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THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE
A New Generation Takes On the Struggle

Mychal
Denzel Smith
Rinku Sen
Paula J. Giddings
Dani McClain
Angela Davis
Melissa
Harris-Perry
Letters

Who Wants Pot to Be Illegal?

- Well, of course Big Pharma is against pot: if it were legal to grow one's own medicine in one's backyard—a medicine that is more effective than many painkillers, muscle relaxants and anxiety reducers and has fewer side effects—nobody would buy Big Pharma's high-priced merchandise [Lee Fang, “The Anti-Pot Lobby’s Big Bankroll,” July 21/28]!

- Davids64

- I live in Colorado, where marijuana sales are legal. Our crime rate is down, we have collected over $10 million in taxes, and we have freed the police to concentrate on real crime. Plus pot is safer than any other legal drug out there. Mike

- “One try and it can ruin your life,” says the man who will ruin your life if he catches you trying it. TongueWagger

- Marijuana helps millions of people cope with sickness and pain. OxyContin is a scourge. I've had five friends die from OxyContin. Two more are doing prison time because of their addiction to it. Marijuana has never killed anyone. These companies have a vested interest in keeping cannabis illegal. Jeff Williams

- I went through a twelve-hour back surgery after a wreck. Nothing but pain for two years after. I was on Vicodin—a dreadful way to live. Decided to stop, and went through a week of shakes, pain and vomiting. Pot helped with the pain, but with none of the dreadful addictive consequences. ARangerForLife87

- Police departments, courts, prisons, the DEA and a zillion other agencies feed off the illegal drug trade. With legal weed, we could drastically cut back on those agencies—but none of them want to legalize themselves out of a job. Pjeffy

BDS: Every Little Bit Helps

Noam Chomsky is undoubtedly right that a boycott campaign directed at Israel is not likely to work [“On Israel-Palestine and BDS,” July 21/28]. Nevertheless, his article was such a powerful indictment of Israel's occupation, and of our government’s unstinting support of Israel, that it persuaded me to go on supporting the boycott—whether or not it works. No single tactic will change Israel's ways or break its iron grip on Congress and US public opinion. If Israel can rain down bombs day after day on the poorest and most densely populated strip of territory on earth—killing thousands of people and forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes—and still be defended by President Obama and the mainstream press, obviously much more than a boycott is needed. So in addition to supporting the boycott, I'll go on writing letters to Congress and the White House urging an end to US aid to Israel, and supporting Middle East peace groups. If we keep up the pressure, something someday may work. Meanwhile, thanks to Chomsky for having done his part, and done it so eloquently, for all these years. Rachelle Marshall

On the Beach

I am so pleased that The Nation covered climate change via Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow’s review of five books on the subject [“Endgame?,” July 21/28]. The authors have varying attitudes, from alarmism and pessimism through optimism, fatalism, activism, concern and a vision of apocalypse. The livestock industry and its supporting industries contribute massively to greenhouse-gas accumulation. Re-
The Struggle Renewed

Ferguson, Missouri. Sanford, Florida. Dearborn Heights, Michigan. Oakland. Chicago. Staten Island. The grim roster of cities where police or vigilante violence has resulted in the death of an African-American just keeps growing. The streets of Ferguson have quieted now, after roiling for eleven days with the anguish of protesters demanding justice for Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old who was shot by a police officer on August 9 after being stopped for walking in the street. The police, fortified by a Pentagon program that provides surplus military equipment to civilian law enforcement—with no training requirements and little oversight—responded with riot gear, tear gas and rubber bullets. (President Obama has ordered a review of the program, but any attempt to curb it will be met with resistance.)

Yet it’s not only the deaths that have sparked fury. It’s also the realization on the part of those horrified and traumatized by the killings that many Americans are willing to accept and excuse the state and individual violence visited upon black Americans. We see this acceptance in the grave injustices following these deaths: the police in Ferguson left Brown’s body in the street for hours, without even covering it, and refused to provide details about the shooting, instead releasing misleading information about what precipitated his fatal encounter with the officer. The police in Sanford, Florida, didn’t arrest George Zimmerman until forty-five days after he had killed Trayvon Martin, and a jury later acquitted him of murder and manslaughter. This divide is reflected in the fact that, according to a Pew poll, 80 percent of African-Americans felt that the shooting of Michael Brown raised important issues about race, while only 37 percent of whites did. On one side of the chasm, people are in agony; the other side is acting like there’s nothing wrong at all.

Those who are in agony, however, increasingly know that they are not alone. And the anger sparked by these incidents of inhumanity is no longer isolated. As Mychal Denzel Smith explores in this special issue, young black organizers are laying the groundwork for a new grassroots movement for racial equality, focused on the critical issues facing African-Americans today: not just police brutality but mass incarceration, unemployment, voting rights, educational disparities and more. As the fiftieth anniversary of many of the civil-rights movement’s proudest accomplishments passes, these activists are registering voters, delivering petitions, drafting legislation—and creating community. While many of these groups were born out of the pain of Trayvon Martin’s killing, they aren’t solely focused on that death. Instead, they are developing a democratic, inclusive leadership model that brings a diverse set of concerns to their work.

As this new grassroots network comes into its own, one very prominent voice has joined theirs to call attention to the plight of African-Americans and Latinos. Last February, President Obama launched My Brother’s Keeper, a $300 million initiative to close the “opportunity gaps” facing boys and young men of color. The problem, writes Dani McClain in this issue, is not only that the effort neglects the needs of girls and young women of color, but also that the initiative focuses on changing the behavior of the very people who are victims of discrimination, harassment and violence, rather than confronting its sources. Pressing us all to face and remedy the true causes of the chasm separating white America from black and brown America will be the vital work of this new vanguard of activists.
Teachout for Governor

A vote for a more progressive, idea-driven politics

When Zephyr Teachout announced that she would challenge New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo in the September 9 Democratic primary, many observers shrugged off her campaign as an election-season lark. Cuomo had the money, the connections, the power of incumbency and the famous family name, a combination insiders said was unbeatable. Teachout gave voice to the progressive populist sentiment that is growing across the country—but without the money or party infrastructure to back her up, it was hard to see how she could break through.

But circumstances—some of her own creation, many resulting from Cuomo’s missteps and misdeeds—have conspired to create what The New York Times calls a “Teachout Moment.” A savvy, trust-busting progressive, Teachout has injected some much-needed debate into the election, earning endorsements from the Public Employees Federation as well as the New York chapters of the National Organization for Women and the Sierra Club. She has also begun to impress New Yorkers. By framing her campaign as part of the fight for “the democratic wing of the Democratic Party”—a fight she proudly shares with Elizabeth Warren, Bill de Blasio and others—she has reminded voters that they need not settle for the austerity policies embraced by Cuomo.

We believe New Yorkers who want a more progressive government should vote for Teachout on September 9. The Nation makes this endorsement with the understanding that Teachout may not be able to overcome the political barriers that have been erected, in the state and nationally, to a grassroots, idea-driven campaign. But we believe her candidacy holds out the potential for forging the bold, people-led politics we seek in 2014 and beyond.

A vote for Teachout sends two critical signals. First, it objects to Cuomo’s approach to electioneering and governing, which is too heavy-handed, too top-down, and too prone to cutting ethical corners. While the governor has done some good on issues like marriage equality, his rightward tilt on education and economic issues has crippled New York’s fight against inequality. And Cuomo has stumbled badly when it comes to addressing corruption, as evidenced by the recent revelations that he meddled with the Moreland Commission on Public Corruption, which he created in 2013.

But there’s more to this challenge than legitimate criticism of Cuomo and corruption. Teachout offers an example of what it means to be a progressive Democrat in the twenty-first century. A distinguished academic and activist, she has been in the forefront of advancing progressive reform for nearly two decades. As a professor at Fordham Law School, the author of important books on political and economic policy, a key figure in Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign, and a visionary organizer on behalf of banking and business reforms, she understands that the Democratic Party must move toward progressive populism in order to become more than a tepid alternative to Republican extremism.

Thus, the second signal that a vote for Teachout will send is a demand for change in the Democratic establishment, which cannot continue to dance around the issue of income inequality. It must reject austerity cuts and embrace investment in infrastructure, education and communities, as Teachout and others in the party’s populist wing have. It must recognize the political appeal of battling crony capitalism and corruption. And in the midst of a digital revolution every bit as disruptive as the Industrial Revolution before it, the party’s leadership must recognize the necessity of supporting Net neutrality, ending the digital divide and expanding broadband Internet access—issues that Teachout and her running mate for lieutenant governor, Tim Wu, have highlighted.

A victory by Teachout and Wu would be a dramatic upset—one with the potential to overturn political calculations nationwide. But even a respectable finish could illustrate the strength of the progressive base and keep the proposals that Teachout and Wu have been fighting for alive.

The battle to create progressive change goes well beyond any one candidate or campaign, and it demands the development of institutional and independent power to the left of the Democratic Party—power that can prod politicians like Cuomo to govern on behalf of the people who elect them. One source of this power has long been the Working Families Party. If Teachout doesn’t win the Democratic nomination, we ask her to publicly encourage her supporters to vote the WFP line as part of a strategy to strengthen progressive politics.

There was much frustration with the WFP’s decision to endorse Cuomo over Teachout at its convention in May. But the WFP didn’t endorse Cuomo casually. The governor had to make significant concessions in order to secure the party’s line: he committed to raise the minimum wage, fight for the public financing of campaigns, and support genuine Democratic control of the State Senate, which would at last enable New York to pass a progressive agenda. That is the WFP strategy, and it has made state politics far more responsive to masses of New Yorkers.

The work of building a more progressive politics will be strengthened, in our view, by voting for Zephyr Teachout for governor on September 9. She is a credible challenger who has advanced a vital vision for her party and her state.
An icon of the Black Power movement, Angela Davis has led a life of resistance to injustice. This interview took place over several months and has been condensed.

—Frank Barat

FRANK BARAT: You often talk about the importance of movements rather than individuals. How can we do that in a society that promotes individualism as a sacred concept?

ANGELA DAVIS: Even as Nelson Mandela always insisted that his accomplishments were collective—also achieved by the men and women who were his comrades—the media attempted to sanctify him as a heroic individual. A similar process has attempted to dissociate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from the vast numbers of women and men who constituted the very heart of the mid-twentieth-century US freedom movement. It is essential to resist the depiction of history as the work of heroic individuals in order for people today to recognize their potential agency as a part of an ever-expanding community of struggle.

FB: What is the significance today of the Black Power movement?

AD: I think of Black Power—or what we referred to at the time as the “black liberation movement”—as a particular moment in the quest for black freedom. In many ways, it was a response to what were perceived as the limitations of the civil-rights movement: we needed to claim not only legal rights, but also substantive rights—jobs, housing, healthcare, education, etc.—and to challenge the very structure of society. Such demands were summed up in the ten-point program of the Black Panther Party. Although black individuals have entered economic, social and political hierarchies, the overwhelming number of black people are subject to economic, educational and carceral racism to a far greater extent than during the pre-civil-rights era. In many ways, the demands of the BPP’s ten-point program are just as relevant—perhaps even more relevant—as during the 1960s.

FB: How would you define black feminism and its role today?

AD: Black feminism emerged as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit. At the time of its emergence, black women were frequently asked to choose whether the black movement or the women’s movement was most important. This was the wrong question. The more appropriate question was how to understand the intersections and interconnections between the two movements. We are still faced with the challenge of understanding the complex ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, nation and ability are intertwined—but also how we move beyond these categories to understand the interrelationships of ideas and processes that seem to be separate and unrelated.

FB: What does the prison-industrial complex say about society?

AD: The soaring number of people behind bars all over the world and the increasing profitability of holding them captive is one of the most dramatic examples of the destructive tendencies of global capitalism. The prison-industrial complex includes not only private and public prisons but also juvenile facilities, military prisons and interrogation centers. Moreover, the most profitable sector of the private-prison business is composed of immigrant detention centers. One can therefore understand why the most repressive anti-immigrant legislation in the United States was drafted by private-prison companies.

FB: When was the last time you were in Palestine, and what were your impressions?

AD: I traveled to Palestine in June 2011 with a delegation of indigenous women and women of color, feminist scholar/activists. Even though we had all been previously involved in Palestine solidarity activism, all of us were utterly shocked by what we saw, and we resolved to encourage our constituencies to join the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement and to help intensify the campaign for a free Palestine.

FB: How would you respond if I said the struggle is endless?

AD: I would say that as our struggles mature, they produce new ideas, new issues and new terrain on which we engage in the quest for freedom. Like Nelson Mandela, we must be willing to embrace the long walk toward freedom.

The demands of the Black Panther Party’s ten-point program are just as relevant today as during the 1960s.
Robert Sherrill, 1924–2014

A man who never kissed ass.

Robert Sherrill, who wrote at least 130 signed articles for this magazine, died on August 19 at age 89. This former college English teacher, amateur painter and poet was a passionate purist in his prose, his populist politics, and his expectations of others and himself. I first got to know Bob by serving as his sometime editor at The New York Times Magazine. (Conflict-of-interest alert: at a critical moment, he sent James Storrow Jr., The Nation’s then-owner/publisher, a billet-doux telling him he’d be a fool not to hire me, so I owe him.) Sherrill’s advice to me when I became editor of this magazine in 1978: “If you ever publish anything in The Nation that could appear in The New York Times Magazine, you are not doing your job.”

Sherrill, who wrote for everyone from I.F. Stone’s Weekly and The Washington Post to Playboy, was first brought to The Nation in 1964 by editor Carey McWilliams, whom he (with good reason) revered. Because Sherrill had been banned from the White House as a security risk—he had punched out the governor of Florida’s press secretary—I was pleased to bestow the title of White House correspondent on him after I came to the magazine. Bob later became our corporations correspondent and—contrary to the New York Times obit, which reported that he left The Nation in 1982—wrote for the magazine until the early 2000s. (For many years Sherrill lived with his first wife, Mary—whom he repeatedly credited with doing the bulk of his research—in Tallahassee, Florida, on Old Dirt Road. I always wondered whether Bob, who was born in Frogtown, Georgia, moved there because he liked that street address.)

I loved Robert Sherrill, but I should quickly add that it would take the higher math to count the number of “I quit” letters he wrote during my years at the mag. My favorite concluded: “You are an eastern liberal… I’m a western anarchist…. But I think I hate corporations much better than you do…and I know damned well that I hate politicians better than you do, though the hatred is downright gutter…. And don’t make me a contributing editor. That is the dumbest and most meaningless title ever concocted by a profession that spends half its time doing dumb and meaningless things. Just take me off the masthead. You know I wish you well indeed.”

Once, objecting to a Nation editorial he regarded as elitist because, in Bob’s reading, it advocated teaching kids how to think as opposed to demanding that they master their ABCs, he sent me a note based on the (to him, generous) assumption that I hadn’t written it, which included the following: “THE EDITOR OF THE NATION IS THE NATION. I’ve said that a thousand times (that’s an understatement) to you, but because you are too fucking soft for your own good, or the good of the magazine, you prefer to turn policy-making over to a bunch of elitist nitwits. That’s the second time I’ve used the word elitist. If I had the time, I would write it a million times.”

In case you haven’t figured it out, Sherrill had what his buddy and fellow Nation writer Molly Ivins called a “cantankerous” temperament. Decades before he died, Molly proposed that his epitaph read: HERE LIES A MAN WHO NEVER KISSED ASS. His usual reaction to anything saccharine, she pointed out, was “It makes me puke!”

Bob had a healthy disrespect for both publishers and publishing conventions. His answer to his pub-
Are the Companies in Your Portfolio Paying Their Fair Share of Taxes?

