coastlines would have been so far underwater that you'd have to take great pains to avoid getting the bends if you tried scuba diving down to them. Today, traveling east through Virginia, or North or South Carolina, or Georgia, midway through

your drive you'll pass over a gentle 100-foot drop. This is the Orangeburg Scarp, a bluff—hundreds of miles long—that divides the broad, flat coastal plain of the American Southeast. It comprises the eroded and smoothed-out rumors of once-magnificent sea cliffs. Here, waves of the Pliocene high seas chewed away at the middle of the Carolinas—an East Coast Big Sur. This ancient shoreline is visible from space by the change in soil color that divides the states, and is visible on much closer inspection as well: To the east of this strange drop-off, giant megalodon-shark teeth and whale bones litter the Carolina Low Country. Though warped over the ages by the secret workings of the mantle far below, these subtle banks 90 miles inland nevertheless mark the highest shoreline of the Pliocene, when the seas were dozens of feet higher than they are today. But even within this warm Pliocene period, the sea level leaped and fell by as much as 60 feet every 20,000 years, to the rhythm of the Earth's sway in space. This is because, under this higher-CO₂ regime, the unstable ice sheet in Antarctica took on the volatile temperament that, 1 million years later, would come to characterize North America's ice sheet, toying with the ancient coastline as if it were a marionette.

So this is the Pliocene, the world of the distant present. While today's projections of future warming tend to end in 2100, the Pliocene illuminates just what sort of long-term changes might inevitably be set in motion by the atmosphere we've already engineered. As the great ice sheets melt, the permafrost awakens, and darker forested land encroaches on the world's tundra, positive feedbacks may eventually launch our planet into a different state altogether, one that might resemble this bygone world. Nevertheless, human civilization is unlikely to keep atmospheric CO₂ at a Pliocene level—so more ancient and extreme analogues must be retrieved.



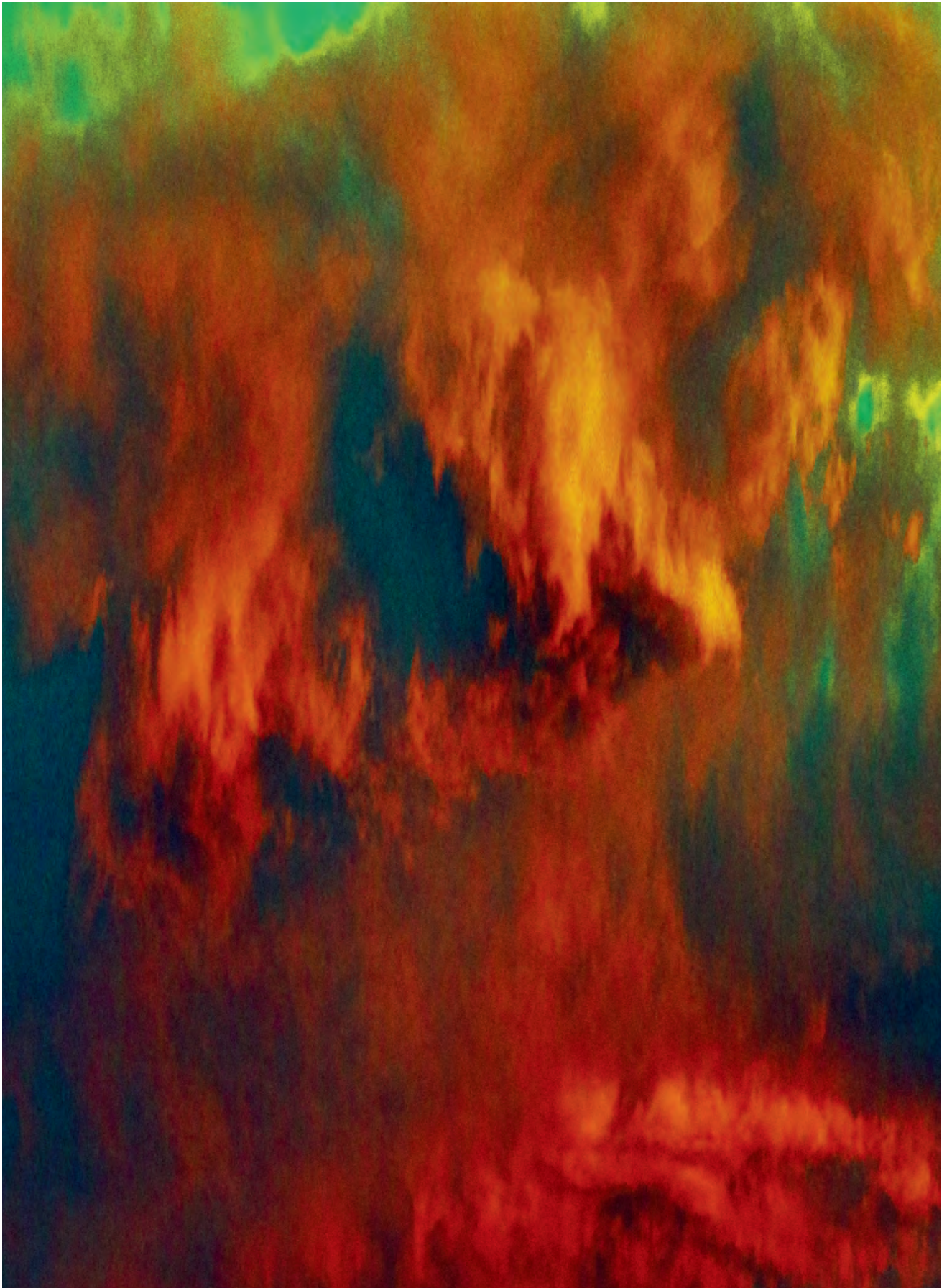
The Fifth Leap Back

PRESENT DAY.....410 PPM
16 MILLION B.C.....400-500 PPM

We're now deeper in the past, and the planet appears truly exotic. The Amazon is running backwards, and gathers in great pools at the foot of the Andes. A seaway stretches from Western Europe to Kazakhstan and spills into the Indian Ocean. California's Central Valley is open ocean.

What today is the northwestern U.S. is especially unrecognizable. Today the airy, columnated canyons of the Columbia River in Oregon swarm with tiny kiteboarders zipping through gorges of basalt. But 16 million years ago, this was a black, unbreathable place, flowing with rivers of incandescent rock. The Columbia River basalts—old lava flows that spread across Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, in some places more than two miles thick—were the creation of a class of extremely rare and world-changing volcanic eruptions known as large igneous provinces, or LIPs.

Some LIPs in Earth's history span millions of square miles, erupt for millions of years, inject tens of thousands of gigatons of CO₂ into the air, and are responsible for most of the worst mass extinctions in the history of the planet. They live up to their name—they are large. But these mid-Miocene eruptions were still rather small as far as LIPs go, and so the planet was spared mass death. Nevertheless, the billowing volcanoes raised atmospheric CO₂ up to about 500 ppm, a level that today represents something close to the most ambitious and optimistic scenario possible for limiting our future carbon emissions.



In the Miocene, this volcanic CO₂ warmed up the world to at least 4 degrees Celsius and perhaps as much as 8 degrees above modern temperatures. As a result, there were turtles and parrots in Siberia. Canada's Devon Island, in the high Arctic, is today a desolate wasteland, the largest uninhabited island in the world—and one used by NASA to simulate life on Mars. In the Miocene, its flora resembled Lower Michigan's.

The sweeping grasslands distinctive to our cooler, drier, low-CO₂ world had yet to take over the planet, and so forests were everywhere—in the middle of Australia and Central Asia and Patagonia. All of this vegetation was one of the reasons it was so warm. Forests and shrubs made this planet darker than our own world—one still painted pallid hues in many places by bare land and ice—and allowed it to absorb more heat. This change in the planet's color is just one of the many long-term feedback loops awaiting us after the ice melts. Long after our initial pulse of CO₂, they will make our future world warmer and more alien still.

As for fauna, we're now so distantly marooned in time from our own world that most of the creatures that inhabited this leafy planet range from the flatly unfamiliar to the uncannily so. There were big cats that weren't cats, and rhino-size "hell pigs" that weren't pigs. There were sloths that lived in the ocean and walruses that weren't related to today's walruses. Earth's largest-ever meat-eating land mammals, African juggernauts like *Megistotherium* and *Simbakubwa*, not closely related to any living mammals today, tore early elephants apart with bladed mouths.

And with CO₂ at 500 ppm, the sea level was about 150 feet higher than today. Approaching Antarctica in the middle Miocene by sea, the waters would be warmer than today, and virtually unvisited by ice. To get to the ice sheet, you'd have to hike far past lakes and forests of conifers that lined the coast. Trudging past the trees and finally over endless tundra, you would come at last to the edge of a much smaller ice sheet whose best days were still ahead of it. An axiom about this land-based Antarctic ice

sheet in paleoclimatology is that it's incredibly stubborn. That is, once you have an ice sheet atop the heart of Antarctica, feedback loops kick in to make it exceedingly hard to get rid of. Barring true climatic madness, a land-based Antarctic ice sheet is essentially there to stay.

But in the middle Miocene this young Antarctic ice sheet seemed to have a temper. It might have been "surprisingly dynamic," as one paper cheerfully puts it. As CO₂ increased from just below today's levels up to about 500 ppm, Miocene Antarctica shed what today would amount to 30 to 80 percent of the modern ice sheet. In the Miocene, Antarctica seemed exquisitely tuned to small changes in atmospheric CO₂, in ways that we don't fully understand and that we're not incorporating into our models of the future. There will undoubtedly be surprises awaiting us in our high-CO₂ future, just as there were for life that existed in the Miocene. In fact, the Antarctic ice sheet may be more vulnerable today to rapid retreat and disintegration than at any time in its entire 34-million-year history.

In the 16 million years since this mid-Miocene heat, the volcanic hot spot responsible for the Columbia River basalts has wandered under Yellowstone. Today it powers a much tamer kind of volcano. It could cover a few states in a few inches of ash and disrupt global agriculture for years, but it couldn't launch the planet into a new climate for hundreds of thousands of years, or kill most life on the surface. Unfortunately, there is such a supervolcano active on Earth today: industrial civilization. With CO₂ likely to soar past 500 ppm from future emissions, even the sweat-soaked, Siberian-parrot-populated world of the middle Miocene might not tell us everything we need to know about our future climate. It's time to go back to a global greenhouse climate that ranks among the warmest climate regimes complex life has ever endured. In our final leap backwards, CO₂ at last reaches levels that humans might reproduce in the next 100 years or so. What follows is something like a worst-case scenario for future carbon emissions. But these worst-case projections have continued to prove stubbornly accurate in the 21st century so far, and they remain a possible path for our future.



The Sixth Leap Back

PRESENT DAY.....410 PPM
56-50 MILLION B.C.....600-1,400 PPM

We're now about to take our largest leap, by far, into the geologic past. We hurdle over 40 million years of history, past volcanic eruptions thousands of times bigger than that of Mount St. Helens, past an asteroid impact that punched out a gigantic crater where the Chesapeake Bay sits today. The Himalayas slump; India unhitches from Asia; and the further back we go, the higher the CO₂ level rises and the warmer the Earth gets. The Antarctic ice sheet, in its death throes, vanishes altogether, and the polar continent instead gives way to monkey puzzle trees and marsupials. We have arrived, finally at the end of our journey, in the greenhouse world of the early age of mammals.

Today the last dry land one steps on in Canada before setting out across the ice-choked seas for the North Pole is Ellesmere Island, at the top of the world. But once upon a time there was a rainforest here. We know this because tree stumps still erode out of the barren hillsides, and they're more than 50 million years old. They're all that's left of an ancient polar jungle now whipped by indifferent Arctic winds. But once upon a time, this island was a swampy cathedral of redwoods, whose canopy naves were filled with flying lemurs, giant salamanders, and hippo-like beasts that pierced the waters. At this polar latitude, on some late-fall evening of the early Eocene, the sun tried and failed to lift itself from the horizon. A pink twilight reached deep into the jungle, but soon the sun would set entirely here for more than four months. In this unending Arctic dark, the stillness would be broken by the orphaned calls of tiny early primates, who hopped fearlessly over stilled alligators that would start moving again when the sun returned from beyond the

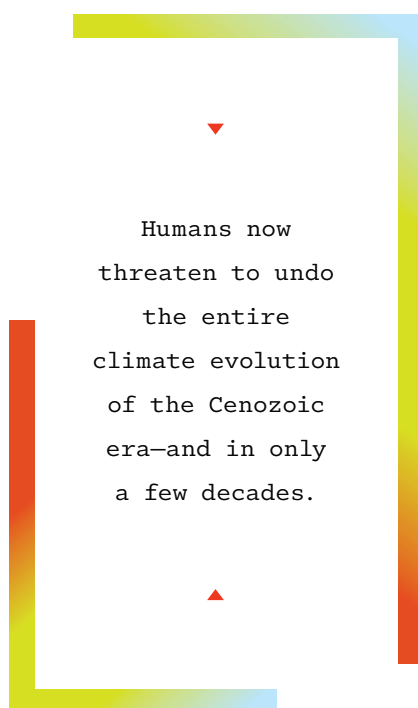
Opposite page: *Clouds in Death Valley, California*

horizon. In this unending night, tapirs hunted for mushrooms and munched on leaf litter that was left over from sunny days past and that in the far future would become coal.

We have no modern analogue for a swampy rainforest teeming with reptiles that nevertheless endures months of Arctic twilight and polar night. But for each degree Celsius the planet warms, the atmosphere holds about 6 percent more water vapor, and given that global temperatures at the beginning of the age of mammals were roughly 13 degrees warmer than today, it's difficult to imagine how uncomfortable this planet would be for Ice Age creatures like ourselves. In fact, much of the planet would be rendered off-limits to us, far too hot and humid for human physiology.

Not only was this a sweltering age, but it was also one cruelly punctuated by some of the most profound and sudden CO₂-driven global-warming events in geologic history—on top of this already feverish baseline. Deep under the North Atlantic, the Eocene epoch kicked off in style 56 million years ago with massive sheets of magma that spread sideways through the crust, igniting vast, diffuse deposits of fossil fuels at the bottom of the ocean. This ignition of the underworld injected something like the carbon equivalent of all currently known fossil-fuel reserves into the seas and atmosphere in less than 20,000 years, warming the planet by another 5 to 9 degrees Celsius. Evidence abounds of violent storms and megafloods during this ancient spasm of climate change—episodic waves of torrential rains unlike any on Earth today. In some places, such storms would have been routine, separated by merciless droughts and long, brutal, cloudless heat waves. Seas near the equator may have been almost as hot as a Jacuzzi—too hot for most complex life. As for the rest of the planet, all of this excess CO₂ acidified the oceans, and the world's coral reefs collapsed. Ocean chemistry took 200,000 years to recover.

The most jarring thing about the early age of mammals, though, isn't merely the extreme heat. It's the testimony of the plants. In higher-CO₂ conditions, plants reduce the number of pores on their



Humans now threaten to undo the entire climate evolution of the Cenozoic era—and in only a few decades.

leaves, and fossil leaves from the jungles of the early Eocene have tellingly fewer pores than today's. By some estimates, CO₂ 50 million years ago was about 600 ppm. Other proxies point to higher CO₂, just over 1,000 ppm, but even that amount has long bedeviled our computer models of climate change. For years, in fact, models have told us that to reproduce this feverish world, we'd need to ramp up CO₂ to more than 4,000 ppm.

This ancient planet is far more extreme than anything being predicted for the end of the century by the United Nations or anyone else. After all, the world that hosted the rainforests of Ellesmere Island was 13 degrees Celsius warmer than our own, while the current global ambition, enshrined in the Paris Agreement, is to limit warming to less than 2, or even 1.5, degrees. Part of what explains this glaring disparity is that most climate projections end at the end of the century. Feedbacks that might get you to Eocene- or Miocene-level warmth play out over much longer timescales than a century. But the other, much scarier insight that Earth's history is very starkly telling us is that we have been missing something crucial in the models we use to predict the future.

Some of the models are starting to catch up. In 2019, one of the most

computationally demanding climate models ever run, by researchers at the California Institute of Technology, simulated global temperatures suddenly leaping 12 degrees Celsius by the next century if atmospheric CO₂ reached 1,200 ppm—a very bad, but not impossible, emissions pathway. And later that year, scientists from the University of Michigan and the University of Arizona were similarly able to reproduce the warmth of the Eocene by using a more sophisticated model of how water behaves at the smallest scales.