In 1952, 32% of U.S. federal tax revenues came from corporate income tax. By 2012, corporate income tax had shrunk to only 8.9%, and today the headlines are filled with stories of aggressive corporate strategies to minimize or eliminate their taxes entirely, primarily through the use of offshore tax havens. Countries around the world are losing billions in tax revenues, all in the name of shareholder value.

Tax is an investment in society. What is our return on investment?

Corporations and investors depend upon government services funded by tax revenues, including law enforcement, market regulation, judicial systems, infrastructure maintenance, public education, poverty alleviation, environmental protection and national defense. These indispensable services cannot be funded by corporate philanthropy or a rise in share price.

Economist Joseph Stiglitz warns that corporate tax avoidance threatens the wellspring of “future innovation and growth.” Other economists have documented the critical and visionary role governments have played in spurring scientific and technological innovation when private investors were unwilling to take the risk. Companies like Google and Apple owe much of their success to taxpayer funded scientific research.

You can’t have it both ways. Ultimately, corporate tax avoidance is a threat to government and rule of law. No investor, or company, can succeed for very long without a functioning government and legal system.

Investors need to speak up and end this global race to the bottom. At Domini, we are asking companies to adopt ethical principles to guide their tax strategies, considering their impact on society and brand value, just as they have with bribery, child labor and climate change.

It’s the responsible thing to do.
Publishers' preference for short, snappy titles included such books as *Military Justice Is to Justice as Military Music Is to Music* and his definitive work on handguns, *The Saturday Night Special: And Other Guns With Which Americans Won the West, Protected Bootleg Franchises, Slew Wildlife, Robbed Countless Banks, Shot Husbands Purposely and by Mistake, and Killed Presidents—Together With the Debate Over Continuing Same.*

Among his pieces for *The Nation* were take-no-prisoners profiles of Rupert Murdoch (“Citizen Murdoch: Buying His Way to a Media Empire,” May 29, 1995) and Roy Cohn (“King Cohn,” May 21, 1988), and his hilarious and dispositively documented exposés of Wall Street chicanery, criminal and otherwise (including the November 19, 1990, special issue on “The Looting Decade: S&Ls, Big Banks and Other Triumphs of Capitalism”). But it is folly to try to capture Robert Sherrill in a few hundred words, so let me end by quoting the man himself. These lines are from a review, reprinted in an anthology of *The Nation’s* best, that Katrina vanden Heuvel put together before she became editor. After inventoring some corporate products that kill, maim or otherwise injure the consumer, he counsels the reader: “Go corner your senators and congressmen and threaten to tie them down and force-feed them coal dust, lint… and asbestos.”

**Go corner your senators and congressmen and threaten to tie them down and force-feed them coal dust, lint… and asbestos.**

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SNAPSHOT/LUCAS JACKSON

**“Hands Up, Don’t Shoot!”**

Running through a parking lot in Ferguson, Missouri, scrawled with messages dedicated to Michael Brown, a young boy smiles for the camera. From 2006 to 2012, a white police officer killed a black person at least twice a week in the United States.

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BACK ISSUES/1965

**It’s the Racism, Stupid**

During what was so euphemistically labeled the “unrest” in Ferguson, Missouri, *The Washington Post* interviewed Barbara Arnwine, a civil-rights attorney who, as a teenager, witnessed the 1965 riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles. “We’re in a time warp,” Arnwine told the *Post*. “Watts was bad, but this is the worst thing I’ve seen.”

In an August 1965 editorial about Watts, *The Nation’s* editor, Carey McWilliams—a longtime California watcher—wrote that “a feverish search for scapegoats is now under way…. Predictably the forthcoming investigation ordered by Governor [Pat] Brown will stress the same tiresome clichés: police brutality, inadequate leadership, The Heat, slum conditions. All the while the truth about Watts is right there in front of people, in plain boldface type, for all to read; so simple that it is incredible. The hatred and violence of race riots is triggered by contempt, and of all forms of contempt the most intolerable is non-recognition, the general unawareness that a minority is festering in squalor. Until the riots began, Watts had simply been forgotten by the encompassing ‘white’ community…. The sad fact is that most race riots have brought some relief and improvement in race relations and the Los Angeles riots will not be an exception.”

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DEEP POCKETS

Calvin Trillin

**Deadline Poet**

For parts of Iraq where our soldiers have died, The ISIS jihadists are serious contenders. So goes the resistance that Rumsfeld described As nothing but pockets of hopeless dead-enders.

---

VICTOR NAVASKY

“Go corner your senators and congressmen and threaten to tie them down and force-feed them coal dust, lint… and asbestos.”
The Birth of the Modern Mind: The Intellectual History of the 17th and 18th Centuries

Taught by Professor Alan Charles Kors
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Role Model for Resistance

Obama wanted to model a safe respectability, but Ferguson had other ideas.

The protests in Ferguson, Missouri, after police officer Darren Wilson killed unarmed teen Michael Brown were Barack Obama’s fault. This is not a claim about law enforcement’s continued militarization under his administration. The federal government has been engaged in arming local police with the weapons of war for more than a decade. Further, the White House must be credited with announcing a decision to review the distribution of army surplus to local police forces and to consider limiting it in the future.

This is also not a claim about the president’s decision to remain ensconced on the golf courses of Martha’s Vineyard as unrest exploded in Missouri’s streets. The optics of a vacationing president set against the breathtaking images of local police bearing down on American citizens with riot gear were discordant and deeply troubling. So too were the president’s lukewarm equivocations. But the administration must be credited with deploying Attorney General Eric Holder to the scene. Holder’s visit successfully conveyed the seriousness of federal authorities seeking both to calm the immediate crisis and to pursue justice in the case of Michael Brown.

This is not a claim about the president’s inability to rein in the provocative choices of his fellow Democrat, Governor Jay Nixon. Surely Obama must have known that imposing a curfew on protesters and calling up the National Guard would ignite the righteous rage of organizers. Perhaps he bears political culpability for not dissuading the tone-deaf Missouri governor from escalating the crisis. But, ultimately, if any national Democrats are responsible for foisting Jay Nixon into the office from which he could make those choices, it’s Bill and Hillary Clinton, who have been public supporters of Nixon and cozy partners with him for years.

Still, despite Obama’s equivocations—and also somewhat against his will—the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, were his fault. And he should be proud.

The people of Ferguson and those in solidarity with them took to the streets within a context of racial repression broader than just one horrific shooting. Between 2005 and 2012, African-Americans have been killed by white police officers at the rate of nearly twice a week. In the month preceding Brown’s slaying, police in this country killed at least four unarmed black men. And in a state like Missouri, African-American drivers are the targets of 92 percent of vehicle searches conducted by police, even though illegal items are found in less than 25 percent of these searches.

The fact that Barack Obama is the president of the United States is the most tangible daily reminder that black people are full citizens of the United States, endowed with the same inalienable rights as their fellow Americans, and capable of exerting their political will to bring forth the political and policy outcomes they prefer. President Obama is the contemporary embodiment of the astonishing possibilities of black citizenship. He can be faulted—or rather credited—with helping ignite the refusal of black citizens to be relegated to second-class status in the wake of Brown’s slaying.

Senator Obama was a long shot when he chose to challenge the powerful Clinton machine for the Democratic nomination. He triumphed because of strategy, audacity and the overwhelming support of ordinary black voters, even when they chose him against the advice of their longtime elected officials, who remained firmly in Clinton’s camp. That experience was an object lesson for black Americans: they could choose for themselves. Perhaps that memory was embedded in those who resisted the curfew imposed by a Democratic governor as their black congressman stood at his side.

During the 2008 general election, Senator Obama rarely spoke about racism directly, but he endured it and bore up under it. Indeed, he inspired a multiracial, intergenerational coalition that included states of the former Confederacy to carry him into the White House. He brought along with him the symbolic possibility of full inclusion. In 2012, President Obama’s re-election in the context of massive efforts to suppress African-American voters made it clear that black people were unwilling to cede the ground they had gained in asserting their political will.

No matter what his policies, his politics or his...
public pronouncements, Barack Obama changed the relationship of African-Americans to the American state. Even as they were forced to endure the images of Michael Brown’s lifeless body lying in the street for hours, many black Americans see in President Obama’s living presence in the halls of power a stark reminder that another outcome is possible for black men if their communities refuse to be silenced.

Since his early days on the national scene, many have wanted Barack Obama to serve as a role model for black people. Obama himself has embraced this calling, launching My Brother’s Keeper as his presidential legacy project [see McClain, page 18]. Through My Brother’s Keeper, he hopes to model a careful conformity to the narrow rules of good behavior: commitment to education, decent employment and other middle-class achievement markers. But along the way, he has modeled something he may not have intended.

The election of Barack Obama is a model of what’s possible when black people refuse to stay in their assigned places, when they demand more say in the system. He is president less because of his individual accomplishments than because his community was determined to see him assume a position of power. They mobilized repeatedly on his behalf even when they were told not to. (Emanuel Cleaver and John Lewis both backed Hillary Clinton in 2008 and were overcome by their constituencies.) Michael Brown’s community learned these lessons well.

Despite his best efforts to be the embodiment of respectability, it turns out Barack Obama is a role model for resistance. Yes we can.
THE KILLING OF TRAYVON MARTIN INSPIRED BLACK MILLENNIALS TO REVIVE A NATIONAL GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT.

by MYCHAL DENZEL SMITH
On July 13, 2013, George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American 17-year-old walking home from a 7-Eleven. What The Washington Post and other media outlets had dubbed “the trial of the century” was over, with a deeply unsettling verdict. In the fifteen months between Trayvon’s death and the beginning of the trial, people across the country had taken to the streets, as well as to newspapers, television and social media, to decry the disregard for young black lives in America. For them—for us—this verdict was confirmation.

A group of 100 black activists, ranging in age from 18 to 35, had gathered in Chicago that same weekend. They had come together at the invitation of Cathy J. Cohen, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and the author of Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics, and her organization, the Black Youth Project. Launched in 2004, the group was born as a research project to study African-American youth; in the decade since then, Cohen has turned the BYP into an activist organization. The plan for this meeting was to discuss movement building beyond electoral politics. Young black voters turned out in record numbers in the 2008 and ’12 elections: 55 percent of black 18-to-24-year-olds voted in 2008, an 8 percent increase from 2004, and while a somewhat smaller number—49 percent—voted in 2012, they still outpaced their white counterparts. But how would young black voters hold those they had put in office accountable? And what were their demands?

This group, coming together under the banner Black Youth Project 100 (“BYP100” for short), was tasked with figuring that out. As with any large gathering, people disagreed, cliques were formed, and tensions began to mount. The organizers struggled to build consensus within this diverse group of academics, artists and activists. And then George Zimmerman was acquitted. The energy in the room changed.

“A moment of trauma can oftentimes present you with an opportunity to do something about the situation to prevent that trauma from happening again,” said Charlene Carruthers, one of the activists at the conference.

Carruthers, a Chicago native, has been an organizer for more than ten years, starting as a student at Wesleyan University. She has led grassroots and digital campaigns for, among others, the Women’s Media Center, National People’s Action and ColorofChange.org. She heard all types of sounds emanating from the people in the room that day, from crying to screaming. “I don’t believe the pain was a result, necessarily, of shock because Zimmerman was found not guilty,” Carruthers said, “but of yet another example...of an injustice being validated by the state—something that black people were used to.”

Some members of BYP100 went into the streets of downtown Chicago and led a rally. Others stayed behind and drafted the group’s first collective statement. Addressed to “the Family of Brother Trayvon Martin and to the Black Community,” it read in part: “When we heard ‘not guilty,’ our hearts broke collectively. In that moment, it was clear that Black life had no value. Emotions poured out—emotions that are real, natural and normal, as we grieved for Trayvon and his stolen humanity. Black people, WE LOVE AND SEE YOU.”

The group recorded a reading of the letter and released the video on July 14, one day after the verdict. “That was the catalyst,” Carruthers said, “that cemented [the idea] that the people in that room had to do something collectively moving forward.”

The police department in Sanford, Florida, was slow to act in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s killing. It took forty-five days for the police to arrest George Zimmerman; although he had admitted to killing Trayvon and had been brought in for questioning the night of the shooting, the police appeared to have accepted his word that he’d shot Trayvon in self-defense and failed to charge him. As the weeks passed, thousands of people took to the streets in frustration. One of them was Phillip Agnew, who worked at the time as a pharmaceutical sales representative. Along with a couple of friends, he organized a group of college students and recent graduates from across Florida for a three-day, forty-mile march from Daytona Beach to Sanford to demand justice for Trayvon. When the marchers arrived, Agnew said, the police sat down with some members of the group, who demanded that they arrest George Zimmerman and form a blue-ribbon commission to investigate the shooting. The department’s response was to shut the police station down for the day. “That march solidified our bonds,” Agnew said. Shortly thereafter, he organized a conference call with nearly 200 other activists to discuss how to pressure the police to arrest Zimmerman. This was the start of the Dream Defenders.

The day the verdict was announced, Agnew was in Miami, having dinner at a neighbor’s house. Like so many others, he had followed the trial intently. Agnew got back home just as the verdict came in. “I saw George Zimmerman celebrating, and I remember just feeling a huge, huge, huge... collapse,” he said. “I’ll never forget that moment...because we didn’t even expect that verdict to come down that night, and definitely didn’t expect for it to be not guilty.”

The injustice of the acquittal shook the Dream Defenders, and on Sunday morning, members of the group con-
vened in Tallahassee, where they occupied the state capitol building. “We thought of the tactic before we even thought of what we were going to demand,” Agnew said. Initially, that didn’t matter: their mere presence in the capitol was enough to garner national media attention. Civil-rights legends like Jesse Jackson, Harry Belafonte and Julian Bond joined them, as well as hip-hop artist Talib Kweli.

“But we knew we had to go to a seat of power and confront a person or a body of people that could give us what we wanted.” Over the course of the monthlong protest, the Dream Defenders crafted “Trayvon’s Law,” an ambitious package of bills calling for an end to the school-to-prison pipeline and racial profiling, as well as the repeal of “Stand Your Ground,” the self-defense law that had come under scrutiny after Trayvon’s death. While the bills were not introduced, the Dream Defenders met with several supportive legislators to discuss them.

AS A NATION, WE FIND OURSELVES CELEBRATING the fiftieth anniversary of many of the achievements of the civil-rights generation, which won major legal victories against institutionalized American racism. We have commemorated (or will soon) the March on Washington, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Civil-rights leaders of the 1950s and ’60s have become the African-American version of the Greatest Generation: throughout my childhood, I was taught to revere them. Each generation of African-Americans born after this period owes its opportunities for success to the brave men and women who organized on the front lines of violent racism and oppression to secure even a semblance of freedom.

But as I got older, the message became less about respecting our elders for their sacrifices and more about chastising my generation for not doing more. We were selfish and apathetic. Why hadn’t we lived up to the standard set by our civil-rights-era forebears?

Despite its undeniable impact, the civil-rights movement didn’t solve the issue of racial injustice. The world that young black people have inherited is one rife with race-based disparities. By the age of 23, almost half of the black men in this country have been arrested at least once, 30 percent by the age of 18. The unemployment rate for black 16-to-24-year-olds is around 25 percent. Twelve percent of black girls face out-of-school suspension, a higher rate than for all other girls and most boys. Black women are incarcerated at a rate nearly three times that of white women. While black people make up 14.6 percent of total regular drug users, they are 31.2 percent of those arrested on drug charges and are likely to receive longer sentences. According to a report issued by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, which used police data as well as newspaper reports, in 2012, a black person lost his or her life in an extrajudicial killing at the hands of a police officer, security guard or self-appointed vigilante like George Zimmerman every twenty-eight hours.

Carruthers and Agnew, both 29, are members of that post-civil-rights-generation, as am I. We millennials are charged with continuing the fight against the system of racism that has been the defining component of the black American experience for centuries. We come after civil rights, after Black Power and after the hip-hop generation. And the perception that millennials are apathetic isn’t entirely fair. We protested the war in Iraq. We volunteered our time in clean-up efforts after Hurricane Katrina. We took to the streets in support of the Jena Six. And we’ve joined organizations fighting for progressive causes. But this work had been taking place in isolated pockets. What millennials had yet to achieve was the formation of a sustainable national movement.

Then Trayvon Martin was killed. Protests sprang up all across the country, and his name became a rallying cry. Trayvon’s death ignited something durable in a considerable number of black youth. Whatever apathy had existed before was replaced by the urge to act, to organize and to fight. Millennials were ready to build their movement.

THE DEMISE OF THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY in the mid-1970s left a void in black political organizing. The Panthers weren’t without problems (the sexist nature of their leadership was a big one), but they represented the last gasps of a national black organizing that combined radical political education, direct action, youth engagement and community services. In the years since, racial-justice groups have struggled to effect change as profound as they managed to achieve during the heyday of the civil-rights and Black Power movements. The Rev. Al Sharpton’s National Action Network is mostly visible to the extent that Sharpton is able to leverage his own platform and personality for the causes he cares about. The same is true of the Rev. Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow PUSH Coalition. Until Benjamin Jealous took over as president in 2008, the NAACP—the nation’s oldest civil-rights organization—was battling perceptions of irrelevance. Under Jealous’s leadership, the NAACP changed course, but the question lingered as to whether it was equipped to fight the new challenges faced by black America. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement has existed since 1993 without much fanfare; the National Hip-Hop Political Convention, started in 2004, fizzled. “The times we live in,” Carruthers said, “call for a resurgence of national black-liberation organizing.”

This past May, I traveled to Chicago for the “Freedom Dreams, Freedom Now!” conference, hosted by a number of organizations, including BYP100, on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago. The conference was intended as an “intergenerational, interactive gathering”...
of scholars, artists and activists commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer and discussing contemporary social-justice organizing. The opening plenary featured a keynote address by Julian Bond, a co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and former board chair of the NAACP. He presented a history of Freedom Summer, the SNCC-led movement to register voters and get black people to the polls in Mississippi, before a premiere screening of the PBS documentary Freedom Summer, directed by Stanley Nelson.

But the aim of the conference wasn’t just to reminisce. It was a precursor to Freedom Side, a collective that includes members of BYP100, the Dream Defenders and United We Dream, an immigrant-youth-led organization, as well as more established groups like the NAACP and AFL-CIO. Before the conference, as part of the Freedom Summer celebration, the Dream Defenders hosted “freedom schools” throughout Florida, talking to young people about criminalization, mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline. Voter registration drives were also held across the country.

The day after the conference ended, BYP100 hosted an organizer-training event at the University of Chicago. Early on, the attendees were split into two groups, and the two sides engaged each other in a call-and-response chant that referenced historical greats like Nat Turner, Angela Davis, Ida B. Wells, Mumia Abu-Jamal and Fred Hampton. But even as they paid homage to their history...
in song, these young activists had their eyes on the future. Members led sessions on personal narratives in organizing, how to handle interactions with police officers, and building political power.

I think we’re seeing different types of organizing [taking] shape, and I think we’re going to continue to see that—especially with the evolution of social media and technology,” said Dante Barry, deputy director of the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice. The group was founded in 2012 by Daniel Maree, who is responsible for creating a Change.org petition calling for a criminal investigation into Trayvon Martin’s death. It collected over 2 million signatures—at the time, the fastest-growing petition ever on the Internet. Barry, 26, joined the Million Hoodies Movement in October 2013. He points out that if not for social media, Trayvon Martin’s death could have languished in obscurity.

While the audiences for these new groups may not be larger than the older ones”—the Dream Defenders has more than 27,000 Twitter followers; the NAACP has over 74,000—the newer groups use Twitter to hear from, not just talk to, their members. The Dream Defenders hosts Twitter discussions about its key issues, including gun violence, the criminalization of black youth and the prison-

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ON MULTIRACIAL ORGANIZING

BY RINKU SEN

In the first campaign I ran as a young organizer, I worked with fifty homeless families, the vast majority of them African-American, who were trying to escape a slumlike welfare hotel in San Francisco for subsidized permanent housing. Several weeks in, I was scouting out the hotel owner’s neighborhood for an action with a 19-year-old campaign member named Aaron, which meant long hours sitting in my car. After we exchanged life stories, Aaron asked me, “What are you doing here with us? You’re supposed to be with them.”

By “them,” he meant his Indian immigrant landlords, who had a lucrative deal housing families in vermin-infested rooms with broken toilets and no refrigerators for months at a time. I finally said something about how angry injustice made me. And I thought about the difference between Aaron and me for the next twenty years.

For much of that time, I helped build multiracial community organizations across the country. At the beginning of my career, I’d often tell diverse groups of people, “We’re all in the same boat”—that is, we’re all hated by the same people, and our fortunes will rise or fall together. This rhetoric resonated, at first. For a couple of years, members would focus on their commonalities rather than their differences. But eventually, fissures would emerge, usually over the benefits of our organizing. Whose demands got priority? Whose social networks got the most attention? Who got the few organizing jobs that our groups generated?

I came to realize that the “same boat” argument didn’t hold up. Racial hierarchy is not a binary in which all whites occupy the lead boat and all people of color occupy the one left behind. Instead, it’s a ladder, with groups occupying different rungs of political, economic and cultural power. The gaps between rungs can seem minor—a few cents on the dollar at work, a few blocks’ difference in where you’re able to live—but to those who are affected by them, they don’t feel like being in the same boat. And blacks often find themselves on the bottom rung.

This is not to say that there isn’t plenty of discrimination directed against Asians, Arabs, Latinos and Native people. But studies revealing the depth of anti-black bias abound—basically, people would prefer almost anyone other than blacks as neighbors and employees.

Racist ideology relies on maintaining hierarchies, and these hierarchies play out in our own political spaces, too—even when we intend the opposite; even when we think we’ll be immune because we’re people of color ourselves. Groups that can deal with the notion of racial hierarchy, even as it applies among and between people of color, are most likely to have significant black participation too.

Groups that are multiracial except for black people have the ability to self-select. Both the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and the National Domestic Workers Alliance had few African-American members in their early years (although the NDWA always had lots of black immigrants). In the restaurant industry, blacks were relegated to fast food, not the high-end restaurants on which ROC United focused; in domestic work, immigrants dominated the workforce. But both groups made significant changes to bring blacks in. ROC United focused on discrimination, deprioritizing several potential campaigns that didn’t address discrimination against black workers, until it found a pattern of anti-black hiring combined with wage theft at Darden Restaurants, which owned Red Lobster, Olive Garden and the high-end Capital Grille. The NDWA, meanwhile, started an Atlanta chapter, whose membership is entirely black.

Yet involving African-Americans in progressive movements isn’t always about their joining something multiracial. Organized black communities are critical to multiracial power-building; they deserve much more support from the progressive infrastructure. An exciting development in the workers’ center movement is the growth of workers’ centers and campaigns that centralize the leadership of native-born blacks. Groups like the Los Angeles Black Worker Center, the Workers Center for Racial Justice in Chicago and One Voice in Mississippi organize black communities to win access to construction jobs as well as policies that prevent employers from asking about convictions in the application process.

After the 1970s, much black organizing energy was redirected into administering the victories of the civil-rights and Black Power movements. While vital, this meant a focus on protecting wins, not maintaining a movement.

That’s why the organizing by black millennials is so important: it changes the equation of power.

There is no contradiction between the desire to build a multiracial movement and the desire to organize black folk specifically. We are all one race or another, and we must be explicit about each community we include. Differences are going to emerge. Knowledge of those differences can be a source of clarity and strategy, if we are brave enough to see them as such. 

Rinku Sen is the president of Race Forward and the publisher of Colorlines.com.
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The Nation on

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The Obama administration has proposed a national racial-justice initiative, but it’s focused exclusively on boys and men.

On a Saturday morning in mid-July, about seventy-five recent high school graduates and college underclassmen—all young black men—crowded into the Laney College student center in downtown Oakland, California. Some were accompanied by parents, mostly their mothers. Some wore red button-up shirts and black ties that marked them as members of the Striving Black Brothers Coalition, a group that provides mentorship to young African-American men attending a nearby community college. One wore a letterman-style jacket issued by another college-prep program geared toward black youth. Embroidered on the back was a question: What if the prince dared to be king?

The princes in question had been convened by the College Bound Brotherhood, an organization that connects black boys and young men in the Bay Area to scholarships and peer support. They spent the day hearing from a former college-football star as well as admissions officers from the University of California—all men of color. Meanwhile, their parents attended sessions on financial aid and traded tips on dorm move-ins and care packages. The young men learned how much time to spend on homework (two hours for every one hour of studying), the best place to sit in a classroom (never farther back than the third row), and how many community-college credits are required before a student is eligible to transfer to the UC system (sixty). Monique Johnson, whose 17-year-old son recently graduated...
from nearby San Rafael High School and will be attending the California Maritime Academy, considered all of this a godsend.

“Where else are you going to have a room full of African-American men of this age who are not in trouble, who are doing the right thing?” she asked me. “And their parents are here,” she added, “so this debunks every myth that you’ve heard.”

Debunking “every myth that you’ve heard” about black and Latino boys and young men is a goal of the Obama administration’s My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative, which seeks to close the “opportunity gaps” faced by boys and young men of color. Not since Bill Clinton tried—and failed—to launch an initiative on race during his second term has a president called attention to the persistent racial disparities in health, wealth, education, incarceration and more. This time around, the effort involves more than holding town halls and issuing reports: My Brother’s Keeper has partnered with foundations, which will allocate $200 million for the initiative, as well as corporations like AT&T, UBS and JPMorgan Chase, which have pledged $100 million in additional financial support.

Many racial-justice advocates have welcomed President Obama’s attention, and the funding that comes with it. But since it was launched in February, My Brother’s Keeper has met with a firestorm of criticism in opinion pieces, on cable news shows and in two highly publicized open letters. On Twitter, opponents have adopted the hashtag #WhyWeCan’tWait—referring to the 1964 book by Martin Luther King Jr. that grew out of his “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”—as their rallying cry. The crux of these critics’ argument: if the Obama administration’s sole racial-justice initiative focuses exclusively on boys and men, then girls and women of color—who are part of the same disadvantaged families, classrooms and communities—find themselves ignored.

The African American Policy Forum (AAPF), a think tank led by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, has taken the lead in harnessing a response. It organized the two open letters—one signed by more than 200 black men, and the other by more than 1,000 women of color—and hosted public conference calls. On one such call in early July, Kristie Dotson, a signer and philosophy professor at Michigan State University, put the question succinctly: “Are black girls genuinely part of the black community?”

At the heart of My Brother’s Keeper is a questionable assumption: that the key to developing stronger families and communities is to create more successful (and thus more marriageable) young men. MBK’s proponents argue that boys and young men of color lag uniquely far behind their white and female counterparts, but they fail to explain how improving the boys’ success will address the myriad challenges faced by black and Latina girls and young women. For example, black girls and women age 10 to 24 are murdered at rates higher than any other group of girls or women. Black girls are three times more likely than white girls to be suspended from school. The
median wealth of single black mothers is $100 and $120 for Latina single mothers; it’s $45,400 for white single moms. Also, black and Latino students—girls and boys alike—have made almost no progress in twelfth-grade reading scores in the past two decades and still trail behind white students.

Supporters of My Brother’s Keeper counter that this administration does have an initiative aimed at females: the White House Council on Women and Girls. But the council’s chief purpose is to act as a clearinghouse for research on this demographic. It lacks the private funding that gives MBK the potential to make an impact. It also lacks a focus on communities of color.

Indeed, very little foundation funding is directed to communities of color in the first place. According to a 2013 Foundation Center report, organizations serving people of color receive only 9 percent of grant allocations. Nor is My Brother’s Keeper the only instance in which boys and men have been made the focus of funding efforts to the exclusion of girls. It builds on a coordinated philanthropic focus that began in the 1990s and was ramped up in 2006, after The New York Times published a front-page article highlighting research on the unique challenges facing black men.

Organizations and individuals receiving grants from the foundations now central to My Brother’s Keeper argue that while the social and economic indicators for girls and young women of color may be bleak, boys and men in these communities can’t afford to wait either. In the pro-MBK camp’s opinion, attempting to hold up an initiative that’s already under way is a risky proposition—especially when the nation’s first black president is championing it. Marc Philpart, associate director of PolicyLink and director of PolicyLink’s Boys and Men of Color Team, argues that the criticism of MBK could have real consequences. “It might become a political hot potato, and nobody picks it up after the president,” says Philpart, who also works with a statewide boys and men of color network convened by the California Endowment, another foundation providing financial backing to MBK. “Critics have been overly harsh and created an air of negativity that helps neither their cause or My Brother’s Keeper. It’s a nascent movement. In situations like that, the goal should be to bring people into the fold and not push them away.”

Alicia Dixon is executive director of the Marcus Foster Education Fund, one of three organizations that run the College Bound Brotherhood. (Another is the Kaapor Center for Social Impact, one of the eleven foundations central to MBK.) Dixon is also an African-American single mother of three boys. She says she understands the perspective of those who have signed the AAPF’s letters, but she’s firm in her belief that the data comparing men and boys to women and girls prove that young black men are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to educational attainment. Young black men complete college at rates lower than any other racial or ethnic group, regardless of sex, according to a 2012 study. Whereas 68.5 and 65.9 percent of black women are awarded associate’s and bachelor’s degrees, respectively, only about a third of black men achieve either. “I get all of that debate,” Dixon tells me. “I just think it’s important that we not get distracted.”

These disparities help explain why foundations made education their top funding priority for black boys and men between 2008 and 2010, according to a 2012 Foundation Center report. In those two years, 40 percent of grant dollars that went to this demographic supported education-related projects.

According to the proponents of such initiatives, programs tailored to meet the specific needs of African-American males will create a ripple effect that reaches other groups. As Dixon puts it: “We think all boats will rise.” Proponents of MBK say the success of programs developed now through grants to support boys and young men of color could lead to the development of future programs targeting other groups, like young Latina women or teenage African-American girls. But to do that, Philpart says, MBK needs to develop without a barrage of criticism from people within the black and social justice communities. When I ask him if he can understand why many women aren’t content to wait for the ripples to reach them, he responds: “I don’t think anybody is asking women to wait. My Brother’s Keeper is great. Let it be that, and women should have a separate initiative. By making My Brother’s Keeper something else and broadening it, you lose the targeting that you want out of a situation like this.”

Sometimes the ripple effect is immediate, asserts Michaèle Stephenson, a producer and director of the documentary American Promise, which aired on PBS earlier this year. By Stephenson’s estimate, the Open Society Foundations’ Campaign for Black Male Achievement—another major player in MBK—gave $450,000 in grants and in-kind support for outreach campaigns for the film, which tells the story of how Stephenson’s now-20-year-old son and his friend—who grow from black kindergartners to young men over the course of the movie—navigated New York City’s tony and majority-white Dalton School. In the discussions after screenings, Stephenson says, she witnessed conversations relevant to black communities as a whole. When parents and educators discuss the film, “talking about boys just becomes a platform to talk about the larger issues”—such as educators’ unconscious biases and the academic underperformance resulting from students’ awareness of negative stereotypes—that affect both girls and boys. “How do we expand this discussion?” Stephenson asks, “as opposed to promoting a critique that may not be constructive in the long run?”
Alvin Starks is a longtime progressive racial-justice strategist who has worked with major funders of programs addressing racial inequality. He was a program officer at the Open Society Foundations (OSF) in 2006, when The New York Times published a front-page story credited with inspiring the philanthropic focus that led to MBK. The article, headlined Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn, drew attention to the increase in incarceration rates throughout the 1990s and the persistent joblessness among black men. The piece marked a turning point for his colleagues, Starks said, but the approach seemed limited in scope to him even then. “The conversation wasn’t about unions, it wasn’t about globalization, it wasn’t about a changing economy,” he recalled. “Instead, the focus was on a person who couldn’t gain access because he was ill-equipped. I wanted folks to have a different frame that was around a broken democracy, not a broken individual.”