The paleoclimatologist Jessica Tierney thinks the key may be the clouds. Today, the San Francisco fog reliably rolls in, stranding bridge towers high above the marine layer like birthday candles. These clouds are a mainstay of west coasts around the world, reflecting sunlight back to space from coastal California and Peru and Namibia. But under higher-CO₂ conditions and higher temperatures, water droplets in incipient clouds could get bigger and rain down faster. In the Eocene, this might have caused these clouds to fall apart and disappear—inviting more solar energy to reach, and warm, the oceans. That might be why the Eocene was so outrageously hot.

This sauna of our early mammalian ancestors represents something close to the worst possible scenario for future warming (although some studies claim that humans, under truly nihilistic emissions scenarios, could make the planet even warmer). The good news is the inertia of the Earth's climate system is such that we still have time to rapidly reverse course, heading off an encore of this world, or that of the Miocene, or even the Pliocene, in the coming decades. All it will require is instantaneously halting the super-eruption of CO₂ disgorged into the atmosphere that began with the Industrial Revolution.

We know how to do this, and we cannot underplay the urgency. The fact is that none of these ancient periods is actually an apt analogue for the future if things go wrong. It took millions of years to produce the climates of the Miocene or the Eocene, and the rate of change right now is almost unprecedented in the history of animal life.



Mount Ruapehu and Mount Ngauruhoe volcanoes, in New Zealand

Humans are currently injecting CO₂ into the air 10 times faster than even during the most extreme periods within the age of mammals. And you don't need the planet to get as hot as it was in the early Eocene to catastrophically acidify the oceans. Acidification is all about the rate of CO₂ emissions, and we are off the charts. Ocean acidification could reach the same level it did 56 million years ago by later this century, and then keep going.

When he coined the term *mass extinction* in a 1963 paper, "Crises in the History of Life," the American paleontologist Norman Newell posited that this was what happened when

the environment changed faster than evolution could accommodate. Life has speed limits. And in fact, life today is still trying to catch up with the thaw-out of the last ice age, about 12,000 years ago. Meanwhile, our familiar seasons are growing ever more strange: Flycatchers arrive weeks after their caterpillar prey hatches; orchids bloom when there are no bees willing to pollinate them. The early melting of sea ice has driven polar bears ashore, shifting their diet from seals to goose eggs. And that's after just 1 degree of warming.

Subtropical life may have been happy in a warmer Eocene Arctic, but there's no reason to think such an intimately adapted ecosystem,

evolved on a greenhouse planet over millions of years, could be reestablished in a few centuries or millennia. Drown the Florida Everglades, and its crocodilians wouldn't have an easy time moving north into their old Miocene stomping grounds in New Jersey, much less migrating all the way to the unspoiled Arctic bayous if humans re-create the world of the Eocene. They will run into the levees and fortifications of drowning Florida exurbs. We are imposing a rate of change on the planet that has almost never happened before in geologic history, while largely preventing life on Earth from adjusting to that change.

Taking in the whole sweep of Earth's history, now we see how unnatural, nightmarish, and profound our current experiment on the planet really is. A small population of our particular species of primate has, in only a few decades, unlocked a massive reservoir of old carbon slumbering in the Earth, gathering since the dawn of life, and set off on a global immolation of Earth's history to power the modern world. As a result, up to half of the tropical coral reefs on Earth have died, 10 trillion tons of ice have melted, the ocean has grown 30 percent more acidic, and global temperatures have spiked. If we keep going down this path for a geologic nano-second longer, who knows what will happen? The next few fleeting moments are ours, but they will echo for hundreds of thousands, even millions, of years. This is one of the most important times to be alive in the history of life. *A*

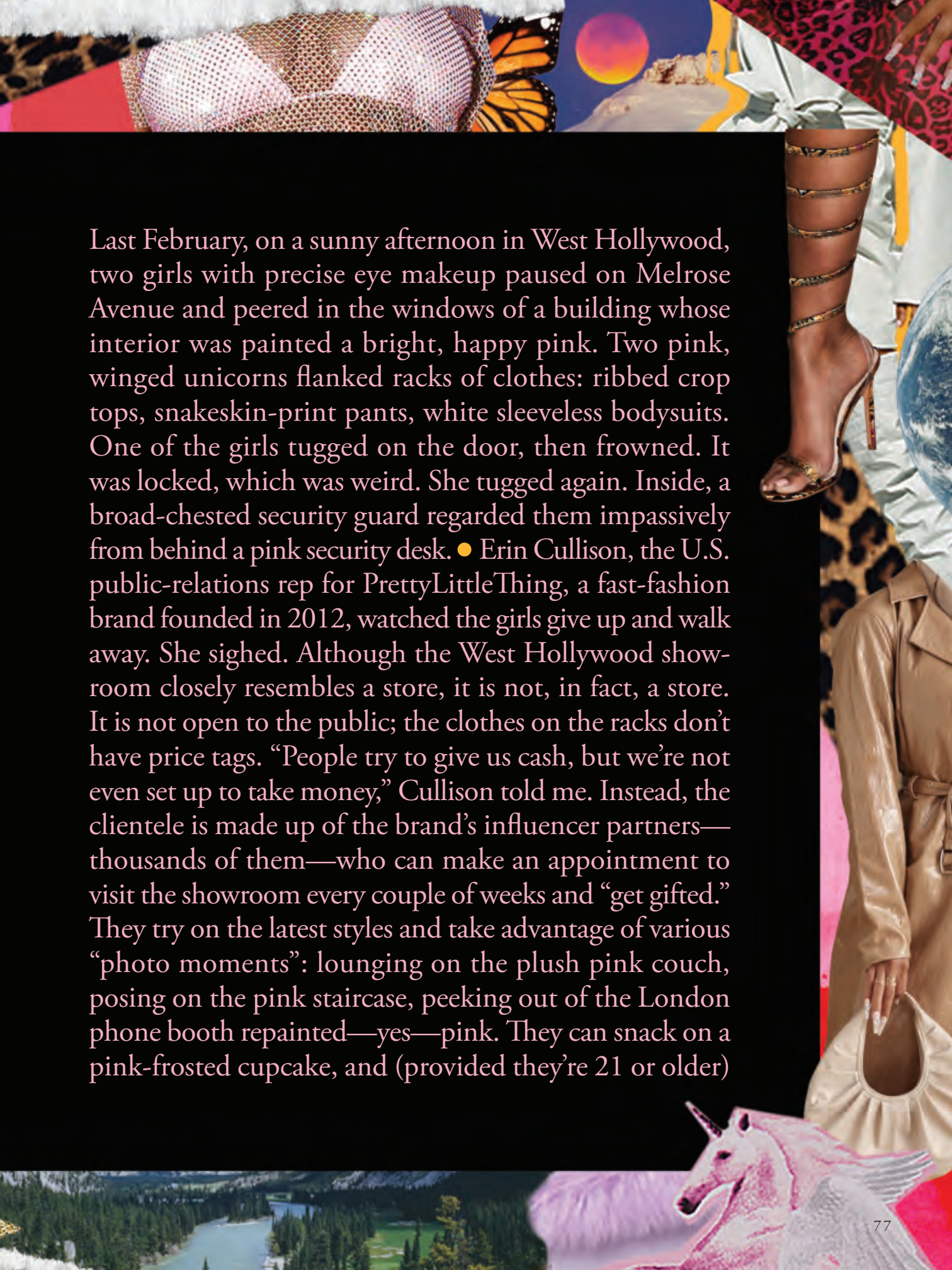
Peter Brannen is a writer based in Boulder, Colorado.



Ultra-fast Fashion
Is Eating the World
Even a pandemic
can't stop people
from buying clothes
they don't need.

●
Illustrations by
Barbara Rego

By Rachel Monroe



Last February, on a sunny afternoon in West Hollywood, two girls with precise eye makeup paused on Melrose Avenue and peered in the windows of a building whose interior was painted a bright, happy pink. Two pink, winged unicorns flanked racks of clothes: ribbed crop tops, snakeskin-print pants, white sleeveless bodysuits. One of the girls tugged on the door, then frowned. It was locked, which was weird. She tugged again. Inside, a broad-chested security guard regarded them impassively from behind a pink security desk. • Erin Cullison, the U.S. public-relations rep for PrettyLittleThing, a fast-fashion brand founded in 2012, watched the girls give up and walk away. She sighed. Although the West Hollywood showroom closely resembles a store, it is not, in fact, a store. It is not open to the public; the clothes on the racks don't have price tags. "People try to give us cash, but we're not even set up to take money," Cullison told me. Instead, the clientele is made up of the brand's influencer partners—thousands of them—who can make an appointment to visit the showroom every couple of weeks and "get gifted." They try on the latest styles and take advantage of various "photo moments": lounging on the plush pink couch, posing on the pink staircase, peeking out of the London phone booth repainted—yes—pink. They can snack on a pink-frosted cupcake, and (provided they're 21 or older)

drink a glass of rosé at the store's pink bar, before heading home with several items of free clothing.

PrettyLittleThing is part of the Boohoo Group, a company that has become a dominant force in retail fashion over the past decade; along with several other aggressive and like-minded companies, it is quickly reshaping the industry. Boohoo stock is now publicly traded on the London Stock Exchange (LSE: BOO), but it started as a family business. As the legend goes, the family patriarch, Abdullah Kamani, immigrated to the U.K. from Kenya in the 1960s and began selling handbags from a street stand. Eventually, he opened a textile factory that supplied

Two decades ago, Zara was revolutionary for offering hundreds of new items a week; nowadays, Asos adds as many as 7,000.

the retailers that, starting in the 1990s, shook the fashion world with their cheap clothes and high merchandise turnover: H&M, Topshop, and the Irish fast-fashion juggernaut Primark.

Abdullah's business was successful enough that he bought himself a Rolls-Royce; his son Mahmud saw the potential for even greater profits. In 2006, Mahmud and his business partner, Carol Kane, began selling cheap clothes directly to consumers through Boohoo.com. Without the burden of retail stores, the company's costs were relatively

low, except when it came to marketing. Young girls who went on YouTube (and, later, Instagram) were inundated with microtargeted ads for Boohoo bodysuits and minidresses. Boohoo's founders understood that social media could be leveraged to make new brands quickly seem ubiquitous to their target audience. "If you have that imagery out there you are perceived as a much larger business than you actually are," Kane told the trade publication *Drapers*.

Social media wasn't just a convenient place to advertise—it was also changing how we think about our clothes. Fashion brands have always played on our aspirations and insecurities, and on the seemingly innate desire to express ourselves through our clothing. Now those companies had access to their target shoppers not just when they stood below a billboard in SoHo or saw an ad on prime-time TV, but in more intimate spaces and at all hours of the day. Brands flooded our feeds with their wares, whether through their own channels or, more surreptitiously, by enlisting influencers to make an item seem irresistible, or at least unavoidable.

The more we began documenting our own lives for public consumption, meanwhile, the more we became aware of ourselves (and our clothing) being seen. Young people, and young women in particular, came to feel an unspoken obligation not to repeat an #outfitoftheday; according to a 2017 poll, 41 percent of women ages 18 to 25 felt pressure to wear a different outfit every time they went out.

Boohoo's founders understood that the company had to hustle to keep customers' attention—to "be fresh all the time," as Kane has put it. "A traditional retailer might buy three or four styles, but we'll buy 25," Kane told *The Guardian* in 2014. Not having to keep hundreds of stores stocked meant Boohoo could be flexible about inventory management. In 2018, H&M was sitting on \$4.3 billion worth of unsold items. Boohoo, by contrast, could order as few as 300 or 500 units of a given style—just enough to see whether it would catch on. Only about a quarter of the initial styles were reordered, according to Kane.

Over time, Boohoo accumulated rich data about online consumer behavior, and

further tailored the shopping experience to its shoppers' tastes. "They know that first-time customers like to see *this* product category, or customers from this geographic area like *this* color palette," Matt Katz, a managing partner at the consulting firm SSA & Company, told me.


In normal times, Boohoo's agility and ingenuity offered crucial advantages over the competition. When the pandemic hit, those advantages became decisive.

IN 2015, when Tricia Panlaqui was 12, she pretended she was 13 so she could start an Instagram account, where she posted videos of herself doing the kinds of things that 12-year-olds do: cartwheeling, blowing kisses at the camera, putting on makeup. By her 15th birthday, she had moved on to what she felt was a more grown-up medium—YouTube—and focused her content on fashion. When she posted haul videos, a YouTube genre that's a combination of an unboxing and a bedroom fashion show, her viewership skyrocketed. Brands began reaching out, offering her sponsorship deals.

In Tricia's earliest videos, her outfits had mostly come from familiar mall stores: a white sweater from Express, distressed denim cutoffs from American Eagle. But once she hit 10,000 followers, her channel began to feature clothes from a different set of brands, ones that were typically online-only and based in China. There was Shein, which sells \$10 bathing suits, and Zaful, where the prices were even lower. These companies had cropped up alongside lesser-known brands whose names tend to be two words awkwardly jammed together: DressLily, NastyDress, TwinkleDeals, TrendsGal, FairySeason. You wouldn't find their goods at the mall or see them advertised on TV, but if you were a young woman between the ages of 12 and 22 on social media, their targeted ads were inescapable.

When Tricia agreed to make a video featuring a company's products, she would typically receive a few hundred dollars' worth of free merchandise. The product quality could be iffy, but the clothes were cheap and abundant—which meant she could make more haul videos.

There was nothing particularly groundbreaking about Tricia's fashion sense, or her online persona. She liked iced vanilla



lattes from Starbucks and leggings from Lululemon. But she had warm, wide eyes, and she spoke to the camera in a friendly, direct way. The more content she made about shopping, the more views—and ad revenue—she earned. The year Tricia turned 16, she made nearly \$40,000 from ad revenue, sponsorships, and commissions; to celebrate her birthday, she showed off her purchases from a shopping spree that had cost her \$3,000—all money she had made through her YouTube channel. Once Tricia surpassed 100,000 followers—a key metric for YouTube influencers—she began getting offers from better-known fast-fashion brands, including Boohoo, as well as other companies that were following its digital-first model, such as Princess Polly and Fashion Nova.

To Tricia, sometimes these companies all seemed to be copying one another. Someone would send her a loose tie-front tank top, and then a few days later four other brands would deliver their versions of the same style. She soon had more clothes than she knew what to do with. She gave them to friends and charities and thrift stores; she sold them on the social-shopping app Depop and ran giveaways for her followers. Her closet still overflowed with outfits, so she stuffed the excess into suitcases.

Working with these brands gave her some pause. Cheap clothes come with severe environmental consequences, and this troubled Tricia. (Her sponsors were self-conscious about this too—she says they asked her to hide the plastic packaging their clothes came in so it wouldn't be visible in the videos.) The industry's labor practices are also suspect, and commenters chided her for working with companies that had terrible track records. She temporarily cut ties with Shein after it was accused of using child labor in its factories. "But as sad as it is, every brand is doing some type of thing," she told me. "You'd have to cancel every single brand."

When the coronavirus arrived, Tricia was worried—with the world falling apart, would anyone care about shopping? Clothing retailers were among the hardest hit by the pandemic. In April, U.S. clothing sales plummeted by 79 percent from March; McKinsey predicted that global fashion-industry revenues would contract

by 30 percent in 2020. Brands like Primark were saddled with what one industry observer called an "inventory crisis"—billions of dollars of merchandise intended for now-closed shops.

With less inventory and no brick-and-mortar stores, Boohoo and its competitors had no such drag on their operations. Quick to pivot, the brands sent Tricia sweatpants and hoodies and suggested themes for her videos: *Corona style! Lounging at home!* Even with the economy in free fall, demand for cheap, cute clothes persisted.

In times of crisis, consumers don't stop shopping—they just limit their purchases to affordable pleasures. Fast fashion had expanded its market share during the 2008 global financial crisis; now this new cohort of companies—known as ultra-fast fashion—was poised to do the same. While the rest of the retail sector struggled and legacy companies such as J.Crew and Neiman Marcus filed for bankruptcy, many of Tricia's sponsors and their rivals thrived. Asos's sales rose rapidly from March to June. Boohoo had its best quarter ever. "We've seen an incredible sprint to digital," Matt Katz told me. "What would've taken seven years has taken seven months—or seven weeks."