Starks is among the more than 200 black men who signed the AAPF letter on the shortcomings of My Brother’s Keeper. In addition to overlooking girls and women of color, he says, MBK lacks a structural analysis of racial inequity. The initiative’s emphasis on personal responsibility rather than institutional barriers enables billionaire stop-and-frisk defender Michael Bloomberg and Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly to endorse the effort. On Twitter, CNN commentator and educator Marc Lamont Hill took issue with MBK’s singular focus on males—“I guess I don’t concede that black women are in favorable position vis a vis black men”—but also questioned whether expanding the initiative was the best solution: “I have no desire to expand My Brother’s Keeper, but to scrap it altogether in favor of more humane and democratic policy.”

Starks ticked off a list of pressing issues—affirmative action, minimum wage, the earned-income tax credit—that he says have been ignored by many program officers now closely aligned with MBK. Meanwhile, he added, programs that promote responsible fatherhood or facilitate rites of passage are well-supported. The question that really motivates funders, Starks said, is: “How do we teach them how to, quote-unquote, man up?”

Sometimes the message to “man up” can be subtle, as it was during a session I attended at the College Bound Brotherhood event, where Tremel Bradford, an admissions counselor at UCLA, addressed a group of young men. A native of Compton, Bradford transferred from Santa Monica College, a two-year school, to UCLA and graduated in 2009; he now works in the UCLA admissions office. When talking to the audience about time management, Bradford turned up the swagger, telling the young men—who were listening with rapt attention—that “time is the ultimate pimp. True leaders in life, they learned how to pimp time.” Was the reference a youthful misstep—or did it go to the heart of critics’ misgivings about what’s being communicated in some gender-specific programs for boys and men of color?

When I talked to him later, Bradford said he hadn’t meant any harm. “I look at pimping as taking full advantage of the resources available to you,” he said. He insisted that his word choice, much like the references he makes to rap lyrics and pop culture, helps make him relatable to young people. The suit he wears can put up a barrier, he said, and he strives to be approachable.

The Brown Boi project is not the typical grantee receiving funds for programs intended for boys and young men. The Oakland-based project, which receives financial support from OSF’s Campaign for Black Male Achievement, encourages people of all gender identities, particularly those in communities of color, to challenge traditional understandings of masculinity. The organization facilitates “leadership circles” in which participants, primarily transgender men and women who identify as “masculine of center,” talk about how they can express themselves outside the confines of gender norms. Though in the minority, straight cisgender boys and men are included, field director Erica Woodland tells me. In a Brown Boi circle, the use of a loaded word like “pimp” would raise conversation around its origins and meaning. Woodland adds: “If, to be relatable, you need to use language that reinforces violence against women, then that’s a problem. Young people can relate to you when you’re authentic, even if you’re different.”

Brown Boi is introducing its boundary-pushing thinking to organizations that receive funding for boys and men of color. In meetings with funders and grantees, Brown Boi consistently calls attention to the absence of gay, bi and transgender men from the conversation, Woodland says. This past school year, the group ran a program that explored bullying, gender identity and racial justice for boys at a middle school in East Oakland. One recent recipient of a Black Male Achievement fellowship, Kalimah Priforce, tells me that Brown Boi expanded his perspective; he will now prioritize the inclusion of transmasculine people as he plans an upcoming tech hackathon.

Joanne N. Smith, executive director of the Brooklyn-based youth development organization Girls for Gender Equity and another signer of the AAPF letter, agrees that gender-specific programming can work, but argues that it needs to happen alongside inclusive programs. “We’ve found a way to do it collectively here,” she says. “We learned from early on that we have to work with the boys.” Programs can be tailored for different groups of young people, she continues, but it’s critical to “then also come together to have those collective community conversations.”

When Smith was invited to a Washington, DC, convening of social-justice nonprofits tasked with drafting a statement of principles for an MBK report, recommendations she supported—such as addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth and boys who experience sexual assault—were left out. Instead, the report focused on six seemingly uncontroversial goals, such as getting more boys of color to read at the appropriate grade level. “When we read the report, [our contribution] was totally missing,” Smith says. She’s adamant that the calls for a different approach will continue until there’s a meaningful response from MBK leadership: “There’s no way we can allow this initiative to go on without a gender-inclusive lens.”
PATRIOTIC HERESY

Neo-McCarthyites have stifled democratic debate on Russia and Ukraine.

by STEPHEN F. COHEN

I prepared the text below for remarks to the annual US-Russia Forum in Washington, DC, held in the Hart Senate Office Building (though not under official auspices) on June 16. Obliged to abridge my text to the time allocated to speakers, I have restored the deletions here and spelled out a number of my impromptu comments. In addition, I refer to a few subsequent developments to illustrate some of my themes.

—S.F.C.

We meet today during the worst and potentially most dangerous American-Russian confrontation in many decades, probably since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The Ukrainian civil war, precipitated by the unlawful change of government in Kiev in February, is already growing into a proxy US-Russian war. The seemingly unthinkable is becoming imaginable: an actual war between NATO, led by the United States, and post-Soviet Russia.

Certainly, we are already in a new Cold War, which escalating sanctions will only deepen, institutionalize and prolong—one potentially more dangerous than its US-Soviet predecessor, which the world barely survived. This is so for several reasons:

§ The epicenter of the new Cold War is not in Berlin but on Russia’s borders, in Ukraine, a region absolutely essential in Moscow’s view to its national security and even to its civilization. This means that the kinds of miscalculations, mishaps and provocations the world witnessed decades ago will be even more fraught with danger. (The mysterious shoot-down of a Malaysian jetliner over eastern Ukraine in July was an omenous example. The military threats in August surrounding Russia’s humanitarian convoy sent to the Donbass cities of Luhansk and Donetsk, and Kiev’s simultaneous attempt to take those cities, are others.)

§ An even graver risk is that the new Cold War may tempt the use of nuclear weapons in a way the US-Soviet one did not. I have in mind the argument made by some Moscow military strategists that if directly threatened by NATO’s superior conventional forces, Russia may resort to its much larger arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. (The ongoing US/NATO encirclement of Russia with bases, as well as land- and sea-based missile-defense weapons, only increases this possibility.)

§ Yet another risk factor is that the new Cold War lacks the mutually restraining rules that developed during the forty-year Cold War, especially after the Cuban missile crisis. Indeed, highly charged suspicions, resentments, misconceptions and misinformation both in Washington and Moscow today may make such mutual restraints even more difficult. The same is true of the surreal demonization of Russia’s leader, Vladimir Putin—a kind of personal vilification without any real precedent in the past, at least after Stalin’s death. (Henry Kissinger has pointed out that the “demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one.” I think it is worse: an abdication of real analysis and rational policy-making.)

§ Finally, the new Cold War may be more perilous because, also unlike its forty-year-long predecessor, there is no effective American opposition—not in the administration, Congress, the establishment media, universities, think tanks or the general public.

In this regard, we need to understand our circumstances. We—opponents of the US policies that have contributed so woefully to the current crisis—are few in number, without influential supporters and unorganized. I am old enough to know our position was very different in the 1970s and ’80s, when we struggled for what was then called détente. We were a minority, but a substantial minority with allies in high places, even in Congress and the State Department. Our views were solicited by mainstream newspapers, television and radio. In addition to grassroots support, we even had our own lobbying organization in Washington, the American Committee on East-West Accord, whose board included corporate CEOs, political figures, prominent academics and statesmen of the stature of George Kennan.

We have none of that today. We have no access to the Obama administration, virtually none to Congress, which is a bipartisan bastion of Cold War politics, and very little to the mainstream media. (Since the Ukrainian crisis deepened, does anyone recall reading our views on the editorial or op-ed pages of The New York Times, The Washington Post or The Wall Street Journal—or seeing them presented on MSNBC or the Fox News Channel, which differ little in their unbalanced blame-Russia broadcasts?) We do have access to important alternative media, but they are not considered authoritative, or even essential, inside the Beltway. In my long lifetime, I do not recall such a failure of American democratic discourse in any comparable time of crisis. (Gilbert Doctorow, an American specialist on Russia and experienced multinational corporate executive living in Belgium, is trying to create a US-European version of the Committee on East-West Accord.)

In my limited remaining time, I will speak generally about this dire situation—almost certainly a fateful turning point in world affairs—in my own three capacities: as a participant in what little mainstream media debate has been permitted; as a longtime scholarly historian of Russia and of US-Russian relations; and as an informed observer who believes there is still a way out of this terrible crisis.
THE NEW COLD WAR
About my episodic participation in the very limited mainstream media discussion, I will speak in a more personal way than I usually do. From the outset, I saw my role as twofold. Recalling the American adage “There are two sides to every story,” I sought to explain Moscow’s view of the Ukrainian crisis, which is almost entirely missing in mainstream coverage. (Without David Johnson’s indispensable daily Russia List, non-Russian readers would have little access to alternative perspectives. John Mearsheimer’s article in the September-October issue of Foreign Affairs is an important exception.) What, for example, did Putin mean when he said Western policy-makers were “trying to drive us into some kind of corner,” “have lied to us many times” and “have crossed the line” in Ukraine? Second, having argued since the 1990s, in my books and Nation articles, that Washington’s bipartisan Russia policies could lead to a new Cold War and to just such a crisis, I wanted to bring my longstanding analysis to bear on today’s confrontation over Ukraine.

As a result, I have been repeatedly assailed—even in purportedly liberal publications—as Putin’s No. 1 American “apologist,” “useful idiot,” “dupe,” “best friend” and, perhaps a new low in immature invective, “toady.” I expected to be criticized, as I was during nearly twenty years as a CBS News commentator, but not in such personal and scurrilous ways. (Something has changed in our political culture, perhaps related to the Internet.)

Until now, I have not bothered to reply to any of these defamatory attacks. I do so today because I now think they are directed at several of us in this room, indeed at anyone critical of Washington’s Russia policies, not just me. (Not even Kissinger or President Reagan’s enormously successful ambassador to Moscow, Jack Matlock, have been entirely immune.) Re-reading the attacks, I have come to the following conclusions:

§ None of these character assassins present any factual refutations of anything I have written or said. They indulge only in ad hominem slurs based on distortions and on the general premise that any American who seeks to understand Moscow’s perspectives is a “Putin apologist” and thus unpatriotic. Such a premise only abets the possibility of war.

§ Some of these writers, or people who stand behind them, are longtime proponents of the twenty-year US policies that have led to the Ukrainian crisis. By defaming us, they seek to obscure their complicity in the unfolding disaster and their unwillingness to rethink it. Failure to rethink dooms us to the worst outcome.

§ Equally important, however, these kinds of neo-McCarthyites are trying to stifle democratic debate by stigmatizing us in ways that make us unwelcome on mainstream broadcasts and op-ed pages and to policymakers. They are largely succeeding.

Let us be clear. This means that we, not the people on the left and the right who defame us, are the true American democrats and the real patriots of US national security. We do not seek to ostracize or silence the new cold warriors, but to engage them in public debate. And we, not they, understand that current US policy may have catastrophic consequences for international and American security. The perils and costs of another prolonged Cold War will afflict our children and grandchildren. If nothing else, this reckless policy, couched even at high levels in the ritualistic demonizing of Putin, is already costing Washington an essential partner in the Kremlin in vital areas of US security—from Iran, Syria and Afghanistan to efforts to counter nuclear proliferation and international terrorism.

But, I should add, we are also to blame for the one-sided, or nonexistent, debate. As I said, we are not organized. Too often, we do not publicly defend each other, though I am personally grateful to James Carden, Gilbert Doctorow and Robert Legvold for having come to my defense. And often we do not speak boldly enough. (We should not worry, for example, if our arguments sometimes coincide with what Moscow is saying; doing so results in self-censorship.)

Indeed, some people who privately share our concerns—again, in Congress, the media, universities and think tanks—do not speak out at all. For whatever reason—concern about being stigmatized, about their career, personal disposition—they are silent. But in our democracy, where the cost of dissent is relatively low, silence is no longer a patriotic option. (Personally, as an American, I have come to feel this more strongly, to the point of moral indignation, as I watch the US-backed regime in Kiev inflict needless devastation, a humanitarian disaster and possibly war crimes on its own citizens in eastern Ukraine.)

But, I must also emphasize, we should exempt from this imperative young people, who have more to lose. A few have sought my guidance, and I always advise, “Even petty penalties for dissent in regard to Russia could adversely affect your career. At this stage of life, your first obligation is to your family and thus to your future prospects. Your time to fight lies ahead.”

Finally, in connection with our struggle for a wiser American policy, I have come to another conclusion: most of us were taught that moderation in thought and speech is always the best principle. But in a fateful crisis such as the one now confronting us, moderation for its own sake is no virtue. It becomes conformism, and conformism becomes complicity.

I recall this issue being discussed long ago in a very different context—by Soviet-era dissidents when I lived among them in Moscow in the 1970s and ‘80s. A few in our ranks who know that history (including Edward Lozansky, a former Soviet dissident, longtime US citizen and Reagan Republican, and the organizer of today’s event) have recently called us “American dissidents.” The analogy is imperfect: my Soviet friends had far fewer possibilities for dissent and risked much worse consequences.

But the analogy is instructive. Soviet dissidents were protesting an entrenched orthodoxy of dogmas, vested interests and ossified policy-making, which is why they were denounced as heretics by Soviet authorities and media. Since the 1990s, beginning with the Clinton administration, exceedingly unwise notions about post-Soviet Russia and the political correctness of US policy have congealed into a bipartisan American orthodoxy. The natural, historical response to orthodoxy is heresy. So let us be patriotic heretics, regardless of personal
Today's civil war in Ukraine was caused by Putin's aggressive response to the peaceful Maidan protests of Ukraine into the West, including (in the fine print) into NATO. A kind of velvet aggression by Brussels and Washington to bring all of Putin's alleged "aggression" that initiated today's crisis but instead exacerbated it without mentioning the alliance, NATO. In short, it was not to Europe's "military and security" policies—which meant in effect entirely benign. It included protocols requiring Ukraine to adhere to its essential economic relations with Russia. Nor was the EU proposal for economic measures and would have sharply curtailed its longstanding and necessary association with Europe. The proposal was not economically feasible. Offering little financial assistance, it required the Ukrainian government to enact harsh austerity measures and would have sharply curtailed its longstanding and essential economic relations with Russia. Nor was the EU proposal entirely benign. It included protocols requiring Ukraine to adhere to Europe's "military and security" policies—which meant in effect, without mentioning the alliance, NATO. In short, it was not Putin's alleged "aggression" that initiated today's crisis but instead a kind of velvet aggression by Brussels and Washington to bring all of Ukraine into the West, including (in the fine print) into NATO.

Fallacy No. 4: Today's civil war in Ukraine was caused by Putin's aggressive response to the peaceful Maidan protests — Kimbrellé Crenshaw

“Women in academia still face obstacles built up over centuries, but the contributors to Presumed Incompetent have taken a leap toward liberation. Their revelations will enrage you—and open minds and hearts.”

—Gloria Steinem

"Exploding the myth that we live in a 'post-identity' world, Presumed Incompetent provides gripping first-hand accounts of the ways in which women faculty of color are subjected to stereotypes, fears and fantasies based on the intersection of race, gender, and class. It reminds us that the mere passage of time is not enough to create equitable workplaces for anyone facing institutional subordination."

—Kimberlé Crenshaw
against Yanukovych’s decision.

**Fact:** In February 2014, the radicalized Maidan protests, strongly influenced by extreme nationalist and even semi-fascist street forces, turned violent. Hoping for a peaceful resolution, European foreign ministers brokered a compromise between Maidan’s parliamentary representatives and Yanukovych. It would have left him as president, with less power, of a coalition reconciliation government until new elections this December. Within hours, violent street fighters aborted the agreement. Europe’s leaders and Washington did not defend their own diplomatic accord. Yanukovych fled to Russia. Minority parliamentary parties representing Maidan and, predominantly, western Ukraine—among them Svoboda, an ultranationalist movement previously anathematized by the European Parliament as incompatible with European values—formed a new government. They also revised the existing Constitution in their favor. Washington and Brussels endorsed the coup and have supported the outcome ever since. Everything that followed, from Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the spread of rebellion in southeastern Ukraine to the civil war and Kiev’s “anti-terrorist operation,” was triggered by the February coup. Putin’s actions have been mostly reactive.

**Fallacy No. 5:** The only way out of the crisis is for Putin to end his “aggression” and call off his agents in southeastern Ukraine.

**Fact:** The underlying causes of the crisis are Ukraine’s own internal divisions, not primarily Putin’s actions. The essential factor escalating the crisis since May has been Kiev’s “anti-terrorist” military campaign against its own citizens, now mainly in Luhansk and Donetsk. Putin influences and no doubt aids the Donbass “self-defenders.” Considering the pressure on him in Moscow, he is likely to continue to do so, perhaps even more directly, but he does not control them. If Kiev’s assault ends, Putin probably can compel the rebels to negotiate. But only the Obama administration can compel Kiev to stop, and it has not done so.

In short, twenty years of US policy have led to this fateful American-Russian confrontation. Putin may have contributed to it along the way, but his role during his fourteen years in power has been almost entirely reactive—indeed, it is a complaint frequently lodged against him by more hardline forces in Moscow.

In politics as in history, there are always alternatives. The Ukrainian crisis could have at least three different outcomes. In the first, the civil war escalates and widens, drawing in Russian and possibly NATO military forces. This would be the worst outcome: a kind of latter-day Cuban missile crisis.

In the second outcome, today’s de facto partitioning of Ukraine becomes institutionalized in the form of two Ukrainian states—one allied with the West, the other with Russia—co-existing between Cold War and cold peace. This would not be the best outcome, but neither would it be the worst.

The third outcome, as well as the best one, would be the preservation of a united Ukraine. This will require good-faith negotiations between representatives of all of Ukraine’s regions, including leaders of the rebellious southeast, probably under the auspices of Washington, Moscow and the European Union, as Putin and his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, have proposed for months.

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s tragedy continues to grow. Thousands of innocent people have been killed or wounded, according to a UN representative, and nearly a million others turned into refugees. It is a needless tragedy, because rational people on all sides know the general terms of peace negotiations:

§ Ukraine must become a federal or sufficiently decentralized state in order to permit its diverse regions to elect their own officials, live in accord with their local cultures, and have a say in taxation and budgetary issues, as is the case in many federal states from Canada to Germany. Such constitutional provisions will need to be ratified by a referendum or a constitutional assembly, accompanied or followed by parliamentary and presidential elections. (The rushed presidential election in May was a mistake, effectively depriving more than 40 percent of the country of their own candidates and thus a real vote.)

§ Ukraine must not be aligned with any military alliance, including NATO. (Nor must any of the other former Soviet republics now being courted by NATO.)

§ Ukraine must be governed in ways that enable it to maintain or develop economic relations with both Russia and the West. Otherwise, it will never be politically independent or economically prosperous.

§ If these principles are adopted, they should be guaranteed, along with Ukraine’s present territorial integrity, by Russia and the West, perhaps in a UN Security Council resolution.

But such negotiations cannot even begin until Kiev’s military assault on eastern Ukraine ends. Russia, Germany and France have repeatedly called for a cease-fire, but the “anti-terrorist operation” can end only where it began—in Kiev and Washington. (Though Washington and Kiev evidently remain opposed, a cease-fire proposal may result from German Chancellor Merkel’s August 23 visit to Kiev and a scheduled meeting between Putin and Ukrainian President Poroshenko in Minsk.)

Alas, there is no such leadership here in Washington. President Obama has vanished as a statesman in the Ukrainian crisis. Secretary of State John Kerry speaks publicly more like a secretary of war than as our top diplomat. The Senate is preparing even more bellicose legislation. The establishment media rely uncritically on Kiev’s propaganda and cheerlead for its policies. Unlike the scenes of devastation in Gaza, American television rarely, if ever, shows Kiev’s destruction of Luhansk, Donetsk or other Ukrainian cities, thereby arousing no public qualms or opposition.

And so we patriotic heretics remain mostly alone and often defamed. The most encouraging perspective I can offer is to remind you that positive change in history frequently begins as heresy. Or to quote the personal testimony of Mikhail Gorbachev, who once said of his struggle for change inside the even more rigidly orthodox Soviet nomenklatura: “Everything new in philosophy begins as heresy and in politics as the opinion of a minority.” As for patriotism, here is Woodrow Wilson: “the most patriotic man is sometimes the man who goes in the direction he thinks right even when he sees half of the world against him.”
Have you ever said to yourself “I’d love to get a computer, if only I could figure out how to use it.” Well, you’re not alone. Computers were supposed to make our lives simpler, but they’ve gotten so complicated that they are not worth the trouble. With all of the “pointing and clicking” and “dragging and dropping” you’re lucky if you can figure out where you are. Plus, you are constantly worrying about viruses and freeze-ups. If this sounds familiar, we have great news for you. There is finally a computer that’s designed for simplicity and ease of use. It’s the WOW Computer, and it was designed with you in mind. This computer is easy-to-use, worry-free and literally puts the world at your fingertips. From the moment you open the box, you’ll realize how different the WOW Computer is. The components are all connected; all you do is plug it into an outlet and your high-speed Internet connection. Then you’ll see the screen – it’s now 22 inches. This is a completely new touch screen system, without the cluttered look of the normal computer screen. The “buttons” on the screen are easy to see and easy to understand. All you do is touch one of them, from the Web, Email, Calendar to Games– you name it… and a new screen opens up. It’s so easy to use you won’t have to ask your children or grandchildren for help. Until now the very people who could benefit most from E-mail and the Internet are the ones that have had the hardest time accessing it. Now, thanks to the WOW Computer, countless older Americans are discovering the wonderful world of the Internet every day. Isn’t it time you took part? Call now, and a patient, knowledgeable product expert will tell you how you can try it in your home for 30 days. If you are not totally satisfied, simply return it within 30 days for a refund of the product purchase price. Call today.

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The Prototype: An Ancient City in Beta

Can monasteries become a model for reclaiming tech culture?

by Nathan Schneider
Christian monasticism began in earnest in the fourth century CE, just after Constantine made Jesus Christ the official god of Rome. No longer persecuted, believers who craved a holiness less compromised by empire fled to the desert and set up communes. These monasteries came to wield power in their own right, putting on display a more strenuous, radical faith. Their successors became Europe’s chief scholars and inventors and also served as guardians for the technology of writing.

Early this year, the ancient caves of Matera, Italy, became home to an experiment: an unMonastery, the first of its kind. For the dozen or so unMonks living there, plus the hundreds following their progress online, it carried the quixotic hope of an underemployed generation regaining control of the technology that increasingly commodifies and surveils their lives. Monasteries ushered civilization through the Dark Ages; perhaps unMonasteries, sparing the dogma and self-flagellation, can keep alive the promise of a liberating Internet as companies like Google and Facebook tighten their grip.

The unMonastery’s gestation began in 2011, the year of Occupy and the Indignados, a time of so many ambitious undertakings with ambivalent outcomes. The Council of Europe’s ominous-sounding Social Cohesion Research and Early Warning Division sought, in the words of its chief, “to have a better idea of the extent of insecurity in society.” The international body sponsored the invention of Edgeryders, “an open and distributed think tank” of people working through an online social network and a series of conferences. Anyone could join, but those who did ended up being mostly young, tech-savvy and entrepreneurial, and mostly from Western Europe. What united them was not a political ideology, but the dead-end conditions of austerity and the hope of figuring out better ways forward. They produced a report about the economic crisis—a “Guide to the Future.” Soon the council’s funding ended, but Edgeryders pressed on as an online network with more than 2,000 members and an incorporated entity. The group presents itself as a company in the business of “open consulting.”

At the end of its first conference in Strasbourg in late October of 2013, some 100 Edgeryders converged on Matera, Italy, a small city in the heel of Italy. Each of the participants carried a little Linux computer, stacked with software and data. They work on the city’s website; they’re hackers, focused on building open-source infrastructure for the commons.

Swartz’s suicide, of blockades against tech commuter buses in San Francisco. Google became one of the world’s leading lobbyists, and Jeff Bezos bought The Washington Post. Tech could no longer claim to be a post-political insurgency; it had become the empire.

As tech achieves its Constantinian apotheosis, old religious tropes seem to offer a return to lost purity, a desert in which to flee, the stark opposite of Silicon Valley. A bonneted “Amish Futurist” began appearing at tech conferences, asking the luminaries about ultimate meaning, as if she came from a world without the Internet. Ariana Huffington cashed in with her mobile app, GPS for the Soul.

For a year and a half, the unMonastery idea developed and grew. Edgeryders brought their favorite conceptual vocabularies to bear: social innovation, network analysis, open source. They brought their experience with hacker spaces, maker spaces and co-working. The “monastery” in their meme also steered them into the generally foreign vocabulary of religion. Alberto Cottica, an Italian open-data advocate and leading Edgeryder, perused The Rule of St. Benedict, the sixth-century text that governs most of Western monasticism. He discovered Benedict to be a network-savvy, evidence-based social innovator.

“Each monastery is a sovereign institution, with no hierarchy among them,” Cottica explained. “The Rule acts as a communication protocol across monasteries.” He compared Benedict to Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, and Linus Torvalds, creator of the open-source operating system Linux. “The rule was—still is—good, solid, open-source software.”

In Brussels, Cottica met Ilaria D’Auria, who was working on Matera’s bid to be declared a European Capital of Culture by the EU in 2019. The bid proposal centered around the theme of “ancient futures”—“in order,” it said, “to give voice to forgotten places, areas often pushed to the outskirts of modernity, yet which remain the bearers of deep values that remain essential.” The proposal talked about Old World ingenuity alongside open data, sharing and crowd-sourcing. The committee in charge of the bid came to recognize the unMonastery concept, with its supporters throughout the continent, as a useful addition to Matera’s portfolio. The city agreed to provide a building, as well as 35,000 euros for travel and expenses for four months, February through May 2014.

In late October of 2013, some 100 Edgeryders converged on Matera for the group’s third conference—this time focused on making the unMonastery a reality. They let themselves get lost in the city’s half-empty, half-touristy mazes. They talked with locals about their needs and winnowed them down to twelve “challenges,” ranging from alternative energy to a lack of intergenerational spaces. Yet the welcome they found in town was uneasy. Materani may have been cooperating and improvising to survive for millennia, but they weren’t used to calling it “social innovation” or “hacking.” It didn’t help that only a few Edgeryders could speak Italian.

Nathan Schneider is the author of Thank You, Anarchy: Notes From the Occupy Apocalypse and God in Proof: The Story of a Search From the Ancients to the Internet.
HE VAST COMPLEX OF CAVE DWELLINGS IN MATERA—the Sassi—is said to have been inhabited for 9,000 years. Staggered terraces of masonry facades line ragged cliffs that fall into canyons. After World War II, the Sassi became the country’s most notorious slum, and the government emptied residents into modern apartments on the plateau above. For decades the ancient caves lay empty. Pasolini and Mel Gibson both filmed movies about Jesus there. In the 1990s, a band of cultured squatters began to move back in and renovate, leading the way for a tourist industry in an otherwise sleepy city. UNESCO declared the caves a World Heritage Site; the sides of Matera’s police cars now boast CITTÀ DEI SASSI. Most of Matera’s 60,000 residents, however, live not in a romantic past but in a present where it’s not altogether clear what they have to offer in the global economy. Decent work is hard to find, and the city is hemorrhaging its youth.

Visible from what became the unMonastery’s patio, down one cliff and up another, are dark abscesses in the rock, their interiors still bearing remnants of paintings from past use as churches and hermitages. Where Matera’s monks and nuns had hours of structured prayer each day, the unMonastery had documentation—the basic act of piety in any open-source project. Before an algorithm can be copied, tweaked and adapted, it must be radically transparent. Monks expose themselves to God through prayer; unMonks publish their activities on the Internet.

The presiding unAbbot was Ben Vickers, 27 years old, with patches of gray on either side of his well-trimmed hair and a hooded black coat worn over his banded-collar black shirt. While also more or less retaining his post as “curator of digital” for London’s Serpentine Galleries, Vickers was the unMonastery’s chief theorist and coordinator; the others generally praised his ability to digest and summarize their various points of view, and to document them on the online platforms they use to communicate. He blasted George Michael while setting up breakfast and found a certain glee in the prospect of failure—a turn of mind probably honed during his days in doomed anarchist squats. But documentation can trump even failure; others can study the attempt, tweak it and try again.

Some of the documentation looked outward. Maria Juliana Byck, an Occupy Wall Street veteran and videographer, was working on a project to map common resources in town, to help Materani connect with each other and collaborate. There was an “unTransit” app in the works for local timetables and workshops on the gospel of open data. Also under way were an open-source solar tracker, an open-source wind turbine, and coding classes for adults and kids in the unMonastery caves.

As in real monasteries, though, much of the unMonastery’s piety went toward scrutinizing the minutiae of daily life. Elf Pavlik, a 31-year-old web developer with pony-tailed hair, had been living for five years without touching money or government IDs. With nearly pure reason, he implored the others to document more and more precisely what came and went, from food to tampons, so they’d learn to budget not by cost but in terms of the resources themselves. Using a software package called Open Energy Monitor, they kept track of the unMonastery’s electricity usage minute by minute, room by room.

Keeping track of the longer view was the job of Bem Davies, a Canadian-turned-Norwegian widower and grandfather, a veteran of the circus and the stage who once helped rewrite the official history in her native Hungary. They talked about the unMonastery, even in its first months, as at the beginning of a 200-year history. It didn’t seem like so much time to ask for in a place that has been around for thousands.

This rhetoric had the ring of dot-com bombast, but mixed with a slower, more resilient kind of vision. The unMonastery sat on more precipices than one—an emissary of the hubristic tech culture it represented, but also a patient attempt at redemption. While planning ahead for centuries, the unMonks practiced the one-step-at-a-time patience of open-source projects. As in real monasteries, though, much of the unMonastery’s piety went toward scrutinizing the minutiae of daily life. While also more or less retaining his post as “curator of digital” for London’s Serpentine Galleries, Vickers was the unMonastery’s chief theorist and coordinator; the others generally praised his ability to digest and summarize their various points of view, and to document them on the online platforms they use to communicate. He blasted George Michael while setting up breakfast and found a certain glee in the prospect of failure—a turn of mind probably honed during his days in doomed anarchist squats. But documentation can trump even failure; others can study the attempt, tweak it and try again.

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concerns. A flying drone had once captured footage of the theatrical morning exercises that Rembo Davies orchestrated. But by May, the circles and the exercises were on indefinite hiatus.

After the 7 AM wake-up bell rang half an hour late one morning, Davies groaned, on the way to the shower in his underwear: “We’re sliding into a prehistoric condition.” He lamented on his blog that people had been reverting back to talking about the laptops they’d brought as “mine.” Benedict’s Rule, after all, has harsh words for private property: “This vice especially is to be cut out of the monastery by the roots.”