Boohoo's clothes may not feature prominently in *Vogue* photo shoots, and may, for now, appeal to customers who are mostly under the age of 30. But the rise of ultra-fast fashion marks a major shift in the retail world. Two decades ago, the first fast-fashion companies redrew the lines of a staid industry. Now their faster, cheaper successors are upending it. In the process, they are changing our relationship to shopping, to our clothes, and even to our planet.

BACK WHEN going to the mall was still a possibility, Tricia filmed another video. She held up a yellow plastic bag from a former fast-fashion powerhouse, Forever 21. "I normally don't go there and, like, buy clothes there ... but our store was 70 percent off so I was like, 'Okay,'" she said, sounding skeptical.

For those of us who grew up haunting the food courts of suburban malls, Forever 21 was once the epitome of fast fashion. When the company filed for bankruptcy in 2019, some interpreted it as the

end of an era. If Millennials killed home-ownership, golf, and department stores, perhaps Generation Z consumers, who claimed to prize sustainability and transparency, would be the death of fast fashion. In study after study, young shoppers said they preferred eco-friendly products from socially conscious companies; surely they wouldn't support an industry notorious for its alarming environmental toll and history of exploiting workers. But that isn't exactly what happened.

When Forever 21 (then known as Fashion 21) opened its first store—in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, in 1984—the majority of the clothes bought in the U.S. were still produced domestically, and most fashion brands released new styles seasonally. "Your mom took you shopping at the beginning of the school year. You got two pairs of jeans, and maybe if you were really lucky, you could squeeze a dress out of her," recalls Aja Barber, a writer and fashion-sustainability consultant.

But macro-level changes were transforming the industry. Synthetic fibers made it possible to manufacture cheaper (and in many cases less durable) clothes; new trade policies led to a globalized supply chain. Companies shifted production offshore, where environmental regulations were less stringent, or nonexistent, and garment workers sometimes earned 20 times less than in the U.S. Clothing got massively cheaper.

Forever 21, which initially catered to L.A.'s Korean community, set itself apart by offering a steady flow of new merchandise that capitalized on emerging styles. As it grew, its co-founder Jin Sook Chang reviewed as many as 400 new designs a day. Shopping for fast fashion was exciting—there was always something new, and the merchandise was so cheap that you could easily justify an impulse buy.

While high-end fashion companies were still releasing fall and spring collections, Forever 21's rival Zara offered fresh styles twice a week. The company, which prefers to distance itself from the "fast fashion" label, says it was just trying to respond to customers' desires. But stocking inexpensive, ever-changing options also stimulated our desire to buy more. If you found





Previous spread: *Used garments at a distribution company for secondhand clothing near Tunis, photographed in 2018. Clothes discarded by Americans often get shipped overseas.*

a look you liked at Zara, you had to snap it up right away, or else suffer from fashion FOMO. One study found that, whereas the average shopper visited any given store about four times a year, Zara shoppers stopped in once every three weeks.

Traditional brands initially scoffed at fast fashion, but they also feared losing market share; they, too, began shifting manufacturing overseas and releasing items more frequently. The 2008 financial crisis further cemented fast fashion's hold on the market. If you were going to a job interview while the economy collapsed around you, a \$25 Forever 21 blazer was hard to beat. Even after the economy recovered, people kept buying inexpensive clothes, and in ever-larger quantities. Worldwide, clothing production doubled from 2000 to 2015, while prices dropped: We were spending the same amount on clothes, but getting nearly twice as many items for it. At its peak, in 2015, Forever 21 made \$4.4 billion in global sales.

It's hard to overstate how much and how quickly fast fashion altered our relationship with clothing, conditioning us to believe that our clothes should be cheap, abundant, and new. Trends used to take a year to pass from the runway to the mainstream; now the fashion cycle has become so compressed that it takes just a few weeks, or even less. Americans buy a piece of clothing every five days, on average, and we pay so little for our garments that we've come to think of them as disposable. According to a McKinsey study, for every five new garments produced each year, three garments are disposed of.

Like many retail brands, Forever 21 was hit hard by the shift to online shopping. While other companies invested in their e-commerce platforms, Forever 21 doubled down on brick-and-mortar retail, signing leases in malls that were steadily losing foot traffic. When shoppers did visit stores, they found a retailer that was out of touch with the times. In 2015, two-thirds of teenage girls in the U.S. identified as "special size"—plus, petite, tall—but mall shops were slow to respond to this reality. Not all Forever 21

stores had a plus-size section; when the fashion blogger known as Fat Girl Flow visited one that did, in 2016, she found it "tiny [and] dimly lit with yellow lights, no mirrors, and zero accessories on the shelves."

By contrast, many of the ultra-fast-fashion brands that were arriving on the scene featured thick-thighed models in minidresses and lingerie. PrettyLittleThing has made a point of embracing body positivity—prominently featuring models with stretch marks, models with vitiligo, models with colostomy bags. And while the ultra-fast-fashion companies were partnering with girls like Tricia, as late as 2017 Forever 21 was still spending nearly half its marketing budget on radio ads.

The companies that once shocked the industry with their speed no longer seemed quite so fast. Two decades ago, Zara was revolutionary for offering hundreds of new items a week; nowadays, Asos adds as many as 7,000 new styles to its website over the same period. Fast-fashion companies used to brag about getting a new style up for sale in as little as two weeks. Boohoo can do it in a matter of days.

BOOHOO'S PROFITS DOUBLED in 2017. They doubled again in 2018. Meanwhile, the third generation of the Kamani family was making inroads in the fashion business. Umar, Mahmud's son, had founded PrettyLittleThing when he was 24. Now he was turning it into Boohoo's splashier little sister. The clothes were bolder (more body-con dresses, more crop tops, more metallics) and the branding was emphatically pinker.

PrettyLittleThing's branding reflects Umar's flashy persona. On Instagram, where he has 1 million followers, he's posted photos of himself posing with Drake, sunbathing in the Maldives, and Jet Skiing behind a yacht. He hosted J.Lo's 50th birthday party at Gloria Estefan's house, and claims to FaceTime with will.i.am nearly every day.

The first generation of fast-fashion brands still tends to take its cues from traditional gatekeepers. Ultra-fast-fashion companies more often look to celebrity culture. Sometimes, this takes the form of partnerships: PLT has produced lines with Kourtney Kardashian; Fashion Nova has linked

up with Cardi B. Other times, though, ultra-fast-fashion companies simply copy the looks of these and other stars. In 2019, Kim Kardashian posted a picture of herself in her closet wearing a tight gold dress with a midriff cutout. "Fast fashion brands, can you please wait until I wear this in real life before you knock it off?" she pleaded in the caption. Within hours, one company, Misguided, posted an extremely similar outfit on its Instagram page, promising to have the dress for sale within a few days. (Kardashian sued the company for copying her looks and was granted \$2.7 million in damages.)

PLT's aesthetic may be as celebrity-obsessed as its founder, but the real force behind its social-media marketing are the thousands of *Bachelor* contestants, TikTokers, Instagram models, and YouTubers like Tricia who have been enlisted to post about the brand. Studies show that the more we use social media, the more time and money we spend shopping online. Following influencers correlates with even more shopping. In 2017, data from the social-media-analytics company Hitwise showed that PLT was the most popular emerging fast-fashion brand, with a 663 percent rise in traffic to its online store since 2014. From 2016 to 2019, the company's annual sales went from about \$23 million to nearly \$510 million.

Still, in training consumers to look for the shiniest, newest style, companies like PrettyLittleThing might be establishing the conditions for their own obsolescence. Today's young shoppers have little brand loyalty. Consider Nasty Gal, which was once heralded as the "fastest growing retailer" of 2012 by *Inc.* magazine. Within a few years it filed for bankruptcy—and was bought by the Boohoo Group, which cut prices and closed the brand's remaining brick-and-mortar stores. "Pre-COVID, not only were consumers buying and wearing things for a shorter amount of time, but they were also constantly looking for newness, which had been accelerating the cycle by which individual brands come in and out of favor," says Adheer Bahulkar, a partner and retail specialist at the global consulting firm Kearney. "The sheer amount of newness in the market makes it difficult for any given brand to keep up."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PATRICK BERNERT; PINGIMAGE; RICH FURY / GETTY; PRETTYLITTLETHING; BARBARA REGO

ABOUT TWO MILES away from PrettyLittleThing's showroom, a line formed outside another West Hollywood storefront. The occasion was the annual sample sale at Dolls Kill, a mass-market brand dedicated to selling nonconformism. On the surface, Dolls Kill looks like the polar opposite of PrettyLittleThing; whereas PLT is all about converging on the trends of the moment, Dolls Kill shoppers identify as misfits and dress accordingly. But the companies are banking on similar strategies to keep young shoppers coming back: aggressive online engagement, an abundance of styles, and unrelenting newness.

Dolls Kill is where you go when you want to buy neon platform combat boots or a pair of shimmery, iridescent bell-bottoms. There's a dash of mall-goth in its aesthetic, alongside some anime-inspired hyperfemininity and raver psychedelia. Despite—or perhaps because of—its outsider cachet, Dolls Kill has attracted attention from powerful venture-capital investors. Amy Sun, then a partner at Sequoia Capital, a major Dolls Kill investor, surveyed the hundreds of shoppers clamoring to get inside the sample sale: their Billie Eilish neon-streaked hair, their skeleton-print hoodies. From inside the store, club music pulsed hypnotically. "You can feel the brand magic," Sun said. "Which is super hard to build."

Dolls Kill's founders, Shaudi Lynn and Bobby Farahi, met at a rave. She was a DJ; he had recently sold his media company and was "partying," he later told *Inc.* Farahi was impressed with Lynn's fashion sense, and business acumen. She would buy something cute on eBay for \$5, then turn around and sell it for \$100. "She looked for items that were hard to find, that were viral in nature—items that made people say, 'Hey, where did you get that?'" Farahi said. Lynn and Farahi began dating, and launched an online boutique in 2012. Lynn chose the name Dolls Kill because she liked the way the two words sounded together—one soft, one hard.

At first, they imagined that Dolls Kill would be a niche brand, popular mostly with club kids. But then something started to shift—the Burning Man aesthetic was creeping into the workaday world; festival culture went mainstream. Word began to

circulate: If you wanted your #ootd to be colorful and weird and stand out on social media, Dolls Kill was a good place to shop.

In the age of the fickle consumer, one strategy is to make customers feel like part of a community. Dolls Kill proved adept at this. "All the models on our sites are customers who submitted photos of themselves. They are just ecstatic, and they become evangelists," Farahi has said. In 2018, the company opened its flagship Los Angeles store. It was designed to look like an industrial nightclub, with raw-concrete floors, exposed-brick walls, and an Italian sound system the company referred to in a press release as "insane." The stores are less a revenue generator than a way to reinforce that feeling of community, Farahi told me: "Are they here to shop, or are they here to meet other people, hang out, be part of a movement?"

In 2014, Dolls Kill attracted \$5 million in an initial round of funding led by Maveron, the venture-capital firm co-founded by former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz; five years later, the company raised another \$40 million in a second round. That round was headed by Sequoia, which thinks Dolls Kill has the potential to be a "generation defining" brand, Sun told me. Rebellion against the mass market had mass-market appeal, she believed. "The age of conformity is over," she said. "Anytime I wear anything from them, people are like, where did you get that?"

Despite its aggressive attitude, Dolls Kill has its own network of influencers and brand ambassadors, just as its more conformist peers do. The first day of the sample sale was invitation-only; the room was full of Dolls Kill superfans, but also influencers like Jake Fleming, a lithe, blond fashion YouTuber in his early 20s. He told me that he liked Dolls Kill just fine—its clothes photographed well and he always wore them to Coachella—but attending this event was basically work for him. "We went to a brand party before this, and we have two more brand parties tomorrow," he said, a hint of fatigue evident in his voice.

THE DOLLS KILL SAMPLE SALE was one of the last times I was in a crowded room. A month later, when most of the country

shut down, I spent many hours scrolling through online stores—not so much buying but browsing. PrettyLittleThing had hundreds of leggings listed on its website, and I looked at all of them: white faux leather, flame-print mesh, seamless gray ombré. Dolls Kill was featuring velour tracksuits in candy-colored tones. The browsing suited my mood of low-key dissatisfaction, the itchy, procrastination-prone state that one of my friends calls "snacky." I had a closet full of clothes and nowhere to wear them, but I added items to my basket anyway—improbable outfits for imaginary parties in a world that no longer existed.

The ultra-fast-fashion brands have designed a shopping experience that makes the consumer feel as if the clothes magically appear out of nowhere, with easy purchasing and near-immediate delivery.

Americans now buy a piece of clothing every five days, on average.

The frictionless transactions contribute to the sense that the products themselves are ephemeral—easy come, easy go.

Of course, the clothes don't come from nowhere. Ultra-fast fashion brings with it steep environmental costs. "You may get a \$1 bikini," Dana Thomas, the author of the 2019 book *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes*, told me. "But it's costing society a lot. We're paying for all of this in different ways."

Producing clothing at this scale and speed requires expending enormous amounts of natural resources. Cotton is a thirsty crop; according to Tatiana Schlossberg, the author of *Inconspicuous*

Consumption: The Environmental Impact You Don't Know You Have (2019), producing a pound of it can require 100 times more water than producing a pound of tomatoes. But synthetic textiles have their own problems, environmentally speaking. They're a major source of the microplastics that clog our waterways and make their way into our seafood. McKinsey has estimated that the fashion industry is responsible for 4 percent of the world's greenhouse-gas emissions; the United Nations says it accounts for 20 percent of global wastewater.

Meanwhile, the volume of clothes Americans throw away has doubled over the past 20 years. We each generate about 75 pounds of textile waste a year, an increase of more than 750 percent since 1960. Some thrift shops, glutted with flimsy, synthetic wares, have stopped accepting fast-fashion donations. Discarded clothes get shipped overseas. Last year, a mountain of cast-off clothing outside the Ghanaian capital city of Accra generated so much methane that it exploded; months later, it was still smoldering.

Fast-fashion companies tell their customers that it's possible to buy their products and still have a clean conscience. H&M has ramped up its use of organic cotton and sustainably sourced materials; Boohoo sells 40 or so items partially made from recycled textiles. Aja Barber, the fashion-sustainability consultant, told me she sees most of these efforts as little more than greenwashing: "It's like, 'Oh look, these five items that we made are sustainable, but the rest of the 2,000 items on our website are not,'" she said.

Then there is the human toll. The rise of fast fashion was made possible by the offshoring of manufacturing to countries where labor costs are kept low through the systematic exploitation of workers. When Rana Plaza, an eight-story factory in Bangladesh, collapsed in April 2013, killing more than 1,110 and wounding thousands more, the disaster brought international attention to the alarming labor conditions in overseas garment factories. Some ultra-fast-fashion companies have emphasized on- and nearshoring, relocating manufacturing domestically or to nearby countries, which allows them to speed up production and distribution. About half of Boohoo's merchandise is

produced in the U.K.; in 2018, 80 percent of Fashion Nova's clothes were reportedly made in the United States.

But domestic manufacturing doesn't necessarily mean ethical manufacturing. Several of Fashion Nova's Los Angeles-based suppliers were investigated by the Department of Labor for paying wages as low as \$2.77 an hour. (Fashion Nova now mandates that all contractors and subcontractors pay minimum wage.) Reporters

The volume of clothes Americans throw away has doubled over the past 20 years.

in the U.K. have uncovered disturbing practices at Boohoo's suppliers, including impossible quotas, unsafe working conditions, and garment workers paid well below the minimum wage. Fast-fashion companies typically outsource production to a long chain of contractors and subcontractors, making accountability a challenge. Eventually, Tricia started shooting Shein haul videos again, after the company posted a self-exonerating explication of its labor practices on its website. But fast-fashion influencers, like fast-fashion consumers, have little insight into supply chains that are kept intentionally opaque.

Last spring, as the coronavirus tore across Europe, Boohoo and other fast-fashion brands kept distribution centers open. Workers told labor advocates that social distancing was impossible, and that they were expected to bring their own hand sanitizer. By late June, Leicester, the U.K.'s textile-manufacturing hub, had an infection rate three times higher than that of any other city in the country. (Boohoo has since pledged to make its supply chains public

and require third-party suppliers to adhere to ethical guidelines.)

Regulators have started to take notice of fast fashion's less savory practices, though their efforts have failed to keep pace with the industry, or have just plain failed. In the U.K., a special parliamentary committee that spent a year studying the environmental and labor impact of fast fashion made a number of recommendations, including levying a one-penny garment tax that would be used to improve textile recycling; the government rejected them all. Last fall, the California state assembly failed to pass a bill that would have held fashion companies accountable for wage theft by third-party contractors.

Also last fall, an independent audit commissioned by Boohoo found that the company had been quick to capitalize on COVID-19 as an opportunity to boost sales, but had paid little attention to low wages and unsafe working conditions in its suppliers' factories both during the pandemic and prior to it. "Growth and profit were prioritized to the extent that the company lost sight of other issues," the report found. But it also concluded that Boohoo hadn't broken any laws. The day the report was released, the company's stock rose 21 percent.

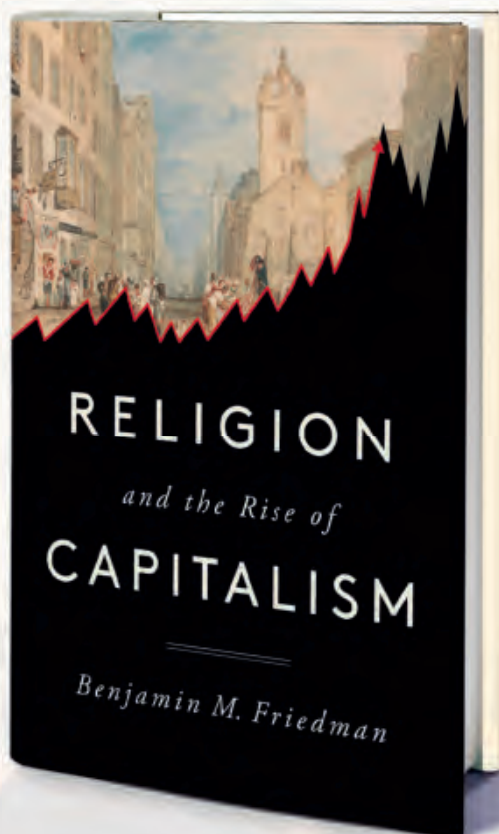
For the moment, at least, there seems to be insufficient political will to rein in the industry's excesses. But that doesn't necessarily mean ultra-fast fashion is here to stay. With so many cheap products saturating our feeds, perhaps buying yet another disposable bodysuit or bandeau won't feel as stimulating as it used to.

The last time I spoke with Tricia, she had enrolled in a premed program. She told me that she'd been making a new kind of video. "I'm styling the clothes I already have in my closet—so I'm keeping up with fashion, but using the clothes I already have," she said. Haul videos were still popular, but she thought I should be paying attention to another trend: "Secondhand clothing and thrifting is so hot right now." *A*

Rachel Monroe is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession.

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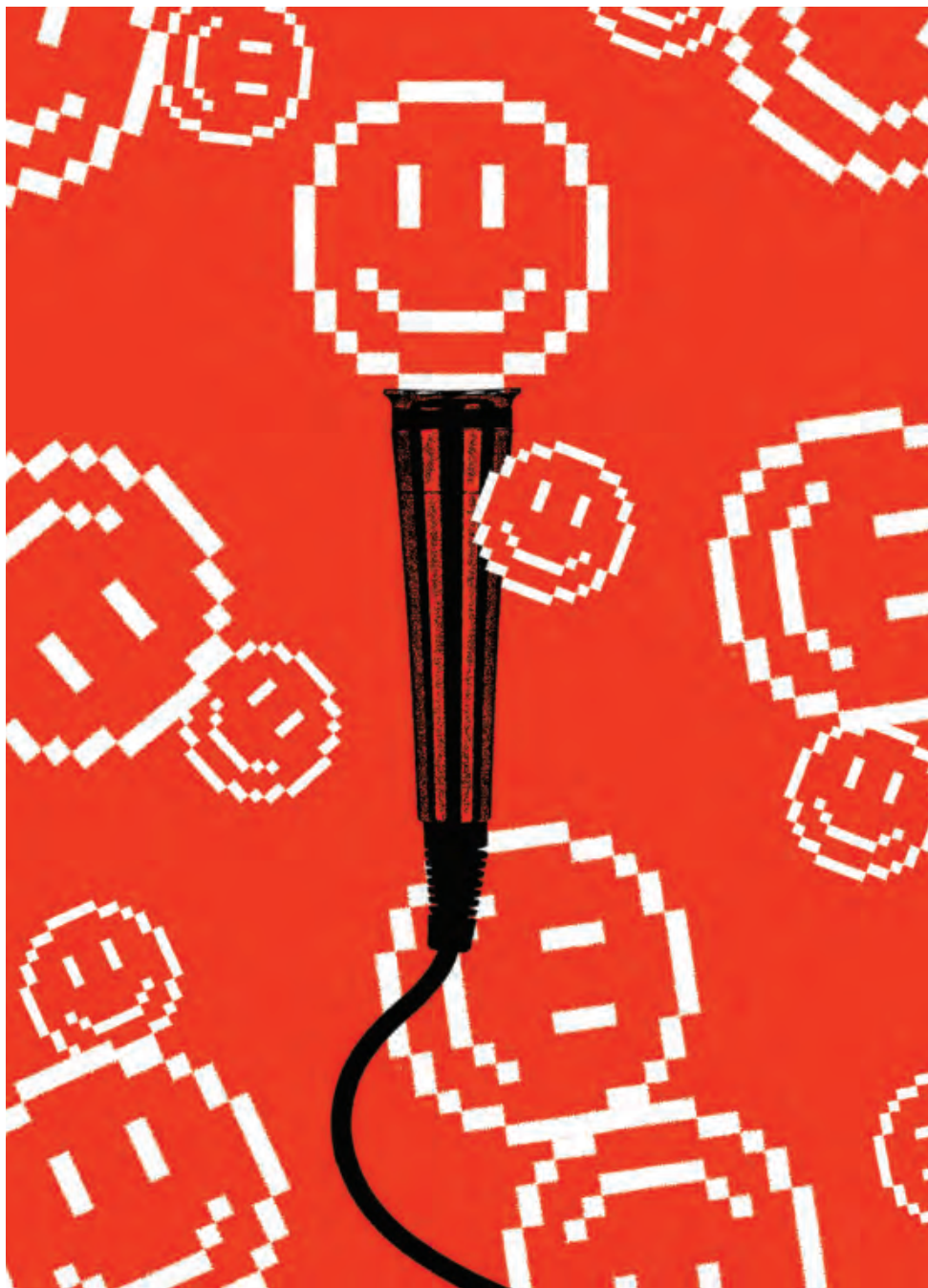
OMNIVORE

Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive

*Hyperpop could become
the countercultural
sound of the 2020s.*

By Spencer Kornhaber

In music and on roller coasters, speediness makes for the fun kind of scariness. When young punk rockers raised on the Ramones began to play their own music in the early 1980s, the rat-a-tat rumble of “Blitzkrieg Bop” accelerated into something called the blast beat: an all-out rhythmic carpet-bombing over which vocalists would groan about Satan, Ronald Reagan,



and the resemblance between the two. This development pushed rock and roll's intrinsic logic—through dissonance, truth; in disaffection, pride—and invigorated new genres such as hardcore, grindcore, and death metal. In a 2016 book, the critic Ben Ratliff argued that blast beats also reflected a new technological landscape: “They were like the sound of a defective or damaged compact disc in one of the early players, a bodiless slice of digital information on jammed repeat.”

Today, no drum kit is required for musicians to glitch and twitch with terrifying intensity. Open up any audio-editing software, pull a few sliders in one direction, put the resulting ugliness on loop, and there you have it: a headbangable hell-scream into eternity. Such sounds are everywhere online these days. On TikTok, I recently came across a series of videos in which teens compared how their parents wanted them to dress with how they actually wanted to dress. As preppy sweaters gave way to nose rings and black fishnets, the music flipped from a saccharine sing-along to a harsh digital pounding. The latter sound was like a car alarm outfitted with a subwoofer—but for some reason, it beckoned to be played louder, rather than to be shut off.

These TikToks deployed a remix of music by Dylan Brady and Laura Les of the band 100 Gecs, which has helped pioneer this era's emerging misfit aesthetic. On the surface, the duo's 2019 debut album, *1000 Gecs*, is a prankish, postmodern collage of Skrillex, Mariah Carey, Blink-182, Nelly, Linkin Park, Kenny Loggins, eurodance, and ska. What glues together such clashing influences isn't just a sense of musicality—though Brady and Les are excellent songwriters—but a fascination with amusicality. The vocals are manipulated to achieve the whininess of SpongeBob SquarePants. The grooves fracture and reroute habitually. The harmonic textures evoke train cars on rusted tracks. Confrontational and bizarre, this sound brings in almost 2 million listeners a month on Spotify.

Though 100 Gecs' music rejects classification and formulas, a fungal burst of artists with like-minded approaches has erupted in the past few years, and Spotify has started using a new genre label: *hyperpop*. Signature songs include XIX's “Kismet,” which places screams and rapping amid casino-floor bleeping, and Slayyyter's “BFF,” which sounds like Kesha performing inside an air duct. As with any new taxonomy, the definition of hyperpop is blurry and contested; one meme cheekily suggests more precise terms such as *glitchcore*, *ketapop* (for the disorienting raver drug ketamine), and *trans ragewave* (because many of the creators are pissed and aren't cis). The word *hyperpop* does nail the way that the music swirls

together and speeds up Top 40 tricks of present and past: a Janet Jackson drum slam here, a Depeche Mode synth squeal there, the overblown pep of novelty jingles throughout. But the term doesn't quite convey the genre's zest for punk's brattiness, hip-hop's boastfulness, and metal's noise.

As hyperpop has become a trending topic to argue over, people have at least agreed that the sound reflects its era. Here is music suited to TikTok's DIY hijinks, Twitch's video-game violence, and the all-you-can-listen-to, boundary-free possibilities of music streaming. You couldn't invent a more zeitgeist-baiting brew. But whenever a new chaotic youth aesthetic has arisen in musical history, it's been a reaction *against*, not just a reaction *to*, its times. Hardcore's blast beats, gangsta rap's provocations, and grunge's moans all used extremity to question mainstream values such as respectability, conformity, and consumerism. The irony is that the rebellion now marches under the seemingly tame mantle of *pop*.

The irony is that the rebellion now marches under the seemingly tame mantle of pop.

ISN'T POP HYPER ALREADY? Trends come and go, but across the decades pop has remained broad and brash, prizing emotional exaggeration, relentless energy, and ridiculous, self-parodying personas. The rise of electronic production—which allows creators to bend the human voice and make utterly unnatural sounds—has only given pop a more deranged, artificial feel in the 21st century. Even as brooding hip-hop music began regularly outperforming peppy sing-alongs on the *Billboard Hot 100* in the past decade, certain values have stuck around. Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's “WAP,” for example, ruled the charts last year precisely because of the hyperbolic scale of its boasts and bass.

But in the public consciousness, the term *pop* has long connoted market-driven insipidness, which has left space for styles such as rock and rap to sell themselves as inherently *alternative*. While pop is compromising, false, and cheerful, the theory goes, alternative artists are complex, authentic, and emotionally dynamic. Of course, anti-pop values have often had mass appeal—especially after the early '90s. That's when grunge went big and then fractured into a thousand Coachella acts, and when Nielsen SoundScan came along to reveal the popularity of hip-hop. The actual listening experience for many people, however, never fully lined up with insider-versus-outsider dichotomies marketed by the music industry. For a certain kind of person—say, a queer kid in the early 2000s who spent time on Britney Spears message boards while being bullied by guys who listened to Staind—enjoying pop could be a transgressive move.

The story of 2010s music is in part the story of such transgressions coming to light. When Spotify arrived in the U.S. in 2011, the buoyant sounds of Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and Carly Rae Jepsen reigned. Soon, the new playlist culture—catering to café backgrounds and the intimacy of headphones—began rewarding the chill dance vibes of the Chainsmokers and the hypnotic raps of Drake. This led to two oddball online movements that fed into hyperpop. One was the “SoundCloud rap” scene of teens mixing hip-hop with nu metal and emo, those oft-mocked remnants of the alt-rock boom. The other movement saw Jepsen-style bubblegum become hipster fare. By the mid-2010s, *Pitchfork* had endorsed the satirical pseudo-superstars of the U.K. electronic label PC Music, which peddled deadpan hooks, frantic beats, and knowingly vapid lyrics. Addictive dance tracks by one critical darling, Sophie, used pneumatic whooshes and crinkling sounds to portray pop as a physical product: “Shake shake shake it up and make it fizz,” went one robotically sung refrain.

That meta-pop wave almost seemed to mock human emotional expression altogether. But its main aim was to decouple pop’s head-rush aesthetics from any commercial expectations, thereby opening space for wilder fun. Hyperpop often uses that space—and the fusions of SoundCloud rap—to supercharge alienation. As a teen, Laura Les aspired to write hits for the boy band One Direction, even as she burrowed into obscure punk, hip-hop, and dance scenes online. When she first encountered the work of PC Music, her “depression lapsed for a minute,” and it felt like “rays of god beams [were] shining down from the clouds,” she recently told *Pitchfork*. For 100 Geecs’ breakout hit, “Money Machine,” she recorded a hilarious burst of trash talk after a day of working at a dead-end service job and finding herself in fights with men. “I had been watching a lot of *King of the Hill*, and I constructed in my head a sort of Hank Hill asshole character to just absolutely break down,” she told the podcast *Song Exploder*. “I was just kind of getting into that sort of mindset of these people that I’d grown up with, these people in St. Louis talking about their big trucks.”

The straight white normie: That’s a hyperpop bogeyman as potent as the yuppie was for hardcore punk, or as the senator’s son was for the Woodstock crowd. A notable number of hyperpop artists, including Les, are transgender. Many others are gender-fluid or gay. Plenty embrace the notion that their music’s mix of sparkle, aggression, and confoundingly distorted vocals reflects a queer sensibility. Last year, the gender-fluid Texas singer Dorian

Electra put out a concept album in which they, taking inspiration from drag, campily inhabited the viewpoint of incels and alt-right trolls. Between patches of fratty-sounding rapping, “Mos Thoser,” by the band Food House, salutes God as trans and calls upon the listener to “make some new behaviors that straight people will infringe on.” That song’s top YouTube comment as of this writing: “I swear this song literally just cured my gender dysphoria.”

Of course, for the growing audience that this music attracts, the disaffection embedded within it can speak to all sorts of grievances. Hyperpop thrives on so-called alt TikTok, the social-media sphere fueled by goth types turned off by the coiffed choreography of straight TikTok; scrolling through alt TikTok is a lot like hanging out in the corners of a high-school cafeteria where the burners and art kids congregate. Many hyperpop songs come off like tech-addled teen comedies: “We broke up on PictoChat, crying on my DS,” goes the chorus of Cmten and Glitch Gum’s “Never Met!” (Yes, those terms sent me Googling.) Other tracks double down on the bristling introspection and score-settling of emo rap. The buzzy 15-year-old Osquinn makes highly melodic diary entries asking questions like “Why am I so ignorant? Why am I so toxic?” Rico Nasty, a rapper who often works with 100 Geecs, specializes in motivational rudeness: “If you wanna rage / Let it out / Bitches throwin’ shade / Punch ’em in they mouth!”

Hyperpop is young and flickering; any day now, it might morph, die out, or go supernova. If it has a celebrity figurehead, she is the U.K. singer Charli XCX, who sang on or co-wrote a number of *Hot 100* smashes in the mid-2010s. Her own solo work—some of which was made in collaboration with the PC Music crowd and 100 Geecs’ Dylan Brady—has gotten gnarlier and more cybernetic over the past few years as she has preached about ignoring genre categories altogether. While mass audiences haven’t been thrilled by such explorations, her obsessive fan base has been. Early in last year’s coronavirus lockdown, she wrote parts of her thrashing but vulnerable new album, *How I’m Feeling Now*, while letting her followers watch—and give input—via Zoom and Instagram Live. It was a fitting stunt for a sound born of the internet’s ability to connect socially stranded people. “I’m online and I’m feeling so glamorous,” Charli sings on one song. “In real life, could the club even handle us?” The shock-wave noises engulfing her mechanized voice imply an answer: At most clubs, this music wouldn’t belong. That’s the point. *A*

Spencer Kornhaber is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

The straight white normie is a hyperpop bogeyman as potent as the yuppie was for hardcore punk, or as the senator’s son was for the Woodstock crowd.