Building a new society in the shell of the old can seem so impossibly hard. Capitalism, meanwhile, makes organizing ourselves look easy by paying us to pretend that’s what we’re doing. Maybe the longing for leaderless swarms in the protests of 2011 partly stemmed from the image of a team at a software conglomerate, or a noncommercial, open-source project nonetheless parasitic on its corporate sponsors. But the kind of democracy and community we glean from tech culture lacks a deep structure, a core; tech culture is particularly good at disguising the reality that its core has become investor returns and Wall Street IPOs. The CEO’s absolute authority dresses up like charisma. Rapt in admiration, we the people are being de-skilled out of actual self-organizing. A few months in, the unMonastery’s communications had become a jungle of platforms, many of them proprietary, with few clear lines between inward and outward: the public Edgeryders website, public Trello boards, a closed Google Group and public folders full of Google Docs. The “ideologically coded” unMonastery website that Elf Pavlik had designed was badly out-of-date and difficult to use, so a Facebook page had become the main means of sharing information with the world. Before, one unMonk had always refused to use Facebook on principle; it was only after coming to this supposedly open-source hacker monastery that he felt compelled to start an account. The unMonastery’s vision of an open-source way of life seemed at risk of becoming a wholly owned subsidiary of the status quo.

Back and forth, they debated what the real problem was: the loss of ritual? The lack of ties with people in Matera? Too much software, or not enough? Alberto Cottica warned from afar over the Edgeryders’ platform about fixating on technology rather than on actual social interactions. They disagreed about the rules that governed them, as well as whether there were any in the first place. Losing patience in a tendentious meeting, Rita Orlando, one of the unMonastery’s Materan allies, begged, “Let’s try to think like a company, even though we are not a company—please!”

Like just about everything, all of this has happened before. Theodore Roszak, a critic best known for coining the term “counterculture” in the late 1960s, published a book in 1986 on what he called the “cult of information.” By the early 1970s, those whom Roszak dubbed “guerrilla hackers” had begun to appear at the intersection of the West Coast’s tech industry and radical subculture. They had their own publication, the People’s Computer Company Newsletter, and a mostly theoretical network (with only one actual node) called Community Memory. Their propaganda described the computer as a “radical social artifact” that would usher in a “direct democracy of information”—“actively free (‘open’) information,” of course.

This was the leaven out of which arose such icons as Steve Wozniak, inventor of the Apple computer, and the Whole Earth Catalog, which hyped the digital revolution in newsprint with all that newsprint and mail-order could muster. Like the unMonastery, the guerrilla hackers blended the old with the new, the ancient
with the postindustrial; users would become communities and machines would become artifacts. Though their projects often relied on state or corporate subsidies, they envisioned their efforts as apolitical, wrapped in the “safe neutrality,” as Roszak put it, of information. With the power of information, they imagined, old-fashioned political power wouldn’t be needed anymore. Meanwhile, Wozniak’s “homebrew” gadget grew into Steve Jobs’s Wozniak’s “homebrew” gadget grew into Steve Jobs’s Apple, which now holds more cash than the US Treasury.

By the mid-1980s, Roszak was already speaking of “hopeful democratic spirits like the guerrilla hackers” in the past tense. “Such minimal and marginal uses of the computer,” he wrote, “are simply dwarfed into insignificance by its predominant applications, many of which seriously endanger our freedom and survival.” Even then he recognized the digitalization of education as a privatization scheme, and the near absence of worker organizing in the tech sector, and the unchecked information-gathering capacities of the NSA. He believed that the response was not merely a parade of better apps, but better ideas and stronger forms of organizing. Nowadays, the Bay Area’s Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is having an impact because of its ties to both street protests and campaigns to change housing legislation. The feminist hacker-space Double Union, in the Mission District, is challenging corporate hiring practices through strong in-person networks, as well as by building open-source software together.

“Making the democratic most of the Information Age,” Roszak wrote, “is a matter not only of technology but also of the social organization of that technology.”

The unMonks realized, after a few months of getting their bearings, that they’d lived frugally enough and saved enough money to keep going for two months longer than planned. Their foothold in Matera could last through June and July, maybe longer. They were determined to see the project survive beyond the few months the grant from the city had allotted them, and to form stronger ties with the people of Matera, whose needs they had come to meet.

One weekend in the middle of May, several unMonks went off to another part of town, a more populated and less tourist-ed part, cleaning up a storefront that had been lent to them for a few weeks. The walls were bright yellow, covered in spots with the repeated, hand-painted name of the mobile-phone vendor that had been the previous tenant: Teknoino.

“It’s ghastly,” said Bembo Davies, arriving with cushions and paint rollers. “I love it,” said Lucia Caistor, an urban planner from London who was soon to end her several months’ sabbatical as an unMonk.

The weather outside alternated between rainy and overcast, and they got to work pulling up wood flooring that had covered tile below, peeling off stubborn decals and sponging walls. Elf Pavlik sat on the floor with his computer, trying to figure out how to set up Wi-Fi and document what was going on around him.

They would be holding a series of events in the storefront the following week to introduce some of their projects to the community. There would be music, kung fu, collaborative maps, a discussion about alternative currency. On one of the days, they’d do a workshop with kids about how to occupy the square next to a school—training the next generation of Indignados. This was unMonastery 2.0. They were only just barely talking about it that way at the time, but the prototype had finally started to spread into a network.

The two extra summer months in Matera proved eventful. “Most of the demons have scurried off and work ethic is buzzing away at a good clip,” Bembo Davies reported in the last days, with his usual telling obscurity. Pavlik brought a new cadre of hackers in for a spell, and dozens of local children attended coding classes. A video of a “co-napping” experiment on the streets of Matera went viral online, though it made some Materani cringe. The wind turbine and unTransit projects came closer to having prototypes of their own; they would carry on even though the unMonastery prototype would be closing. A pack of young locals got to work editing their documentary about it. Ben Vickers scrambled to assemble the unMonks’ fervent documentation into “unMonastery-in-a-box,” a package of lessons and tools for the next iterations.

“I didn’t realize we were this crazy,” he said while surveying the dozen or more sets of data on the kitchen alone. “It’s a little bit over the top.”

Rita Orlando lived in Matera before the unMonastery came and is still there now that it’s gone. She’s frustrated. People in town mostly just saw the project’s foreignness and naïveté, not its promise or vision. “We’ve been too short on time,” Orlando said.

In October, there will be another edgyders conference in Matera. The theme is stewardship. A high-level Italian official is slated to be there, as well as representatives from the Pirate Party. Offers of real estate for a new unMonastery have come from Greece, Spain and up near Venice. Its fate in Matera, if any, remains to be seen—and improvised. A few unMonks remain in town. At least one plans to stay for good.

Far beyond the Sassi, the unMonastery idea has continued to circulate. Michel Bauwens, an elder statesman in Europe’s peer-to-peer movement, wrote an open letter to Pope Francis suggesting that underused churches and monasteries not be sold on the real-estate market but re-purposed as sites of a new collaborative economy. He cited the unMonastery as a model. “These new practices are...
recreating the moral economy of the future, and could learn from the moral economy of the past, when the Church played such a vital role,” Bauwens wrote. “On the other hand, by engaging with these vital forces that are changing our society and civilization, the Church would also learn about the new spiritual needs that are co-emerging from these practices.” Already, monks at two real monasteries in Italy have expressed interest in having an unMonastery in their cloisters.

Bauwens wrote the letter from Ecuador. There, much as Matera had brought the unMonastery, the national government commissioned him to help lead an unprecedented effort to design policies for an economy based on open knowledge. He envisions a “partner state” that would encourage cooperative control over production and rein in intellectual property laws, fostering an open-source society that would stem the flow of surplus value to the rich while rewarding people for enriching the commons. The pieties of the unMonastery, that is, would become norms.

The unMonks were watching communities like theirs develop elsewhere, from the mysterious Calafou complex outside Barcelona to the pop-up phenomenon dubbed [freespace] in San Francisco. Dmytri Kleiner, a denizen of the hacktivist Shangri-la of Berlin, has coined an adventuresome moniker for the new surge of communities: “venture communism.” He insists on the sensible Old World notion that transforming the economy should start with securing the means of production, digital and otherwise, in worker collectives.

Maybe the unMonastery really is a protocol that can travel, that can go to other places with unused spaces and unused people who want to do good. These spaces could become workshops for commons-based resources, or bulwarks against gentrification, or hubs for disaster relief—with or without permission. A lot of religious communities are trying to figure out how to put their empty buildings to use these days, while preserving some kernel of their traditions. And there’s a fed-up generation looking for the resources, both material and spiritual, to create a society more worth living in. People want to hack, but also to experience some tangible inkling of a future that can sustain them.

Doing so, however, requires tangible politics. If the new wave of guerrilla hackers is to hold on longer than its predecessors, it needs to build power. The hackers need allies at every level: local organizations, organized labor, political parties—allies that their practices can support and that, in turn, can help their values spread. What would an open-source party look like? Or a unionized hackerspace? Churches, too—the turn to religious tropes need not remain solely superficial. These relationships can seem like compromises with the past, but what seems new and original almost never really is, except to the degree that we fail to remember.

The prefix “un” has its uses—for marking a new beginning, for putting aside certain inadequacies of the past—and yet one cannot go on negating and reinventing everything forever. Ancient monks had to learn this, too. First the desert hermits, then the Benedictines, then the Franciscans—each fled the world, while the world did all it could to domesticate them. To last, and to transform society, they had to build power within church structures as well as outside them, making strategic compromises in the process. This meant playing politics—a distinctive kind of politics, though politics nonetheless. Nuns and monks formed ties with the communities around them and established embassies to the Vatican. They had their protocols, perhaps, but protocols on their own were not enough. There may come a time when spiritual-social-political institutions with features such as those of the prototype in Matera will be content to drop the “un” and call themselves, simply, monasteries.
The question before humans is not so much can we limit our deleterious effect on the earth, but, as the reviewer suggests, why should we do so, since the earth is bigger and stronger than we are? Will the earth, in a few hundred years. We care about our neighbors will survive the climate change we are driving. But that humanity will survive the climate change that is occurring repeatedly on earth, is also have a moral obligation to evolve, to do no harm? That is what highly evolved consciousness in all traditions—secular, scientific and spiritual—teaches us.

Karen Malpede
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Letters

thenation.com

I loved Rebecca Tühus-Dubrow's review of *Scatter, Adapt, and Remember* by Annette Newton, because I, too, am interested in the long view of history, geological change, the origins of life and human evolution. Newton is quite right that dramatic climate change has occurred repeatedly on earth, even in the course of human history, and that humanity will survive the climate change we are driving. But that misses the point. Most people don't really care whether there will be humans on the planet in a few hundred years. We care whether we, our children and our neighbors will survive the next year or couple of decades, and whether our smartphones will connect to the Internet.

When a species exceeds the carrying capacity of its environment, nature brings it back into balance through a population collapse. We are about to experience another collapse. My guess is that at least three-quarters of the population will die, much sooner and more suddenly than most of us imagine. Although climate change is the driving force, famine, war, disease and natural disasters will be the immediate causes. Humanity will survive, but most humans won't, and neither will their smartphones. So go ahead and worry. We're in for a very unpleasant time.

Tim Joseph
Ithaca, N.Y.

Son of Deadline Poet

I have taken the liberty of adding two verses to "Deadline Poet" Calvin Trillin's July 21/28 "William Kristol's Credentials as an Iraq Expert" (that the first verse here is his):

Bill Kristol predicted a war of two months.
Its last, we know, somewhat longer.
So, even including his chicken-hawk pals, Has anyone ever been wronger?
Wolofszit said it would pay for itself,
But at 3 trillion dollars and counting,
We'd have to say he was as wrong as old Bill,
And the cost keeps on steadily mounting.

Dick Cheney weighed in with the "fact" that Iraq
Had no past of sectarian strife.
This is one of the very most fact-challenged things
He has said in his fact-challenged life!

Brian Kemble
San Francisco
The Haus of Maus

by ALISA SOLOMON

A faint murmur wafted toward the entrance of “Art Spiegelman’s Co-Mix: A Retrospective” at the Jewish Museum in New York City. Barely audible and wholly indecipherable at first, it grew louder as one moved through the first few galleries and could begin to discern a human voice. Then, at the center of the show, amid scores of preliminary sketches, research materials and finished panels from Spiegelman’s masterpiece Maus, one discovered its source: excerpts of the interviews that the artist recorded with his father, Vladek, beginning in 1972, in which Vladek recounts his experience surviving in Nazi-occupied Poland and in Auschwitz—the basis of his son’s celebrated two-volume graphic memoir, published in book form in 1986 and 1991.

Encountering Vladek’s voice was shocking. In part that’s because, as with any retrospective, “Co-Mix” is dominated by the artist’s consciousness, and the intrusion of someone else’s breaks the spell that is one of the pleasures of a large solo survey—submerging oneself entirely in a single imagination. First mounted in Angoulême, France, in 2012, then moving on to Paris, Cologne and Vancouver before showing in New York (with some additions) for four months, and now headed to Toronto for a December opening at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the exhibit is the first to take stock of Spiegelman’s sweeping fifty-year career.

If his sensibility has remained constant, his drawing style has shifted constantly over the decades—from the inchoate, simple-line caricatures in the hectographed satirical zine Blasé that he produced at age 15, to the busy, bulbous, lurid scenes of his underground comix years in the early 1970s; the visual homages to old masters like Winsor McCay and Chester Gould as he staked out an avant-garde in the ’80s; and the stark graphic forms in the painted-glass window he recently designed for his alma mater, New York’s High School of Art and Design. Meanwhile, from Alisa Solomon, director of the arts and culture concentration at the Columbia Journalism School, is the author of Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

the mid-‘60s through the ‘80s, Spiegelman paid the rent by working in another, altogether different vernacular, parodying consumer goods and popular dolls in the Topps bubble-gum sticker series Wacky Packages (“Crust Toothpaste,” “Botch Tape,” etc.) and Garbage Pail Kids (“Bony Joanie,” “Potty Scotty,” etc.). From early on, and to this day, Spiegelman’s work betrays a restless, cheeky intellect at play, filtered through a smarty-pants Jewish anxiety; he tests the formal limits of his medium while championing its illustrious history, and refuses to give up the charge of épater le bourgeoisie (despite knowing how long ago that battery drained).

Against the twitchy irreverence and boho self-consciousness of Spiegelman’s art, Vladek’s voice sounds steady and calm, its soothing tone all the more astonishing in contrast to the tale it tells. Spiegelman’s first stab at Maus, a three-page strip that ran in a 1972 underground comic (with a cover by R. Crumb) called Funny Aminals, captures the disjunction brilliantly by figuring Vladek’s narration as a bedtime story. After an opening panel that mimics Margaret Bourke-White’s famous photograph of Buchenwald prisoners in striped uniforms lined up behind barbed wire—but with the inmates drawn as mice and one, in the second row, labeled “Poppa”—the story begins. Poppa sits on the edge of his son Mickey’s bed, the boy snugly bundled under the covers, head on his father’s lap. Poppa describes life in the ghetto, then its liquidation, the hiding place he and Momma shared with several others in an attic, their betrayal to the
Gestapo, and so on, all in highly condensed language that incorporates the syntactical and prepositional glitches of a non-native English speaker. (“One night it was a stranger sitting in the downstairs of the house...”) The story is told via narrative captions, while the panels illustrate those scenes—goateed and helmeted cats pursuing long-snouted mice, with no trace of the word “Jew,” “Nazi” or “Holocaust,” the mice wearing “M” badges rather than yellow stars—and the story occasionally flashes forward to the cozy bedroom in Rego Park. By page 3, Poppa and Momma have been sent to “Mauschwitz.” One panel shows a pair of mice in striped uniforms hauling a skeletal corpse to a heap adjacent to the smoke-spewing crematorium chimneys, and the next crosses back to Queens, where Poppa tucks Mickey in, telling him it’s time to sleep. The sweet final image—it almost looks like it was culled from the Russell Hoban–Garth Williams children’s classic Bedtime for Frances, which features a family of adorable badgers—belies the nightmares sure to trouble the child’s slumber.