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BOOKS

The United States of Amazon

How the giant company has transformed the geography of wealth and power

By Vauhini Vara

In the mid-1990s, when I was in middle school, my family moved to the suburbs of Seattle, where my father had gotten a job at Boeing. My parents would drive my sister and me down I-90 to the Bellevue Square mall on weekends, and I'd sit on the carpet of the B. Dalton bookstore, reading magazines. A mile and a half up Bellevue Way, in the garage of a rented house, Jeff Bezos was starting Amazon. For some time, Amazon's influence was little noticed. In high school, the drive to my part-time job took me through what was then the nondescript South Lake Union neighborhood—dotted with auto shops, warehouses, and, along the waterfront, a few marinas. The main landmark was Denny Triangle's Elephant Car Wash, with its pair of pink, elephant-shaped neon signs. It was a perfect



GRAPHICARTIS / GETTY; SHUTTERSTOCK

specimen of the kitsch for which Seattle was known at the time, and I loved it.

Only recently has the South Lake Union area that I remember been transformed by the sprawling landscape of Amazon's campus, which includes a *Harry Potter*-themed library, a dog deck featuring a fake fire hydrant, and three enormous, spherical plant conservatories. This past October, the Denny Triangle Elephant Car Wash closed down, under pressure from the pandemic and rising taxes and rent. Its owner donated one of the elephant signs to Amazon. "They asked for it, they wanted to have it," Bob Haney told *The Seattle Times*. "So I gifted it to them."

Haney isn't a character in *Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America*, Alec MacGillis's wide-ranging, impressionistic tour of a nation whose citizens' existence has become intertwined with a single corporation, but he easily could have been. Plenty of books have been written about Amazon, so MacGillis wasn't interested in probing the inner workings of the corporation itself. Instead, he set out to explore "the America that fell in the company's lengthening shadow"—that is, the places where Amazon's influence has undermined social cohesion in pervasive ways. Finding such places turns out to be easy.

THERE ARE countless ways to measure Amazon's hold on American life. More people in the U.S. subscribe to its Prime service than voted for either Donald Trump or Joe Biden in the past election: more than 100 million, by recent estimates. Amazon reaps fully half of what people in this country spend online. It is the second-biggest private workplace in the United States, after Walmart, employing more than 800,000 people, most of whom will never set foot in the Seattle headquarters' plant spheres. Among Amazon's large Arizona-based workforce, most of it inside warehouses, one in three people was on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in 2017. Incidentally, Amazon, along with Walmart, has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of an arrangement that allows food stamps to be used for online groceries, bringing in large amounts of government money. Bezos, Amazon's CEO, is the richest person alive.

As MacGillis notes, understanding how a single corporation became so widely and deeply entrenched requires historical perspective. Starting in the late 1970s, federal regulations governing business consolidation were loosened, and antitrust enforcement waned. Predictably, a growing share of corporate wealth began flowing to a small number of firms and, in turn, people. The rise of the internet in the 2000s accelerated the process in ways we're by now familiar with, and a handful of companies—Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon, in particular—came to

dominate large swaths of economic life. What MacGillis feels is underappreciated is the geographical remapping of wealth—and, with it, power—that the transformation has brought about.

MacGillis, a reporter at ProPublica and the author of a Mitch McConnell biography titled *The Cynic*, was one of the first journalists to begin documenting the socioeconomic upheaval that helped shift the rural Rust Belt from blue to red and put Donald Trump in the White House. In *Fulfillment*, he is less concerned with the much-discussed electoral implications than with the tech-era upheaval itself. The superficially equalizing promise that customers everywhere can enjoy unprecedented convenience with a mere click has intensified the differences in the choices available to the rich and the poor. MacGillis describes how, while rich corporations and their top employees have settled in a small number of wealthy coastal cities, the rest of the American landscape has been leached of opportunities.

Portraying the phenomenon as a widening urban-rural divide is the simplistic version of a more nuanced and bigger story, MacGillis emphasizes. In 1969, the 30 metropolitan areas with the highest per capita personal income included Detroit, Cleveland, and three other midwestern cities. In 2019, only two midwestern names—Chicago and Minneapolis—appeared on that list, and nearly all the rest were on the coasts. Meanwhile, within the coastal cities that have grown wealthier, the gains have been disturbingly uneven. Rising rents and a lack of affordable housing have left the Seattle area, for example, with the third-biggest population of homeless people in the U.S., after New York City and Los Angeles, according to 2019 data.

These numbers document a stark divergence, but they don't capture its human dimensions. That is MacGillis's goal, as he explores what the erosion of power and possibility means for regular people. Internally, Amazon uses the word *fulfillment* in reference to processing customers' orders. MacGillis, of course, has another usage in mind: the very American emphasis on the chance to seek satisfaction—a sense of meaning, purpose, and value; a feeling of personal empowerment and communal solidarity—in our labor. No corporation provides a clearer vantage, or more angles, than Amazon does on the strategic choices that have expressly contributed to foiling that quest.

FULFILLMENT begins in a basement. Hector Torrez (a pseudonym) is an Amazon warehouse employee in Thornton, Colorado, who earns \$15.60 an hour moving packages and boxes all night long. When the book opens, he has learned—from co-workers, not the

More people in the U.S. subscribe to Prime than voted for either Donald Trump or Joe Biden in the past election.

company—that he has been exposed to the coronavirus on the job, and his wife has exiled him downstairs. From Torrez’s basement, MacGillis travels to Seattle and Washington, D.C., where so much of Amazon’s wealth is concentrated, as well as to cities in Maryland, Ohio, and Pennsylvania that have Amazon to blame, at least indirectly, for their historic decline in fortunes since the ’90s.

In some of MacGillis’s stories, the connection to Amazon is so tenuous as to be almost indiscernible; the characters’ problems seem to arise more from larger forces, such as globalization, gentrification, and the opioid crisis, than from any one corporation’s influence. A young man from small-town Ohio—alienated by his experience in D.C., where he starts college—returns home and enters Democratic politics. After scoring a local success, he runs for Congress, determined that the party not write off his opioid-ravaged, Trump-supporting region, but he fails to drum up more than a couple of union endorsements. A gospel singer who became a cultural force in Seattle during the ’80s watches as her neighbors are pushed out of the city’s historically Black Central District one by one.

Local energies may have been sapped for many reasons, yet in the coastal cities that MacGillis visits, Amazon’s disproportionate ability to further enrich and empower already thriving places and workers is glaring. Familiar though they are, evocations of the six-figure salaries and amenities available to young Amazon programmers—a café catering to their dogs, meeting space in a giant replica of a bird’s nest—acquire new salience set against Torrez’s experience. And the sense of entitlement on display in the company’s search for a second headquarters site is breathtaking. Local officials across hard-knock America prostrate themselves for a chance to host it. In the end, Amazon chooses the suburbs of the nation’s capital—already one of the wealthiest areas in the country—and walks away having amassed a great deal of useful regional data provided by eager bidders who probably never stood a chance.

In the less glamorous pockets of the country—the rural areas and small cities where MacGillis has spent so much time as a reporter—Amazon’s role in making economic hardship more entrenched is no less stark. In El Paso, Texas, Amazon has aggressively marketed itself to the city government as a go-to source for office supplies—which has pushed local purveyors to open up online storefronts on Amazon; a large cut of their sales goes to the corporation. In York, Pennsylvania, the headquarters of the once-fashionable Bon-Ton department store has been made extinct by Amazon and the broader retail consolidation it represents. The crisis of unemployment that has ensued is one that Amazon exploits, finding able bodies for its warehouses in nearby towns.

On his home turf of Baltimore, MacGillis explores most intimately the ebbing of human fulfillment that has accompanied Amazon’s promise of high-speed customer service. He profiles Bill Bodani Jr., who spent most of his working life at Bethlehem Steel’s Sparrows Point complex, outside the city. In the early 2000s, a serious injury forced him to retire in his mid-50s, around the time that foreign competition and other factors pushed the company into bankruptcy. Eventually, the Sparrows Point plant shut down and Bodani’s monthly pension payment was cut from \$3,000 to \$1,600. Now 69 years old and back at work as a forklift driver in a 22-acre Amazon warehouse, he returns every day to the exact same piece of land. The peninsula has been rebranded—it’s called Tradeport Atlantic now—and has become what MacGillis calls an “all-purpose logistics hub” that houses, among other facilities, an Amazon fulfillment center.

Bodani’s young co-workers call him “Pops” and “Old Man”—he’s by far the oldest one around. He starts out making about \$12 an hour, compared with the \$35 an hour he earned at his steel job. Other indignities are more insidious. The company uses an algorithm to track how productive its workers are and how much time they spend off task, flagging people for termination if the data show them underperforming. In other words, a worker can be fired with minimal involvement by a supervisor. Time-limited bathroom breaks mean that Bodani sometimes pees in a quiet corner of the warehouse, parking the forklift to shield him. Yet he draws comfort from working on the same physical terrain where he began his career: He sought out the job at the old Sparrows Point because it gave him a sense of belonging. “It’s a feeling of being home,” he tells MacGillis.

A man who clearly sets store by solidarity and continuity, Bodani still hangs out regularly with the Retirees United Local 9477, gathering for lunch with former Sparrows Point steelworkers and other union members—the kind of custom no Amazon worker will enjoy, if the anti-union corporation has its way. One day, he drops by a United Steelworkers office and collects some material on the right to organize. At work, he shows it to a young man he’s been training to operate the forklifts, who plainly chafes at Amazon’s culture—“the constant pressure to ratchet goals upward, the sense of total surveillance, the workers’ lack of a voice,” as MacGillis puts it. The next day, Bodani’s supervisor, three decades his junior, chastises him for passing out literature. The young man to whom he gave the flyers hasn’t been circumspect in distributing them; later, that worker is furloughed. (Amazon has denied that he was suspended.) When the supervisor threatens to dock Bodani’s pay over a bathroom break, Bodani

FULFILLMENT:
WINNING
AND LOSING
IN ONE-CLICK
AMERICA

*Alec
MacGillis*

FARRAR, STRAUS
AND GIROUX

has had enough. “You got to be kidding me,” he tells the supervisor. After a 50-year career at Sparrows Point, he quits, amid the holiday crush.

WHEN HE began this project, MacGillis could not have anticipated just how timely a book about Amazon’s power—and the powerlessness of those in its path—would be. Recent press accounts have exposed that blue-collar labor at Amazon is not just exhausting but extremely dangerous, with injury rates about double the industry average. The company has actively sought to head off unionization efforts. The revelations came as the pandemic gave Amazon its most profitable year in history by far, thanks to people resorting to shopping online rather than at brick-and-mortar stores.

Last year, Bezos’s net worth rose by more than \$67 billion (or 60 percent) to \$182 billion. During roughly the same period, according to Amazon, almost 20,000 of Amazon’s frontline workers, such as warehouse employees and Whole Foods clerks, tested positive for the coronavirus. Step back, and the pattern holds. The world’s billionaires increased their wealth by about a fifth over the course of last year—to more than \$11 trillion, according to *Forbes*. Meanwhile, a quarter of U.S. adults said someone in their household was laid off or lost a job because of the pandemic.

Addressing the regional imbalances in America would be an enormous undertaking, and MacGillis doesn’t presume to offer prescriptions. But his book suggests one very big place to start: Serious workplace reforms would affect hundreds of thousands of workers, as well as help reshape the broader labor landscape. Hector Torrez, whom MacGillis revisits toward the end of *Fulfillment*, remains wary. He is still employed at the Thornton warehouse, and Amazon has taken some action to keep workers safe—offering up to two weeks of paid leave to anyone with a COVID-19 diagnosis and a temporary raise for those who kept working at the height of the spring outbreak. The company has implemented basic precautionary measures, such as issuing masks and disinfecting work sites. For Torrez, those steps don’t offer much consolation. “What I see around me is a lot of people who don’t have much choice,” he tells MacGillis. Torrez’s quarantine period ended a long time ago. But not wanting to risk infecting his wife or children, he’s still in the basement. *A*

Vauhini Vara, a story editor at The New York Times Magazine, has worked as a Wall Street Journal technology reporter and as the business editor for The New Yorker’s website.

Deciduous

By Linda Gregerson

Speak plainly, said November to the maples, say
what you mean now, now

that summer’s lush declensions lie like the lies
they were at your feet. Haven’t

we praised you? Haven’t we summer after summer
put our faith in augmentation.

But look at these leavings of not-enough-light:
It’s time for sterner counsel now.

It’s time, we know you’re good at this, we’ve
seen the way your branched

articulations keep faith with the whole, it’s time
to call us back to order before

we altogether lose our way. Speak
brightly, said the cold months, speak

with a mouth of snow. The scaffolding is
clear now, we thank you, the moon

can measure its course by you. Instruct us,
while the divisions of light

are starkest, before the murmurs of con-
solation resume, instruct us in

the harder course of mindfulness.
Speak truly, said April. Not just

what you think we’re hoping to hear, speak
so we believe you.

The child who learned perspective from the
stand of you, near and nearer,

knowing you were permanent, is counting
the years to extinction now. Teach her

to teach us the disciplines of do-less-harm. We’re
capable of learning. We’ve glimpsed

the bright intelligence that courses through the body
that contains us. *De +*

cidere, say the maples, has another face.
It also means decide.

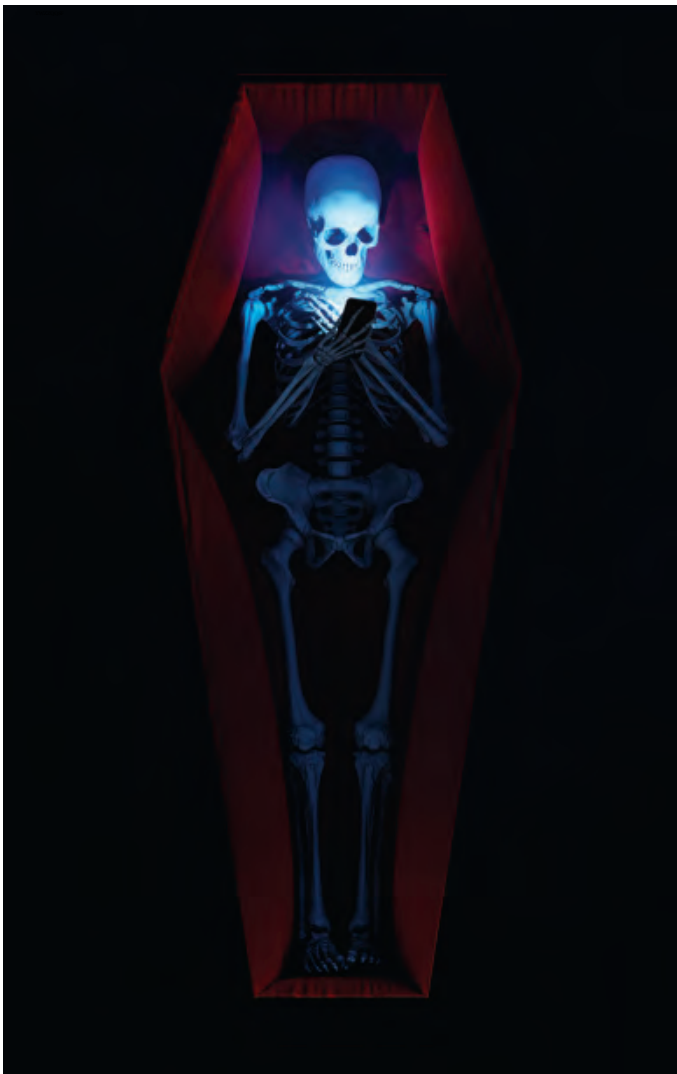
*Linda Gregerson’s most recent collection is
Prodigal: New and Selected Poems, 1976 to 2014.*

BOOKS

Extremely Online and Wildly Out of Control

Patricia Lockwood's debut novel explores the mind, and heart, of an internet-addled protagonist.

By Jordan Kisner



On an Instagram account that I like, an illustrator publishes little four-panel drawings of smooth-headed aliens doing normal human things. Two aliens with bodies like slim light bulbs encounter each other against a bubblegum-pink background. One is sitting in a chair, reading a book; the other is just poking its head in, as if to say hello: “What are you doing?” The reading alien looks up from its book. “Forming emotional bonds,” it replies.

“If I am successful I will be despondent upon completion.”

“Well I hope you are devastated,” the friend says, warmly.

“Thank you—lowering my defenses,” the reading alien says with a jaunty hand gesture.

In another drawing, an alien gives an earbud to a friend. “Put this in your head,” it says. “I want you to hear vibrations that affect my emotions.” “So that mine are also affected?” the alien’s friend asks. “If all goes as planned,” the first replies.

What I like about this particular cartoon series, called *Strange Planet*, drawn by the artist Nathan W. Pyle, is that it presents the most mundane human actions—reading a novel, wanting a friend to hear and appreciate your sad music—out of context and in unfamiliar language. *We’re so weird*, I find myself saying, while snort-laughing, looking at my own behaviors in this frame. *Why are we like this?*

This is the experience—snort-laughter mixed with bewilderment at the absolute strangeness of the world in which I participate—that I tend to have when reading Patricia Lockwood, the poet turned memoirist and *London Review of Books* essayist who has now published her first novel, *No One Is Talking About This*. The novel follows a protagonist who is “extremely online,” a genius of the “portal,” as the internet is called here, and naturally adept at the cleverness and absurdity of social-media exchange. She has become famous for it. Recently, she has gained worldwide recognition for a post that says, in its entirety, “Can a dog be twins?” Her cat’s name is Dr. Butthole. She travels the world, invited to speak about the portal—both as an interpreter of its patterns and as a performer of its bizarre and hilarious argot.

“Stream-of-consciousness!” she shouts to an audience in Jamaica. “Stream-of-consciousness was long ago conquered by a man who wanted his wife to fart all over him. But what about the stream-of-a-consciousness that is not entirely your own? One that you participate in, but that also acts upon you?”

These are the driving questions of *No One Is Talking About This*. What happens to a mind that has enthusiastically joined a worldwide Mind, yet can still occasionally see—if only in flashes—the perversity of the exercise? “Modern womanhood was more about rubbing snail mucus on your face than she had thought it would be. But it had always been something, hadn’t it?” Lockwood’s narrator notes. Elsewhere: “She had a crystal egg up her vagina. Having a crystal egg up her vagina made it difficult to walk, which made her thoughtful, which counted as meditation.”

Where do these thoughts come from? Who made them? How did it come to be that we now have crystal eggs up our vaginas?

Already it was becoming impossible to explain things she had done even the year before, why she had spent hypnotized hours of her life, say, photoshopping bags of frozen peas into pictures of historical atrocities, posting OH YES HUNNY in response to old images of Stalin, why whenever she liked anything especially, she said she was going to “chug it with her ass.” Already it was impossible to explain these things.

I FIRST encountered Lockwood, as many people did, on Twitter, where she has a large and devoted fandom, and where her current profile bio identifies her as a “hardcore berenstain bare-it-all.” One of the early Twitter projects that won her readers, circa 2011, was a series of “sexts” riffing on what was at the time an ascendant phenomenon of interpersonal communication, and turning it into a poetic mode.

“Sext: I am a living male turtleneck. You are an art teacher in winter. You put your whole head through me.”

“Sext: I get nude as hell. I write BRA on my boobs and JEAN SHORTS on my pelvis. I walk through a philosophy class and I am not arrested.”

This kind of weird, slyly sophisticated humor, and a deep commitment to the profane as a tool for revelation and critique, are hallmarks of Lockwood’s style. Her high-low panache extends to her fierce and wonderful literary criticism for the *London Review of Books*, where she’s written about Vladimir Nabokov, John Updike, Carson McCullers, Joan Didion, and others. About Didion, she remarks: “It would be possible to write a parody of her novels called *Desert Abortion—in a Car*. Possible, but why? The best joke you could make wouldn’t touch her.”

Despite her concerns about the individual mind’s dilution in the great tidal insanity of Online Discourse, Lockwood is a stylist who only ever sounds like herself. Her first poetry collection, *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black* (2012), contains poems with titles like “Killed With an Apple Corer, She Asks What Does That Make Me” and “The Salesmen Open Their Trenchcoats, All Filled With Possible Names for the Watch.” Penguin published her second collection, *Motherland Fatherland Homelandssexuals*, in 2014 after one of its poems went viral, a response to a public debate at the time about whether rape jokes could ever be funny, which played out within a larger debate about whether women were categorically less funny than men. “The rape joke is that you were 19 years old,” the poem begins. “The rape joke is that he was your boyfriend . . . The rape joke is he was a bouncer, and kept people out for a living / Not you!”

“Rape Joke” established Lockwood’s talent for speaking the language of the zeitgeist and knifing the

zeitgeist’s heart in the same gesture—her ability to win at both humor and lacerating critique. In her 2017 memoir, *Priestdaddy*, Lockwood recounts growing up as the daughter of one of the only married Catholic priests in the world (her father had been a Lutheran minister, but petitioned to be reordained), which gives some context to her sensibility: She weaponizes hyperbole and irreverence as only a person raised on Roman Catholicism and then weaned on the internet can. In *Priestdaddy*, when she’s asked for descriptions of her poetry to fuel “the machinery of book publication,” she considers suggesting as her plaudit: “Electrifying . . . like if a bumblebee stang you right on the clit.”

Lockwood’s affinity for the surreal, for baroque wit, for the sexually weird, for the inane and shocking—for the “worst things the English language is capable of,” as she phrased it to *The New York Times Magazine*—has made her one of the most interesting writers of the past 10 years. It has also made her a master of Twitter. (Her feed remains disturbing and hilarious. In November, she posted the back end of an uncastrated hog, generously endowed. Another time: “Was asked to pitch something to a ‘women’s magazine’ and the first thing that came to mind was ‘Covid Gave Me Really Soft Pubes Like A Chinchilla’ . . . but on second thought I’ll be saving that for a men’s magazine.”) But in *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood betrays suspicion of the skills that she wields with relish. She turns her critical streak toward the medium in which her writing, and her public life, has been forged.

THE FIRST HALF of *No One Is Talking About This* has the feeling of an endless scroll—it’s largely made up of brief, one-to-four-sentence increments, approximately tweet-length, rendered in super-close third person. These seem to have little relation to one another chronologically, and they don’t proceed logically. Instead, they are sporadic and self-contained: a joke, a story, a note, a question, a pithy comment. They pass the way social-media feeds pass. “Why were we all writing like this now?” the protagonist wonders. “Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote.”

The portal, the protagonist realizes, “had also once been the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone.” She meets people at events on her tours who remember her old blog, and she remembers their blogs. “Tears sparked in her eyes instantaneously . . . His had been one of her very favorite lives.” But is any of this real? Real to whom? Real in what sense? Anyway, the self (whose self?) devised

Lockwood’s affinity for the surreal, for the sexually weird, for the inane and shocking, has made her one of the most interesting writers of the past 10 years.

on the internet vanishes. “Myspace was an entire life,” she half-sobs at an event. “And it is lost, lost, lost, lost!”

The narrator’s endless, directionless tumble in time and language is interrupted by the hard stop of a very offline tragedy. Her younger sister, who is “leading a life that was 200 percent less ironic than hers,” is pregnant, and something has gone terribly wrong. The baby has Proteus syndrome, which causes tissues in some parts of the body to grow far out of correct proportion. The baby’s head is too big: She’s unlikely to survive birth, and certainly won’t survive infancy.

Proteus syndrome is a poetic choice here, an ironic choice even. It is a biological hyperbole suited to the sensibilities of the internet: runaway proliferation turning the body into a wildly exaggerated, Daliesque version of itself. It is surreality visited on the human form. With a less skillful writer, this would be a heavy-handed—or worse, manipulative—plot device, but the baby and her terminal condition turn the book into something unexpected: not a tragedy, but a romance. The baby is born and—improbably—survives, and Lockwood’s narrator is immediately and wholly lovestruck by this tiny creature and her runaway everything. “In every reaching cell of her she was a genius.” She is obsessed with the baby’s body, with the way the baby experiences the world purely physically and not in her mind, or in *The Mind*.

Her fingertips, her ears, her sleepiness and her wide awake, a ripple along the skin wherever she was touched. All along her edges, just where she turned to another state . . . The self, but more, like a sponge.

Through this baby, the narrator falls out of the life she spent “with a notebook, painstakingly writing ‘*oh my god—thor’s hammer was a chode metaphor*’ with a feeling of unbelievable accomplishment.” She falls “out of the broad warm us, out of the story that had seemed, up till the very last minute, to require her perpetual co-writing.” Now she realizes that it doesn’t need her co-writing, and that she maybe doesn’t care.

Through the membrane of a white hospital wall she could feel the thump of the life that went on without her, the hugeness of the arguments about whether you could say the word *retard* on a podcast. She laid her hand against the white wall and the heart beat, strong and striding, even healthy. But she was no longer in that body.

Lockwood uses the same language to describe the internet—a broad, warm body; a strong heartbeat—and the fragile corporeality of the baby, though those two domains are mutually incompatible. The baby the narrator can hold in her arms; the baby is broken and holy. The internet is elsewhere, voracious, profane. But

they act on her similarly. The internet is a collective reality that swallows and reconfigures us—it is a kind of corpus. And so, of course, is the one truly universal human experience: confronting mortality. The truth of the body that suffers and fails is a reality—a hyper-reality, an inevitability—just as ready to swallow and reconfigure her. Which body does this narrator love? To which does she wish to ultimately belong?

Fortunately, Lockwood doesn’t make her narrator piously renounce her wild tweeting in favor of the “real world,” whatever that might mean. There’s a joke (on the internet) about the “broken brain”—“The internet broke my brain,” people commonly lament. The narrator has a broken brain, still; it’s just that now she has an incandescently broken heart, too. Sitting next to the baby, who is struggling to breathe, she is Googling Ray Liotta’s plastic surgery. She is telling the baby about Marlon Brando because “one of the fine spendthrift privileges of being alive [is] wasting a cubic inch of mind and memory on the vital statistics of Marlon Brando.” She is grieving and scrolling. Reading this, I suddenly remembered sitting in a hospital room, next to a loved one on a ventilator, and trying to scroll back through years of images online of some random dancer’s nondancing twin to see whether she, too, had a fraught relationship with her arms on account of having been raised in a religious cult. We’re so weird. Why are we like this?

The second half of the book, in which the narrator is newly deranged by the immovable reality of loving what must die—in addition to being deranged by the portal, which feels, by contrast, both eternal and editable—is electric with tenderness. “The doors of bland suburban houses now looked possible, outlined, pulsing—for behind any one of them could be hidden a bright and private glory.” She becomes like the baby, who “could not tell the difference between beauty and a joke.”

Lockwood’s genius for irony is matched by the radiance of her reverence, when she lets it show. A glory, the portal tells her, is also what you call the round rainbow that plane passengers sometimes see haloing the plane’s shadow as it moves through mist. “Every time she looked out the window it was there, traveling fleetly over clouds that had the same dense flocked pattern that had begun to appear on the baby’s skin, the soles of her feet and palms of her hands, so she seemed to have weather for finger and footprints.” Glories follow her through the sky, made only of water and light. Unusually for me, I wept through parts of this book, but in the best, beautiful-sad-music way—a grand success, the aliens would say. *A*

Jordan Kisner is the author of Thin Places: Essays From In Between.

NO ONE
IS TALKING
ABOUT THIS

Patricia
Lockwood

RIVERHEAD

"How do I become something I don't see?"

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BOOKS

Tom Stoppard's Double Life

For Britain's leading postwar playwright, virtuosity and uncertainty go hand in hand.

By Gaby Wood



Tom Stoppard outside the National Theatre, in London, 1977

In a short book about biography, Hermione Lee, literary life-writer par excellence, offered two metaphors for the art at which she excels. One was an autopsy. The other was a portrait. “Whereas autopsy suggests clinical investigation and, even, violation,” she wrote, “portrait suggests empathy, bringing to life, capturing the character.” She argued that these contrasting approaches had something in common. They “both make an investigation of the subject which will shape how posterity views them.”

Lee is clearly no coroner, even when writing about the dead. Tom Stoppard is her first living biographical subject—on a roster that includes Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, and, most recently, Penelope Fitzgerald—and she concludes her portrait by lobbying posterity on his behalf. Stoppard “matters,” she writes; “he will be remembered.” His significance seems a strange thing to feel in need of proving. Surely if Stoppard’s reputation in postwar British theater weren’t secure, this giant biography—nearly twice the length of Lee’s last—would never have been undertaken.

Stoppard is the alchemist who turned Shakespeare into Beckett; he has held audiences rapt at that feat for half a century, and riveted by the work that has followed. “What’s it about?” an audience member once asked him of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, to which he allegedly replied: “It’s about to make me very rich.” Since that play premiered, in 1966, Stoppard’s linguistic hijinks and relish for experimenting have seemed too clever to some and thrillingly ambitious to others. The dichotomy was perhaps inevitable, given the scope of his intellectual appetite: He has fused philosophers with acrobats (*Jumpers*) and dissidents with footballers (*Professional Foul*), devised poetic plots from the laws of physics (*Arcadia*), and rewritten 19th- and 20th-century history until it was antic or aslant (*Travesties*, *The Coast of Utopia*). But his virtuosity has been more than gymnastics. The restless author of more than 20 plays for the stage, as many for radio and TV, and several Hollywood screenplays, he has spun more serious ideas into silly jokes than Charlie Chaplin and Richard Feynman combined. He has also said as much about literature and love as Ivan Turgenev.

Still, nothing reputational is certain (“I have a theory that plays go off, like fruit,” Stoppard told a friend), and he would know, because uncertainty itself is one of his subjects. A story he once heard became a favorite refrain, a way to convey this abiding theme: Two men in a car drive so quickly past something improbable that they can’t quite decipher it. Was it a man in pajamas carrying a football, or a tortoise, or a peacock? Stoppard positions himself with the flummoxed witnesses.

Unlike his friend Harold Pinter, Stoppard doesn’t believe in a “definitive” text, and Lee proceeds accordingly, documenting changes, in draft or revival, alive to

his provisional spirit. A self-described “tinkerer,” he’ll revise or reinvestigate in collaboration with others. The actors in Patrick Marber’s 2016 kinetic production of *Travesties*—in which a minor character in *Ulysses* reminisces about meeting James Joyce, Tristan Tzara, and Vladimir Lenin during the First World War—were excited, Lee reports, that Stoppard was willing to make changes to a 42-year-old play last produced in 1993.

What’s more, Lee found herself extending her deadline in order to write about *Leopoldstadt*, Stoppard’s first new play in five years, a moving exploration of history, memory, and family that is his most explicitly autobiographical work. It opened in London in January 2020, and was forced by the pandemic to close two months later. In writing about Stoppard while he’s alive, Lee is not just keeping up with new output. She’s conveying the ways in which his past work remains potentially in progress—and the ways in which his own life, as becomes clear in his latest play, is a window onto the vagaries of history. Lee has said more than once that there is no such thing as a “definitive” biography. In *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, she proves that in the extreme.

STOPPARD WAS BORN Tomáš Stráussler in Zlín, Czechoslovakia, in July 1937. The son of Jewish parents—his father was a doctor; his mother had trained to be a nurse—he fled with them to Singapore after the Nazis invaded in March 1939. He was 4 when the Japanese occupation of Singapore began. His father enlisted in a British volunteer defense corps. Tomáš as well as his older brother, Petr, and their mother were evacuated on a boat they thought was bound for Australia. They arrived in India instead—on what may have been the same day that his father’s ship was blown up off the coast of Sumatra. Marta Stráussler spent four years in India with the boys before marrying an Englishman, Ken Stoppard, whose name they all took. They moved to England, and never spoke Czech again.

The young Tom Stoppard embraced Englishness—country landscapes, cricket—as he began his boarding-school life. He did not particularly excel as a student, and never attended university. Instead, he became a local reporter in Bristol. His eight years as a journalist—during which he reviewed plays at the Bristol Old Vic, wrote about film, honed his literary sarcasm, and became friendly with the actor Peter O’Toole—were the making of him. He wrote nonstop: letters, journal entries, columns, short stories, and eventually plays. Success came early, at 29. With *Rosencrantz*, Stoppard became the youngest writer to have a play put on at London’s National Theatre. “Fame was very satisfying and he took to it with ease,” Lee notes.