When he was first invited to contribute to Funny Animals, Spiegelman imagined a 1950s-style horror comic about a mouse caught in a trap, as he relates in a series of autobiographical strips. The comic portrays him as stuck until he visits a film class—trays him as stuck until he visits a film class and (at one time, expurgated) sexual curiosity—she came down to us as the irreproachable survivor parent and the boomer-generation child, as well as the process of representing the putatively unrepresentable.

One effect of this structure—and a reason for Maus’s blockbuster success—is that it blasts away the mawkish and heroic tropes of familiar Holocaust narratives. I have always thought of Maus as the flip side of Anne Frank’s diary, and not only because (as Maus’s subtitle puts it) it is “A Survivor’s Tale.” Both diaries—Spiegelman’s framing story, after all, is the first-person account of Art’s trials—are told in the youthful voice of an aspiring artist with a sharp eye for the irritating foibles of others, an ardor for popular culture and a sense of belonging to a rich, if remote, wider world. But Anne’s story, of course, is cut off abruptly, with the pathos of her life and talent left unfulfilled. Where she is all innocent promise, Art is a guilt-wracked success. A panel in Maus II shows him, beheaded in a mouse mask, hunched at his drawing table and describing Maus I’s triumph. Part of a Nazi guard tower can be glimpsed outside his window; there’s a pile of emaciated corpses at his feet. A speech bubble from an unseen figure—Hollywood tempter or Nazi executioner?—announces, “Alright Mr. Spiegelman. We’re ready to shoot.”

Maus tells of an older brother, Richieu, from whom Art never met: his parents left Richieu to a Golden Age master by writing the book Jack Cole and Plastic Man (extolling Cole’s “cheerful streak of perverse violence”), and he constantly spoke about comics at colleges, bookstores and anywhere else that gave him a platform. You can watch him hold forth in thousands of YouTube clips.)

It was the trauma of September 11, 2001, that reigned Spiegelman’s pilot light for extended work: “disaster is my muse” he contends in In the Shadow of No Towers (2004), an oversized book, printed on heavy cardstock,
Departing from Fort Lauderdale and cruising to:

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- Dave Zirin
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that, in forty-two glossy color pages, follows several simultaneous trajectories. The central narrative relates his and Moully's panicked sprint to pick up their daughter from a school near the World Trade Center as the towers fell; in a loud obbligato, he rants against the Bush administration's jingoistic manipulations of the crime. Meanwhile, visually and thematically, Spiegelman calls upon early-twentieth-century newspaper comic strips—"the only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses"—to help him contain his terror. He transports Bringing Up Father into the twenty-first century, where Jiggs grows ever more paranoid as TV and radio blare bad news; he has the Katzenjammer Kids running for their lives as the Twin Towers burn atop their very own heads. Jumpy and dense with activity, these strips break the comics grid more aggressively than he'd done before. The book's second section anthologizes seven strips from the early 1900s in which war breaks out, flags flap furiously, and buildings threaten to topple. The gesture behind this section resembles that of David Hockney assembling his "Great Wall" of artworks dating from 1350 to 1900 as he explored the manipulation of light in painting: both men demonstrate a specific historical continuity in their medium and place themselves within it.

In recognizing a sense of individual trauma within a collective historical one, Art can't help but recall his father in many of the scenes. I don't know of another work that so acutely captures the discombobulating sense of alarm and rage and love of the city that overtook so many of us in the months after the attacks. Still, no doubt because of its savaging of the Bush doctrine, you won't find it for sale in the gift shop of the new 9/11 Memorial and Museum; you can, however, buy postcards of Spiegelman and Moully's iconic New Yorker cover of the towers silhouetted against a black background in the Jewish Museum's shop.

A surge of work followed, some of it completely new—a theatrical collaboration with the Pilobolus Dance Theater; a lecture-demonstration slide show, with music by the jazz composer Phillip Johnston, on the history of wordless novels—and much of it retrospective. Indeed, even before the "Co-Mix" exhibit with its attractive, image-packed catalog—bookended by essays by J. Hoberman (on Spiegelman's collapse of high and low art) and Robert Storr (making a case for comics departments in museums)—Spiegelman was documenting his oeuvre.

He first chronicled his early experiments in narrative strategies and drawing styles in 1978 in a large-format album called Breakdowns; having found his voice as a cartoonist, he explained later, he "needed to see my strips in a setting separate from the underground comix they had been born in, to understand what I had articulated." The pieces show his allusive, self-referential, often witty and sometimes bizarre explorations of plot-making in comics, appropriating insights and images from Dada, Cubism, TV soap operas, the comics canon, porn, his own dreams. The three-page proto-Maus from 1972 was here. So was a breakthrough strip, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," a gut-wrenching four-page account of his response to his mother Anja's suicide in 1968, when Spiegelman was 19.

Drawn in an Expressionistic scratchboard style that makes the panels resemble woodcuts, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" portrays Art dressed in a striped concentration camp uniform, his stunned eyes large and drooping on a face made haggard with multiple hatch-marks. The lines become more jagged as the strip progresses; Anja's coffin juts out over it, howling; Art slumps in the corner of another panel, "alone with my thoughts," which he pictures in a stack of images (a heap of corpses in Auschwitz; his mother reading him a story in bed as a little boy; a close-up on her right hand, stamped with its Auschwitz number, slitting her left wrist with a razor). The closing frames show him locked up in prison, a speech bubble emerging from the bars: "You murdered me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!"

Years later, Spiegelman inserted "Hell Planet" whole into Maus. With the jarring visual disruption, he provided important exposition and introduced both a powerful new plot point and a layer of fury and sorrow: Vladek finds the strip, which Art never intended him to see. Later, the father admits that in a fit of grief he had burned Anja's reconstructed wartime diaries, further silencing the mother Art still longs to know (and to be known by). Incensed, Art transfers a share of his guilt to his father: "You—you murderer!" Vladek thoroughly meditates Anja's story, dismissing Art's question of what happened to her while they were separated at Auschwitz, saying, "she went through the same what me: Terrible!" An agonizing sense of her absence pervades the father-son drama of Maus.

Nothing else in Breakdowns approaches the strong emotion of "Hell Planet." The overall tone is one of intellectual whimsy and delight in the tricks that comics can perform: one strip moves from frame to frame in any number of directions; another renders the pair of crooks in a hardboiled detective story as Mr. Potatohead and Picasso's split-faced Weeping Woman.

The book barely sold and was hardly noticed. But Spiegelman reissued it in 2008, this time introduced by the nineteen-page autobiographical comic essay "Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@!" In richly drawn color strips—into which he occasionally collages a page of an early work—he traces his development toward the Breakdowns pieces that follow. Eyeballs bulging and tongue lolling, Art pants after Harvey Kurtzman's Mad the moment he sees it in a store at age 7 (and the small boy is drawn with the older artist's bearded chin, receding hairline and perpetual cigarette hanging from his mouth). Another chapter shows him as an incompetent, bored and ambyopic boy in the outfield, reading a comic book as a baseball comes his way and whlops him on the head; in the next frame, he is a decked Charlie Brown and, in the last one, he is shown hiding from sports in the library after school reading Kafka. So this Bildungs-cartoon continues, not always chronologically, ending with a peroration on form, content and the power of narrative that cites Susan Sontag and Viktor Shklovsky.

Looking at all these works, it's not surprising to learn that the impetus for Maus was formal: Spiegelman wanted to create a comic that "needed a bookmark" and would be worth rereading. (For the most part, poring over his oeuvre in book form is more rewarding than gazing at it on walls.) The process is recounted in minute detail in MetaMaus (2011), a 300-page compendium of notes, sketches, resource materials and all the rest that went into making Maus, with a lengthy interview conducted by the comics scholar Hillary Chute. The book comes with a DVD, The Complete "Maus" Files, that contains the words and images of both Maus volumes, with individual pages linked to relevant background materials and preparatory drawings; the 1946 booklets of renderings of concentration camps and other contemporary accounts that Spiegelman had found on his mother's bookshelf; home movie footage from his second research trip to Auschwitz; and the full audio of the interviews with Vladek. In all, the volume is like a cross between a variantum King Lear and the six-disc deluxe reissue of The Velvet Underground and Nico, designed for prospecting academics and zealous fans—who can't ever come close to Spiegelman's own obsessiveness. Not that they haven't tried. Dozens of doctoral dissertations have been written about Maus, and a scholarly-journal database shows thousands of references to it; in the comments notebook by the
exit from “Co-Mix,” one museumgoer wrote: “My future wife and I have matching Maus portrait tattoos taken from the endpages of Maus. Thank you.” One can only wonder if they put them on their forearms.

In Breakdowns/Portrait and MetaMaus—and in the more overt teleology presented in the exhibit, where, in the most satisfying use of the museum format, all of Maus II is mounted in horizontal sequence, with variant pages running in vertical branches—one sees Spiegelman clambering up the mountain and applying the lessons of his earlier experiments, in which he mastered the use of the distance devices that, as in theater, are built into the very form of the medium, available to those who want to make use of them: breaking the fourth wall, juxtaposing disparate realms of story and meaning, making metaphor material, monkeying with metonymy. Comics can captivate the reader with representational narrative even as they reveal and comment upon their own themes and strategies. They can simultaneously make and break illusion—while yakking about the process. Sometimes, this takes the simple form of making figures of speech visual. When a “Portrait” strip recalls how Art was “in the grip of my recovered memories” while working feverishly on “Hell Planet,” a huge white hand squeezes around the artist at his drawing table; in Maus II, when Art visits his therapist, he is actually shrunken—tiny against his chair and barely a third of the other man’s size.

Sometimes, the strategy involves giving graphic shape to the unspoken. In another “Portrait” strip, after Vladek unwittingly buys his son crime and horror comic books—once banned for allegedly causing juvenile delinquency—the boy tosses his “pops” a quarter for another batch, appearing in the frame transformed into a hoodlum replete with leather jacket, shades and greaser pompadour. A strip called “A Father’s Guiding Hand” offers a powerful portrayal of trauma transmission, as the middle-aged Art presents his own son with the family heirloom: a chest from which a fire-breathing monster bursts forth and keeps growing, a Hitler face protruding, Alien-like, from its belly.

Most important, as Spiegelman enthuses, comics turn time into space. Panels can collapse or juxtapose different temporalities, pit them against each other, dissolve them entirely. And all that can happen in the visuals alone, in the accord or contradictions between image and text or between speech bubble and caption. Early in Maus I, Art asks Vladek to describe his life in Poland and the war as he pedals on a stationary bike in Art’s old bedroom. Vladek’s arms dominate a long, narrow panel as they grasp the handlebars, framing Art in the background—just beneath his father’s concentration-camp tattoo. In Maus II, when Art and Françoise visit Vladek in the Catskills, he tells them about the cremation pits dug for the mass arrival of Hungarians at Auschwitz: as big as the swimming pool at the Pines Hotel. While driving to the Shop-Rite, he answers Art’s question about four women who revolted and blew up a crematorium: as he explains that these women—good friends of Anja—were caught and hanged, the car travels a wooded rode, passing four bodies dangling from the trees. The perpetual presence of the past in comics maps directly onto the perpetual presence of past trauma.

Maus has long been credited with winning some highbrow legitimacy for comics, best exemplified by its special Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and an exhibit on the making of Maus (largely incorporated into “Co-Mix”) at the Museum of Modern Art in 1991 (there, one had to don earphones to hear Vladek’s testimony). It’s hard to imagine that the serious, long-form narratives by artists like Chris Ware, Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel could have happened without it (nor, perhaps, the spate of comics about the Holocaust like Bernice Eisenstein’s I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors, Miriam Katin’s We Are On Our Own, Joe Kubert’s Yossel; April 19, 1943, and even a manga version of Anne Frank’s diary). Spiegelman helped open the way, too, for works in other media, like Ari Folman’s animated film Waltz With Bashir and Lisa Kron’s solo performance 2.5 Minute Ride.

Less widely noted—and tied to the ways comics allow the present to be permeated by the past—is the fact that Maus became the proof text for academic study of the trans-generational transmission of trauma and its representation. It was in her discussion of Maus that the scholar Marianne Hirsch coined the term “postmemory” to describe the experience of second-generation children being so intimately and powerfully shaped by the stories and images of events that preceded them that they take on the force of their own memories.

Spiegelman likely still wishes to get out from under the shadow of the giant mouse—“a monument I built to my father,” though “I never dreamed [it] would get so big,” as a strip in Portrait puts it. But Maus is one of the great artistic works of the twentieth century, so what can he do? It is also a monument to the medium he has championed, and expanded, for decades.
Hope Against Hope

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

What first comes to mind when I think of Jeff Koons isn’t his art—not even his most memorable works, such as the stainless steel Rabbit of 1986 or the vast, flowery Puppy of 1992—but rather a cameo he had in a movie. In Gus Van Sant’s 2008 biopic Milk, Koons briefly graced the big screen in the role of Art Agnos, the progressive politician (and future mayor of San Francisco) who defeated Harvey Milk in the 1976 Democratic primary for a position in the California State Assembly. After a debate, Agnos offers his opponent a bit of advice: relentless criticism of the status quo isn’t enough to win the public over. Unless you can offer constructive programs to improve people’s lives, you’re just a downer, Agnos says: “You gotta to give ‘em a reason to hope.” People need hope.

While the admonition seems to be faithful to the exchange reported by Milk’s biographer Randy Shilts, it might easily have been Koons’s own motto. When he began to attract attention in the early 1980s, the new watchword for art was “critique”; every up-to-date young artist was poring over books like The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture (1983), edited by Hal Foster. Koons was one of the few artists of the time who wasn’t explicitly “anti” anything (except, as he has said, “anti-judgment”). What Foster called “a postmodernism of resistance”—one that “seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes,” as he put it—was, for Koons, completely beside the point. Indeed, the catalog of the current Koons retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art features an illuminating essay, by the art historian Pamela M. Lee, about Koons’s “increasingly post-critical stance.”

Relentless optimism has taken him far, and the Whitney has chosen to glorify it by making the Koons retrospective the largest exhibition it has ever devoted to a single artist as well as the swan song at its Manhattan’s Upper East Side, which has been its home for nearly five decades. Once the exhibition ends on October 19, the museum will have a hiatus until it opens its grand new quarters downtown in the meat-packing district sometime next year. (After the Whitney, the show travels to the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.)

As Koons would later emphasize with series titles like “Easyfun” and “Celebration,” his art presents itself as one of affirma tion, perhaps of a regression to childhood innocence, despite the knowingly creepy overtones that often lurk around its edges. Koons contends that his embrace of kitsch means a liberation from invidious standards of cultural distinction: “I was just trying to say that whatever you respond to is perfect, that your history and your own cultural background are perfect.” Here, Koons turns art’s precious promesse du bonheur into a New Age mantra of blissful idiocy.