Stoppard describes himself as having led “a charmed life,” and that is indeed the feeling the reader gets

through much of the book. Nonetheless, the unfolding luck is set against an unremembered past, and a single midlife switchback gives Stoppard’s existence an extraordinary shape. It’s as if, as his stage directions say of characters in *Arcadia*, he has been “doubled by time.” Until he was in his 50s, Stoppard knew nothing about his family from Zlín. He knew enough about his migrant early years to refer to himself as a “bounced Czech,” but when asked if he was Jewish, Stoppard would joke, “Well, I’m Jew-ish.” He knew that his father—of whom he had no memory—had been Jewish. He didn’t realize that his mother was too.

In 1993, Stoppard met his aunt’s granddaughter, Sarka, with whom his mother had embarked on a semi-clandestine correspondence (after keeping her past quiet for more than half a century). In an exchange that would be echoed in *Leopoldstadt* 27 years later, he asked what had happened to his aunts. “Auschwitz,” came the reply, several times over. He delved deeper during the 1990s, surprised by “all the grief I owe,” he wrote at one point, and a decade and a half later, a charge made by a Croatian writer, Daša Drndić, hit a nerve. Working the actual Tom Stoppard into her novel *Trieste*, she called him out as a “blind observer.” Having learned of his exterminated relatives (including all four grandparents), she contended, he then returned to “his lovely English language and his one and only royal homeland” as if those relatives had never lived. “She was clearly saying,” Lee writes, “Well, fuck you and your ‘charmed life.’”

If Stoppard’s “lovely English language” was a place to hide, though, he was hiding in plain sight. The playwright in *The Real Thing*—a poignant play about love and marriage produced in 1982—is given to say, of words, that “if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos.” Long before he was told about his relatives, Stoppard had been preoccupied with divided selves and uncertain identities; with doubles and disorder. He had traveled to Czechoslovakia several times, and worked with the playwright (and later president) Václav Havel. Mortality, and historical unpredictability, had always been central to his work. You might say that everything he didn’t think he knew had haunted it for decades. Stoppard had been fond of quoting a passage from a play by his near-contemporary James Saunders, about grief lying behind everything, dimly discernible, “as you can see sometimes through the surface of an ornamental lake the outline of a carp.” But possibly more fundamental than these thematic echoes is his virtuosic way with language itself. Was his becoming a writer in some crucial way due to the precariousness of his past? What could strike some as overwrought cleverness was perhaps care, that need to “look after” words—a bridge across incomprehension in a language not his first.

Stoppard has spun more serious ideas into silly jokes than Charlie Chaplin and Richard Feynman combined.

ONE OF THE PLEASURES of Lee's book is the glimpse it offers into Stoppard's working practice. He had trouble with plot from the start, she tells us, but he could find the comic clockwork in a "situation": *Hamlet* gets turned inside out; a man in a lunatic asylum imagines he's conducting an orchestra; a single room is seen in two different centuries. Conceits whiz by, as Lee describes Stoppard writing like mad, at one point gluing to his desk the sandpaper strip from the side of a matchbox, so he doesn't have to stop writing to light a cigarette. He "toyed with the idea of a five-minute *War and Peace*, but that came to nothing."

The jokes, though, like the metaphysics and the math, have to serve him. As one of his characters explains, writing is like a well-made cricket bat: It exists so that "when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might . . . travel." And one of Stoppard's favorite ideas is an unsolved problem: Fermat's last theorem (*Arcadia*), the seven bridges of Königsberg (*Hapgood*), the Riemann hypothesis (*Leopoldstadt*). These cerebral propositions may have baffled many (*Hapgood*, which opened in 1988 and starred his then-lover, Felicity Kendal, was a feebly received spy thriller based on quantum physics). Yet an unsolved problem offers at least two ways to convey Stoppard's guiding preoccupations. First, it is a message left for the future by the past. And second—like the recitation in *Leopoldstadt* of relatives killed in the camps—it is seemingly impossible yet palpably true.

In Patrick Marber's elegant, respectful production of *Leopoldstadt* ("You treat a new play like a classic and a classic like a new play," he has said of his approach), two young boys sit at the front of the stage playing cat's cradle with an old man. It's November 1938, the room in Vienna is full of relatives, and in a moment a Nazi official will burst into their apartment. The boys, Leo and Nathan, are second cousins; Ludwig is Leo's grandfather, a mathematician. Ludwig has made knots in the string. As the cat's cradle changes shape between Leo's fingers, the knots "change their address." There seems to be no logic to the switch except, as Ludwig explains, the cat's cradlers know that "each state came out of the previous one. So there is order underneath." Nathan guesses something further—the knots always stay the same distance from one another. He goes on to become a mathematician too. Yet what Nathan has described is not just math. It's family.

In 1955, the cousins meet again, in the same apartment. Leo—now an Englishman—remembers nothing. Then Nathan calls attention to a scar on his hand, and Leo is reminded of the wound he received in that very room, on the day they were taught about chaos and relatedness. "Cat's cradle," he whispers, and then repeats it for Nathan through tears: "Cat's cradle." Beneath the unthinkable disorder lie unbreakable

bonds. Stoppard, Lee says, "wrote into *Leopoldstadt* his remorse."

LEE HAS had access to boundless sources—letters, appointment diaries, notebooks, and drafts, as well as friends, family members, and the subject himself, who spoke with her over several years and allowed her to sit in on rehearsals. Yet I don't think—I could be wrong in tracing this—that Lee ever quotes directly from her own interviews with Stoppard. She quotes other people, and we hear from Stoppard in his own words, in published interviews, private letters, and journals. But what he tells Lee directly she adopts as part of her narrative voice—a lighter, closer tone than she has taken in her posthumous biographies, in tune with Stoppard's own blend of irreverent seriousness:

It was much easier and more exciting to start out as a playwright than as a novelist. A playwright could write a hundred pages in a few weeks, most of which were white space, and it would last two hours on stage, and on Sunday Kenneth Tynan would devote a quarter of a page of the *Observer* to it, even if you were a completely unknown person and the play had no scenery.

The view isn't invented—Lee's endnotes are scrupulous—yet it sometimes amounts to a kind of inhabiting; more like acting, perhaps, than traditional scholarship.

Sir Tom occasionally shades into Saint Tom, thanks to a notably ample collection of friends who remark on his generosity and kindness. He remembers birthdays, he lends money when others are in need, his wit always beguiles. He is an unstoppable correspondent, keeping in touch with everyone, including long-ago landladies, and for 50 years he wrote once or twice a week to his mother. But Lee astutely observes that his charm can be a form of concealment, a means of detachment. Overall, a "familial feel" characterizes his working relationships, yet his four sons encountered a frazzled man at breakfast who'd worked half the night. About his three marriages—to Jose Ingle, Miriam Moore-Robinson, and Sabrina Guinness—and his long relationships with Felicity Kendal and Sinéad Cusack, Lee is as circumspect as the women themselves. When Stoppard read this biography, he told Lee that "he is good at performing niceness, but he is not as nice as people think." For all Lee's evident affection, she leaves that unwritten self just visible at the perimeter, living its part of the undefinitive life. *A*

Gaby Wood, the literary director of the Booker Prize Foundation, is a critic who has written for The Daily Telegraph and the London Review of Books, among other publications.

TOM STOPPARD:
A LIFE

Hermione Lee

KNOPF

WE ALL KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO FEEL

LEFT OUT.

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We've all had moments where we've felt we didn't belong.
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ESSAY

Creativity in Confinement

*Incarcerated artists
respond to brutal
conditions in
unexpected,
expansive ways.*

By
Leslie
Jamison

Spiz's Dinette, a toaster-size trailer with a propane tank no bigger than your thumb, was painstakingly crafted during Dean Gillispie's years of incarceration at an Ohio prison. Gillispie constructed the silver trailer by spreading cigarette-pack foil across notebook cardboard, and used pins taken from the prison sewing shop to hold the whole structure together. The window curtains, made from used



tea bags, are partially closed. A tiny sign on the trailer door reads, in nearly microscopic inky script: GONE FISHING. The whole sculpture invites you to lean closer, to peer through the tea-bag curtains and squint at the sign—only to encounter a message that is a declaration of absence, an ironic claiming of the very leisure time that prison makes impossible. Written from the claustrophobic quarters of a prison cell, the note turns a cliché of leisure into an act of fugitive self-possession.

During two decades of incarceration for crimes he did not commit, Gillispie—raised in rural Ohio by working-class parents who went into tremendous debt to fund the fight for his release—built an entire series of miniature establishments that collectively evoke a sense of small-town nostalgia, including a movie theater (whose marquee advertises *I Walked With a Zombie*) and a series of shops bearing his childhood nickname: *Spiz's Burger Shack*, *Spiz's Scoop City*. Many feature the street address 276: Gillispie's cellblock number. These miniatures represent a nearly sublime form of the art of “mushfake,” prison slang for replicas of outside objects constructed from materials available inside. The bricks of the movie theater were sculpted out of dental compound taken from the prison medical unit. *Spiz's Diner*, made from soda cans and cassette-tape cases, was rigged with electricity by a fellow cellblock resident.

Gillispie's miniatures are daydreams made tangible, salvaging sleek chrome sidings from the austerity of a cigarette economy, and hours of creative labor from the long decades of a prison sentence. With their limited materials, Gillispie's pieces testify to some of the many freedoms their maker was denied. But their ingenuity testifies to freedoms that can never be fully taken: to imagine, to create, to reconstitute, to survive by way of unexpected beauties. As Gillispie has put it, summing up his relationship with prison authorities: “They were procuring my life and I was procuring product from them.”

When art emerges out of conditions shaped by injustice, inequality, and brutality, we—and by “we,” I specifically mean people viewing the art who are not subject to the conditions under which it was

produced—may reflexively expect it to be a transparent vessel delivering the terrible news of its own origins. From that angle, we risk seeing its creators as ethnographers, duty-bound to deliver the particulars of their dehumanization. But not all art that emerges from injustice wants to transcribe it; art can glance obliquely, using stolen sewing pins and tea-bag curtains to suggest longing and determination—to say, *You can't have all of me*.

GILLISPIE'S MINIATURES are part of an exhibition at MoMA PS1 through early April called “Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” guest-curated by Nicole R. Fleetwood, a professor at Rutgers

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and an activist who has written a book by the same name. The exhibition presents an archive of art that responds to the painful conditions of its own making in a breathtaking variety of ways—not just with explicit depiction or acts of figurative witnessing, but also with abstraction and experiment, with miniature daydreams and monumental collages; not just with visions of suffering, but also with glimpses of camaraderie, intimacy, and vitality.

Some pieces cry out with unapologetic directness against the injustice that pervades the penal system. The photo collages made by Ojore Lutalo, a self-described political prisoner affiliated with the Black Liberation Army who spent 22 years in solitary

confinement (where he was permitted a photocopier for work on his legal appeals), are manifestos that indict the brutal cruelty of extended isolation. The video installation by the Philadelphia-based rapper Isis Tha Saviour (Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter) restages her experience of giving birth in prison, shackled to a gurney; in her lyrics she connects that viscerally wrenching experience to the longer history of African American bondage (“The prison system just another version of the plantation”).

Other works address in more slanted ways the systemic and enduring toll of mass incarceration. Jesse Krimes's massive wall installation, *Apokaluptein: 16389067*, composed of 39 “procured” prison bed-sheets, depicts an elaborate dystopian cosmos. Many of Jared Owens's abstract-expressionist paintings utilize paint mixed with soil taken from the prison recreation yard, granting them an insistent roughness, a textural topography that refuses to stay confined to the flat plane of the canvas. Owens's choice to work in abstract expressionism—an artistic tradition long associated with elite institutions and high-brow culture—asks his audience to respect his identity as an autonomous creative agent, rather than simply an emissary of institutional horror.

A particular set of constraints confronts incarcerated artists in their work: very little space, very few materials, but almost endless time. To put it more precisely, they are navigating endless *penal* time, scheduled by others, while mourning the loss of domestic time—family time, home time, free time. Many of the pieces in “Marking Time” are reckoning with that simultaneous grief and abundance, and they all mark time in one essential way: by transforming penal time into art. Gillispie's sculptures and Krimes's wall mural—in their miniature intricacy and massive scale, respectively—offer physical testimony to all the hours that went into making them. James “Yaya” Hough's drawings are scrawled across prison menus, Tuesday's potpie and Wednesday's stuffed-cabbage casserole, an imagined mythology running roughshod across the discrete time-blocks of coercive institutional life. For Owens, who spent much of his 13-year sentence in New Jersey helping run art programs for fellow prisoners, the techniques

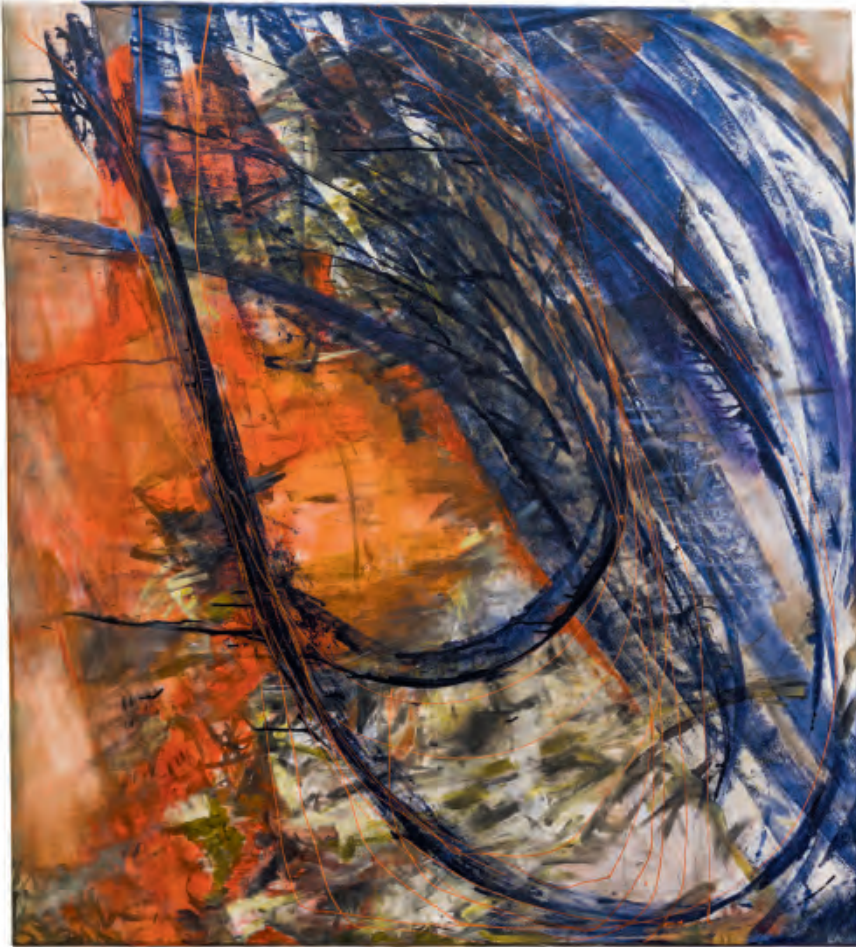
of abstract expressionism offered a tool to help him manage his relationship to time. “To fixate on the past or to focus on the time remaining on his sentence was to succumb to rage and depression,” Fleetwood recounts him explaining in an interview. “Such thoughts would make him angry about the years spent away from his two sons, both very young when he went away.” Abstraction helped him hone a “practice of staying in the present.”

wooden pallet that he realized he could use to stretch larger canvases, and decided to brave a heavily monitored hallway to obtain it, risking punishment. Owens, who took jars of prison soil with him when he was released, was on parole when he produced his 2014 painting, *Oculus*. The work is anchored by swirls of dark paint swooping and curling over choppy strokes of dull olive green, its upper corner buoyed by arcs of periwinkle blue—the

blaring orange, the ghosts of cell bars and correctional officers’ uniforms conjured by curves of black and navy blue. But the ways in which Owens’s abstract paintings veered away from representation were just as important as their symbolism. Fleetwood describes the “fugitive planning” involved in nonfigurative art that renders “one’s self out of sight,” and Owens’s canvases helped me understand what that might entail: art that pushes back against the brutality of constant surveillance by resisting the accessibility of direct portrayal. Owens’s paintings forced me to acknowledge my own hunger for representational directness—how much I wanted depictions of the conditions they’d arisen from. Perhaps, more than anything, I wanted fodder for my own righteous indignation.

Though art is often credited with providing speculative transport across vast gulfs in experience, “Marking Time” challenges that premise by implicitly asking, *What are the limits of what can be made visible?* Again and again, its art forces a viewer to reckon with those limits. Owens’s painting confounded any stable emblematic meanings. Gillispie’s miniatures presented me with spaces that were too small to enter. However closely I peered, the actual experience of confinement that had catalyzed their construction eluded me—the abiding pain lurking behind their eerie daydreams.

FANTASY AND DOCUMENTARY might seem like opposite modes: Fantasy conjures the impossible, while documentary transcribes what already exists. Yet so much of the art created within prison walls attests to their entwinement. Fantasies document psychic rather than physical landscapes; they expose the inside of a mind, rather than the inside of a cell. Just a room away from Gillispie’s miniatures, an entire gallery wall is covered by Jesse Krimes’s 15-by-40-foot *Apokaluptein: 16389067*. Arranged as a three-layer tableau of heaven, earth, and hell, this dreamscape stages the fascinating collision of two realms: the claustrophobic materials of prison, and the expansive imagining of everything beyond it—the external world in all its chaotic abundance.



Opening page: Dean Gillispie’s Spiz’s Dinette (1998). Above: Jared Owens’s Oculus (2014).

His decision to mix rec-yard soil into his paint, he noted, not only inscribed the prison in his art but expanded his otherwise limited array of color options. Even the size of his prison paintings gestures toward a submerged story of scarce materials. As Owens recounted to Fleetwood, at first he was able to work only on the small canvases the prison made available to him. But one day he spotted a discarded

suggestion of a distant sky, obscured but not blocked entirely. All of these tones are staged against a bleeding, pulsing core of orange. “Anyone who has been incarcerated would know that [orange is] a stress color,” Owens told Fleetwood.

As I stood in front of Owens’s abstract canvases, I could feel myself reaching for the explanatory symbolism of their colors: the traces of inmate jumpsuits in the

Krimes—a native of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with a working-class background, sentenced to five years in federal prison right after getting a bachelor's degree in art—constructed each layer of *Apokaluptein:16389067* from 39 bedsheets, elaborately collaged with images transferred from *The New York Times* using hair gel and a spoon. He made each panel individually, using prison sheets (made by prison labor through a government program called Unicorn) and bartering bespoke tattoo designs for money to purchase the hair gel; then he smuggled the sheets out of prison by sending them home in individual packages with the help of fellow inmates who worked in the mail room.

At first glance, all I could see in *Apokaluptein:16389067* was an elaborate fantasy of the outside world—a surreal cosmos structured by longing for the inaccessible. The lowest row of bedsheets (“hell”) is a frantic collage of media images, like a simmering stew of capitalism

and commodification: advertisements for Christie's and Prada crowded around a sketch of a giant human eye, ambiguously demonic or holy, taking it all in or else trying to destroy it with a glare. The middle row (“earth”) is full of towering women cut from J.Crew ads, who step like giants over a series of alternately pastoral and nightmarish landscapes, including a battered roller coaster looming out of flooded seawater from Hurricane Sandy and a crowd of protesters at Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring. The juxtaposition of towering fashion models and the scenes of turmoil at their high-heeled feet reflects with wry absurdity—as if through a fun-house mirror—the gap between the fantasies and realities of late capitalism. The upper row (“heaven”) is an open blue sky full of washed-out clouds, perhaps the most audacious fantasy of all. Each layer of Krimes's cosmos is also covered with flying figures, muscular ballerina bodies hand-drawn with colored pencils. When I

leaned close to get a better look, I saw that many of them were headless. I'd expected legible humanity, but instead I found faceless, disquieting anonymity.

The longer I stood in front of *Apokaluptein:16389067*, the more its meanings multiplied and undermined one another. Its staggering scale and teeming collages, crowned by open sky, all reach toward the external world, but its dark cityscapes and looming giantesses offer a withering critique of market-driven excess in all its blithe ruthlessness—from the frenzy of advertisements in the lower reaches of hell to the models obliviously stepping across tableaux of wreckage. The mural loathes the culture of worship it evokes. Its flying figures are both impossible ideals and unnerving grotesques. At once elusive and immersive, it refuses to yield the satisfaction of an easy allegory even as it swallows you whole. The work's title combines the Greek origin of the word *apocalypse* (meaning “to uncover, reveal”) with Krimes's prisoner

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JESSE KRIMES / HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS



Apokaluptein:16389067, by Jesse Krimes, 2010–13

number (16389067), which slyly suggests that we might be in the business not just of producing an apocalypse but of mass-producing apocalypses, each with its own serial number.

Krimes's mystical cosmology rejects the cramped scale of prison—the single sheet, the single cell—and his methods, like Gillispie's, insist on transformation rather than documentation. Neither Krimes's collages nor Gillispie's mushfakes are devoted to the art of reproduction; both are strategies of alchemy and displacement instead—letting inside materials replicate the outside, and outside materials saturate the inside. Fleetwood recounts that Krimes actually “struggled to make art after he was released from prison because the restrictive parameters of making art inside had fueled his creativity.”

For so many of the artists in “Marking Time,” these feats of transformation were made possible through collaboration—like Gillispie's cellmate rigging the electricity for his tiny diner, and Krimes's friends in

the mail room sending out his bedsheets. During Krimes's years at FCI Fairton, the same federal prison in New Jersey where Owens was incarcerated, he and Owens—along with another artist named Gilberto Rivera, who made collages from commissary wrappers and inmate jumpsuits—created the Fairton Collective. The trio gathered in a small art studio to pool their supplies and their subscriptions to *Artforum* and *Art in America*, and to read and discuss theorists like Michel Foucault. Owens was also vested with the authority to allocate use of the studio by others in the prison: The collective's existence—its control over that studio and what happened there—was an act of reclaiming physical space, just as all of these artworks manifest a reclamation of governed time. The three men were claiming friendship, too, as a creative material, in the same way cigarette foil and prison menus and soil became materials—all resources salvaged from conditions of scarcity.

AS I GREW more and more enthralled by Krimes's mail-room-smuggled Divine Comedy and Gillispie's meticulous craftsmanship, I also started to become suspicious of my awe, worried that it might offer false solace or unwittingly fuel the delusion that the brilliance of the art could somehow redeem, or even ameliorate, the circumstances of its making. But part of the achievement of the work in “Marking Time” is the way it subtly, forcefully undermines the very awe it produces, constantly reminding us of the prison soil in the paint. By summoning wonder but refusing its consolations, it forces visitors to dwell in an honest discomfort. Even as this art testifies to the stirring possibilities of generative constraint, it never lets us forget that it wants to abolish the conditions that made its creation an act of survival.

Nowhere did this experience of troubled awe feel more moving than in the small room that opens the exhibition—and that is also, as a visitor finishes the loop of galleries, where it ends. All four of its walls are covered with rows of pencil-sketched portraits, each one showing the face of an incarcerated man: one with a goatee and a wry smile; another wearing a pair of headphones, his expression focused and withdrawn; yet another with an eye patch and the faint outlines of a stick-and-poke cross on his shoulder. Since 2014, an incarcerated artist named Mark Loughney has been creating these portraits in 20-minute sessions with fellow inmates at SCI Dallas, a Pennsylvania state prison. Together they constitute a series called *Pyrrhic Defeat: A Visual Study of Mass Incarceration*, now consisting of more than 500 portraits. “The irony is that 500 faces is not even a drop in the bucket of our 2.4 million brothers, mothers, sisters, and fathers that are locked away in prisons in our country,” Loughney has written.

Loughney's faces are all drawn on 9-by-12-inch sheets of whatever inexpensive paper he can acquire inside, sketched in three-quarter view, their eyes gazing away from us. An elderly man with dreadlocks and a beard—his tufts of white hair drawn in pale charcoal, his creased eyes suggesting his weariness—conveys an



expression at once dynamic and inscrutable, a mixture of patience, knowingness, and disappointment. A younger man with cornrows and wire-frame glasses looks stone-faced and determined, his rigid expression so precisely arranged that it seems to betray a rawness lurking beneath. Each rectangle holds not just a face but the record of an encounter between two men joined by the act of portrait making, a pocket of stillness and concentration carved from an otherwise chaotic environment. “I saw a guy here with a skeletal middle finger tattoo that engulfed his entire face,” Loughney recounted to the journalist Maurice Chammah. “I said, ‘Dude, I gotta draw you.’ I asked him his name and he said, ‘Face.’” While making a portrait of Phil Africa, a legendary Philadelphia activist, Loughney recalled that “a fly buzzed around them, occasionally landing on Africa’s face,” Chammah wrote. “‘You could swat that fly if you want,’ Loughney said. ‘No, he’s alright,’ Africa responded. ‘He’s our brother, too.’ Africa died soon after.”

Loughney’s portraits function as a kind of ethical antivenom, reclaiming the faces of incarcerated men from all the genres that ask us to see them as perpetrators: the wanted poster, the mug shot, the courtroom sketch. His portraits instead situate these faces inside a genre long associated with nobility and privilege, available to members of society who could afford to commission depictions of themselves, and who could control the terms by which they were seen. Loughney’s work also suggests—as the most searing portraits do—that we can glimpse the hidden infinitude of someone’s consciousness through the finite, tangible features of his face. In a cramped room that feels like a cross between a prison cell and a shrine, Loughney’s drawings ask us to see the human faces behind the rhetoric that justifies mass incarceration, and to confront a carceral state that has been rendered invisible not so much by disappearance as by naturalization. As the activist Angela Davis has put it: “The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us.”

Hidden in plain sight, the stain of mass incarceration implicates the museum



An Institutional Nightmare, by Gilberto Rivera, 2012

audience, too: It’s supported by our tax dollars, and conducted under the banner of protecting our freedom. Loughney’s portraits ask those of us who wander freely through these museum galleries to reckon with the stark truth that each imprisoned person is endless in his humanity—tender and flawed, bitter and hopeful, loving and beloved. One man in a beanie looks curious, or maybe wistful, or else nostalgic; another with a short-cropped beard looks amused by something we can’t see; another with a pursed mouth looks ... who knows? His sunglasses make his expression inscrutable,

which feels less like obstruction and more like the point: He is determining how much of him we get to see.

The averted gazes of Loughney’s subjects, along with their simultaneously suggestive and opaque expressions, insist that we recognize their humanity and their privacy at once. That push-and-pull sense of invitation and refusal echoes the tensions embedded in other works: the evocative ambiguities of Owens’s abstract canvases, the allegorical ambiguities of Krimes’s surreal cosmos, the bait and switch of Gillispie’s *GONE FISHING*. And in their elusive gazes, Loughney’s portraits reminded me

• **BUSINESS**

Winning and Losing in One-Click America

The award-winning journalist
Alec MacGillis investigates Amazon's
impact on how we live and work in towns
and cities across the United States

Excerpted from *Fulfillment*
by Alec MacGillis

Like all great crises, the global pandemic of 2020 revealed the weaknesses of nations it attacked. In the case of the United States, that weakness was the extraordinary inequality across different places and communities. When it reached this country, the coronavirus first struck its upper echelons, the highly prosperous precincts that had tighter connections with their global peers than with scruffier places in their own backyard: Seattle, Boston, San Francisco, Manhattan. But within weeks it had leached into less privileged redoubts, as if guided by an unerring homing instinct for the most vulnerable, among whom it would do the most damage: in central Queens, where it ravaged small houses packed with large families of Bangladeshi and Colombian cab drivers and restaurant workers; in Detroit, where far more people would die than in Seattle, San Francisco, and Austin combined; and in the small city of Albany, Georgia, where a single funeral seeded a contagion that led to more than sixty deaths within a few weeks in a county of only 90,000 people. "It hit like a bomb," the county coroner said. "Every day after [the funeral], someone was dying."

No one should have been surprised by the disparity of the impact, because the divides had been there for anyone to see, getting more noticeable by the year, wherever your travels took you. The gaps were everywhere. Between booming Boston and declining industrial cities like Lawrence, Fall River, and Springfield. Between Nashville, the belle of the Upper South, and its poor relation, Memphis.

The country had always had richer and poorer places, but the gaps were growing wider than they had ever been. And as I began to think about this phenomenon and the economic concentration that accompanied it, it became clear that one of the most natural ways to tell the story was through



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Amazon, a company that was playing an outsized role in this zero-sum sorting. To take a closer look not so much at the company itself, exactly—but rather, to take a closer look at the America that fell in the company's lengthening shadow.

"Alec MacGillis is one of the very best reporters in America. By always going his own way, he finds stories and truths that others avoid. *Fulfillment* paints a devastating picture of Amazon, but it also gives human voices to the larger story of our unequal economy and society. *Fulfillment* is an essential book in the literature of America's self-destruction."

—GEORGE PACKER, author of the
National Book Award-winning *The Unwinding*



Installation view of *Pyrrhic Defeat: A Visual Study of Mass Incarceration*, by Mark Loughney, 2014–present

of a series of photographs a few rooms away by an artist who was inspired by his incarcerated uncles. In Larry Cook's *The Visiting Room*, all of his subjects are pointedly turned away from his camera. Confronted with the backs of their heads, I kept moving and fidgeting, trying to get a better view of faces that were physically impossible to see. Making someone's face visible can force you to recognize his humanity, but refusing access to his face—especially in the context of prison's unmitigated surveillance—can force you to recognize his humanity as well, by insisting that you acknowledge how much of him you'll never see or know.

One wall of Loughney's portraits is entirely composed of men wearing masks, that instant visual touchstone of

the coronavirus pandemic. A man in a sleeveless undershirt has a massive eagle tattoo across his chest, his mask creased into slight shadows by his breathing. The eyes of a bald man beside him seem rueful or yearning behind his glasses, and the tied loops of his mask dangle behind his ears. In a formal sense, these masked portraits are forced to do so much with limited access—to work with just the subjects' eyes; to summon, from their gazes alone, a sense of the singular texture of each individual consciousness. The masks on these men are a jarring reminder of simultaneity. They are living through the same pandemic as every museum visitor, but they are living through it in a very different way—their bodies more imperiled, deemed less worthy of protection.

Among all these faces, only one stares at us directly. This man's face is sketched in blue pencil amid rows of faces penciled in plain graphite gray. He is unmasked amid the masks. His eyes are not gazing off into the distance. After a moment of staring at this man's portrait—or rather, meeting his gaze—I realized that it is a self-portrait: the artist's name, Loughney, is faintly visible on the name tag sewn onto his uniform. His eyes stopped me. His gaze didn't invite me into the frame so much as it said: *You're already here.* *A*

Leslie Jamison is the author of Make It Scream, Make It Burn; The Recovering; Intoxication and Its Aftermath; and The Empathy Exams.

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*So there
I was,
staring at
my mug
of tea.*

It was 1993. I was sitting over a plate of eggs in the New Piccadilly Café in Soho, London. Things were not going well. As a man, as a person, as a unit of society, I was barely functioning. More acutely, I was having panic attacks, in an era when people didn't yet say "panic attack." They just said *Oh, dear*. As far as I was concerned, I was going insane.

I took a despairing slurp from my mug, then put it back down. As I did so, the side of my hand touched the Formica tabletop, and I felt the radiant heat from where the mug had been resting a second before. Or, more accurately, I registered it. Through my private cerebral

drizzle—the continuous, joy-canceling brain-rain that was my mental reality at the time—I noted it: energy, life, jiggling molecules, the world. A message from the fire of generosity at the heart of the universe. And the message was this: *One day, you'll be able to simply appreciate what's in front of you.* The tea, the café, London, the little lens of warmth on the table. One day, this will be enough.

Strive for excellence, by all means. My God, *please* strive for excellence. Excellence alone will haul us out of the hogwash. But lower the bar, and keep it low, when it comes to your personal attachment to the world. Gratification? Satisfaction? Having your needs met? Fool's gold. If you can get a buzz of animal cheer from the rubbishy sandwich you're eating, the daft movie you're watching, the highly difficult person you're talking to, you're in business. And when trouble comes, you'll be fitter for it.

"Reality is B-plus," says my friend Carlo. I'd probably give it an A-minus, but I take his point. "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. But there also lives the dearest shoddiness. We're half-finished down here, always building and collapsing, rigging up this and that, dropped hammers and flapping tarps everywhere. Revise your expectations downward. Extend forgiveness to your idiot friends; extend forgiveness to your idiot self. Make it a practice. Come to rest in actuality. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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LOW EXPECTATIONS

By James Parker



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