Despite his powers as an artist, or rather as a sculptor (nothing Koons has produced in the guise of painting is of more than trifling interest), the work failed me. The survey of his message of hope left me feeling hopeless. I’m just not good enough at being the disinterested viewer to find myself cheered by a cheerleader for the neoliberal economy, no matter how brilliantly inventive. Scott Rothkopf, the curator of the exhibition, points out that the first review of Koons’s work had already pegged it as “a commentary on the glamour of conspicuous consumption.” This is what separates Koons from Warhol, who, in an era when CEOs made about twenty times the average worker’s salary (rather than nearly 300 times, as today), saw consumerism as a force that leveled social distinctions. “The richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest,” he said. “You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and the same things as the poorest,” he said. “You already pegged it as “a commentary on the glamour of conspicuous consumption.” This is what separates Koons from Warhol, who, in an era when CEOs made about twenty times the average worker’s salary (rather than nearly 300 times, as today), saw consumerism as a force that leveled social distinctions. “The richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest,” he said. “You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and the same things as the poorest,” he said. “You

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represent their values so convincingly if he didn’t share them. It’s not economic rationality that collectors find inspiring in Koons’s work, or in any of their other true favorites; it’s the perverse romance of business as the visionary pursuit of market dominance. Rothkopf reminds us that Koons has sometimes had to sell his pieces for less than what it cost to make them—“His business model has always been risky at best and disastrous at worst”—and argues that this sets him apart from such other market darlings as Richard Prince, Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami. But the same thing is true for all of them, even Prince, who is a more traditional kind of artist: they put the market at the service of their obsessions. Murakami, reminded by the journalist Sarah Thornton of Warhol’s maxim that “Making money is art…and good business is the best art,” just laughed and said, “That is a fantasy!” Jeff Bezos knows you don’t have to show a profit to get rich, and Donald Trump knows what it’s like to face bankruptcy; in today’s economy, “risky at best and disastrous at worst” is just how things are done. In the end, it’s always the others who pay.

Modern-day moguls have learned to think of themselves not as canny bean-counters, the organization men of yore, but as titanic creative geniuses in the Romantic mold of a Wagner or Rodin; they expect of an artist no less. It’s entirely characteristic of Rothkopf’s Marie Antoinette attitude that, even as he invites the museumgoer to admire the spirit of risk that led Koons to “lay off nearly his entire staff” in 1997, he has no thought to spare for the laid-off workers themselves. Yet despite Rothkopf’s paens, appalling as they are, to Koons’s open-eyed devotion to “the unifying sign of money” (somehow morally or intellectually or even aesthetically superior to the approach of other artists, whose work seems “to buckle with embarrassment under a pecuniary attention it neither seeks nor sustains”), I have to agree with his essay’s concluding point: colleagues recognize in Koons what they call a “real artist.” Of course, it’s almost impossible to know what vivid yet ungraspable intuition is embedded in anyone’s application of this honorific, but I suspect that in Koons’s case, it always has something to do with the intensity with which he pursues his work’s realization. But there are better ways of achieving this than by becoming the CEO of one’s own art brand.

In previous columns, I have argued against the view—common among some cultural critics—that artists who are promoted by the market can for that very reason be taken as affirming in their work the values of their collectorship; as Rothkopf rightly says, “Any monochrome painting can be subject to an accelerating price index without visibly registering that fact.” But Koons really is an emblematic artist in this sense, and Rothkopf’s flippancy illustrates how handily the artist’s work exemplifies our reactionary times.

But for those of us who aren’t inclined to swoon over Koons’s success at becoming the Steve Jobs of art, what’s left to appreciate? The great jumble of his retrospective doesn’t answer the question. While Koons’s cultural influence certainly justifies the full-scale, down-to-the-last-detail treatment, the retrospective shows that only his work from the 1980s has any real artistic consistency. What’s striking about that work, especially in view of what followed, is the flatness of its affect. It doesn’t try to excite the viewer, but rather to lure him or her into contemplating with a certain neutrality what otherwise might have been dismissed as beneath notice. Consider his sculptures consisting of vacuum cleaners encased in acrylic boxes; a somewhat alien, theatrical light is cast on them by their being lit from below by fluorescent tubes. It’s a very subtle effect. I can’t take very seriously the pseudo-Freudian hooey with which the artist has encouraged his commentators to surround these works—supposedly they conjure “sexual associations” both male and female with their “pliant trunks, sucking orifices, and bags that inflate and deflate like lungs” (though we never see these in operation). I defend to the death the right of any person to find erotic significance in a vacuum cleaner, but my own inclinations go otherwise. For me, these works take something utilitarian and turn it into a collectible; the vacuums sit untouched in their cases like investment-grade Barbie dolls that will never be played with but simply preserved in perpetuity in cryogenic splendor. I can already hear the rejoinder: Isn’t that true of all art objects? Yes and no. There’s something more to art, something that doesn’t necessarily take the form of what the ‘80s art world called “criticality” but that still refuses to lull the viewer into believing—as the art historian Alexander Nagel recalls when he first saw Koons’s work—that “I didn’t have to do anything other than accept it.” Religious icons, totalitarian propaganda and commercial advertising all might urge that—but icons, propaganda and advertising only become art when we no longer hear them whispering: Don’t think anymore, just give in.

In any case, subsequent works like those exhibited under the title “Luxury and Degradation” showed Koons’s investment in the collectible as a model for his art. These 1986 stainless-steel sculptures were cast from objects of display, such as bourbon bottles in the form of a train set (originally in porcelain); supposedly Koons had his steel replica filled, like the original, with whiskey at the distillery. Likewise, the accompanying liquor ads were not rephotographed, as an artist like Richard Prince would have done, but printed from the original plates with high-quality oil-based ink on canvas. Koons was an appropriator, like other artists of the time, but his point was always to make a better, more exclusive version of the found object—to borrow his terms, not a degraded version but a luxury one.

Though I have never loved Koons’s work, it was the sort of enterprise that made New York in the 1980s an artistically absorbing place. From show to show, one could see Koons pushing himself further, with the curious result that each show made the last one seem, in retrospect, almost classically composed. And never was that truer than with his 1989–91 “Made in Heaven” series, with its startlingly autobiographical turn for an artist who had previously touted the “objectivity” of the ready-made. In intimate detail, the series celebrated the artist’s sex life with Ilona Staller, or La Cicciolina, the Italian porn star and politician who was also, for a time, his wife. As it turned out, this intertwining of art and life was a disaster: the marriage ended in an acrimonious divorce and a bitter custody fight that was never resolved because an American court granted custody to Koons while the child was in Italy with Staller. One result was a hiatus in Koons’s work, after which he began a series whose title, “Celebration,” can only be seen as compensatory, and inadvertently ironic; his difficulty in finishing pieces to his own satisfaction can be detected in their dates of production, not uncommonly 1994–2000 or even 1994–2006. For Rothkopf, this is evidence of Koons’s devotion to perfection, but to me, it suggests the anxiety beneath the works’ shiny, happy surface. From here on out, in fact, Koons has thrown himself into an ecstasy of falsehood. His work blossoms, if that is the right word, into an ever more gargantuan effort to create, as if to confound the cool gaze solicited by his art of the 1980s: a visual frenzy of bright colors and clashing imagery on an ever-increasing
Science as Salvation?

by MICHAEL SALER

Whether or not scientists are from Mars and humanists from Venus, the “two cultures” debate about the arts and sciences has never been down to earth. For decades we’ve endured schematic sparring between straw men: humanists claim that scientists are reductive, scientists find humanists reactionary. (A recent bout between the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker and the literary critic Leon Wieseltier in the pages of The Nation introduces an amusing turn to the debate.) Matrix scientists and humanists with strong ties to the humanities, is alarmed by the hubristic stance of his discipline and the backlash it is liable to provoke. He has written The Island of Knowledge as the much needed self-analysis in a time when scientific speculation and arrogance are rampant.... I am attempting

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Koons will likely have a place in art history, but it may be because of his influence more than his work. As evidence of that influence, consider the most talked-about piece seen in New York City this year, Kara Walker’s ironically titled A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, which was presented by Creative Time in the late spring and early summer at the former Domino Sugar factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. This was a surprise turn for an artist who has not previously been known as a sculptor; Walker’s signature works have been grand-scale cut-paper tableaux, silhouettes depicting racially and sexually charged narratives uncomfortably mixing historical memory and perverse fantasy, always on the border of the unspeakable. Hers is not an art that says to anyone, “Your history and your own cultural background are perfect.” Walker prizes ambivalence. But like Koons’s Puppy, A Subtlety was made from an unusual ma-

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Photograph by Jason Wyche/Courtesy Creative Time

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Michael Saler, the author of As If, teaches history at the University of California, Davis.
to protect science from attacks on its intellectual integrity.”

Perhaps this well-meant intervention is unnecessary, given the many signs of interdisciplinary concord today. These include the growth of science studies, technocultural studies and the digital humanities within the liberal arts; successful popularizations of science in the media—the new *Cosmos* had the largest debut of any series in television history; and the ongoing enthusiasm for science fiction in mass culture. (True, the genre is often light-years away from genuine science, but at its best it’s an exemplary merger of the two cultures.) From such portents alone, we seem poised to embrace the ideal of “one culture, many methods.” But might this be a pious platitude, if not a colossal category mistake? Are the arts and sciences actually fated to be an estranged couple, burdening their offspring with crippling complexes?

Gleiser hopes to heal the rift between the two cultures by denying the scientific dream of establishing final truths. He insists that while the arts and sciences have different methods, they are fundamentally united in their search for humanity’s roots and purposes; they also share the human limitation of finding only provisional and incomplete answers. He traces Western science’s misguided aspiration to omniscience, and its consequent devaluing of human fallibility, to its beginnings in classical Greece. This is certainly an appropriate place to start for a history of science’s Platonic aspirations. However, the origin of the “two cultures” debate that Gleiser implicitly addresses is more recent, and thus less entrenched, than his own chronology implies. The unhappy couple stands a good chance of being reconciled through judicious interventions such as his.

Their current disaffection commenced in the early nineteenth century, when the “natural philosopher,” a man of parts, began to be replaced by the specialized “scientist,” a term coined in the 1830s. A new division of labor emerged. Scientists claimed to establish objective facts and laws about the natural world by stifling their imagination and relying on empirical observation, testing and prediction; humanists embraced the Romantic imagination, interpreting the ambiguous nature of human experience through empathy as well as analysis. At the dawn of the twentieth century, reconciliation beckoned within the new domain of the “social sciences.” Economists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and historians combined rational inquiry with intuitive insight—the sort of “scientific use of the imagination” proposed by the scientist John Tyndall and exemplified by the fictional icon Sherlock Holmes. Nevertheless, methods clashed and philosophies jostled. Should social scientists seek simple, encompassing laws like the natural sciences, or should they highlight particularity and uniqueness, like the humanities? The debate revolved around approaches deemed “nomothetic” (generalizing) or “idiographic” (individualizing)—terms so ugly they assured public disinterest.

The battle lines became firmly drawn in the years following World War II. In *Science and Human Values* (1956), Jacob Bronowski attempted to overcome the sullen suspicions between humanists and scientists, each now condemning the other for the horrifying misuse of technology during the conflict:

Those whose education and perhaps tastes have confined them to the humanities protest that the scientists alone are to blame, for plainly no mandarin ever made a bomb or an industry. The scientists say, with equal contempt, that the Greek scholars and the earnest explorers of cave paintings do well to wash their hands of blame; but what in fact are they doing to help direct the society whose ills grow more often from inaction than from error?

Bronowski was a published poet and biographer of William Blake as well as a mathematician; he knew that artists and scientists had different aims and methods. Yet he also attested that both engaged in imaginative explorations of the unities underlying the human and natural worlds.

If Bronowski’s stress on the imagination as the foundation of both the arts and sciences had prevailed, Gleiser would not need to remind his readers that Newton and Einstein shared a similar “belief in the creative process.” However, while Bronowski meant to heal the breach by exposing it, he inadvertently encouraged others to expand it into an unbridgeable gulf, a quagmire of stalemate and trench warfare. His friend C.P. Snow battled on the division in lectures that were subsequently published under the meme-friendly title *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959). Snow acknowledged that scientists could be philistine about the humanities, but his ire was directed at the humanists: they composed the governing establishment, their willful ignorance about science impeding policies that could help millions worldwide. As the historian Guy Ortolano has shown in *The Two Cultures Controversy* (2009), Snow tactlessly insinuated that the literary intelligentsia’s delight in irrational modernism rather than rational science was partly responsible for the Holocaust: “ Didn’t the influence of all they represent bring Auschwitz that much closer?” Such ad hominem attacks raised the hackles of the literary critic F.R. Leavis, himself a master of the art. His response, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow* (1962), proved only that humanists could be just as intemperate as Snow implied. (One critic, appalled by Leavis’s vituperation, dubbed him “the Himmler of Literature.”)

The “two cultures” debate has continued for decades, often rehashing the same issues and generating more heat than light—a metaphor that reminds us of how entwined the arts and sciences are in everyday life. In recent years, however, the tone and substance of the debate have changed. There is a revived tenor of nineteenth-century scientific triumphalism, owing in part to the amazing successes of the natural sciences, from the standard
model in physics to DNA sequencing and the Human Genome Project. Numerous physicists are convinced that they will discover a final “theory of everything” proving the unity of nature’s laws and defining its constituent elements. Not all scientists share this reductionist outlook, but the wider culture unintentionally reinforces it, thanks to information technology’s colonization of everyday life. We’re more primed than ever before to think in terms of keyword searches, algorithmic sequences and Big Data.

No wonder that science, for many, has become a secular holy writ, goading its believers to denounce all forms of religion as empty superstition while converting the humanistic disciplines into mere disciples of science. The new priesthood even performs last rites, as Stephen Hawking did in 2011: “Philosophy is dead,” he pronounced, because “[p]hilosophers have not kept up with modern developments in science. Particularly physics.” Gleiser is troubled by the fatal preening of some prominent scientists, who risk alienating a public otherwise predisposed to appreciate the marvels of scientific discovery and the mysteries of scientific exploration: “To claim to know the ‘truth’ is too heavy a burden for scientists to carry. We learn from what we can measure and should be humbled by how much we can’t. It’s what we don’t know that matters.”

In this polarized atmosphere, offers of a truce in the manner of Bronowski simply inflame mutual mistrust. The recent dust-up in The New Republic began when Pinker extended to the humanities an olive branch of sorts in the name of “consilience” with science. Wieseltier identified it as a cudgel, and in some ways he was right: Pinker began by transsubstantiating eighteenth-century philosophers like Hume and Rousseau into scientists manqué, and then added insult to injury by suggesting that the humanities become more like the sciences by adopting a “progressive agenda.” Wieseltier agreed with him that the boundaries between the two cultures were porous, but demanded they be buttressed against science’s imperialistic agenda: “Unified field theories may turn scientists on, but they turn humanists off: it has taken a very long time to establish the epistemological humility, the pluralistic largeness of mind, that those borders represent, and no revolution in any science has the power to repeal it.” (To be fair, the humanities have had their share of unified theories, including Marxism, Freudianism and structuralism. The two cultures are true to human nature in craving essences and totalities; even some postmodernists have been heard to proclaim that there are absolutely no absolutes.)

If such well-intentioned partisans can’t negotiate a cease-fire, perhaps each side needs to conduct an internal audit about what it has in common with its opponent prior to future armistice talks. Philosophers and historians of science have laid the groundwork, but they tend to be humanists and thus easier for hard scientists to dismiss. Steven Weinberg, a Nobel laureate in physics, patronized the philosophy of science as providing a “pleasing gloss” on scientific achievements, but little more: “We should not expect it to provide today’s scientists with any useful guidance about how to go about their work or about what they are likely to find.”

This situation is what makes Gleiser’s intervention in the debates so timely and interesting. He started his career in theoretical physics believing in the holy grail of his field, a final theory unifying quantum mechanics with general relativity. In his autobiographical A Tear at the Edge of Creation (2010), he confessed that he had been attracted to science initially by his own psychological need for order in an apparently meaningless universe. The death of his mother when he was 6 led him to search for sources of transcendence, from religion to fantasy fiction. He finally became a convert to the secular “magic” of physics as a teenager: “Science was a rational connection to a reality beyond our senses. There was a bridge to the mysterious, and it did not have a reality beyond our senses. There was a bridge to the mysterious, and it did not have a bridge to supernatural lands. This was the greatest realization of my life.”

Gleiser has never lost his sense of wonder about existence or about the importance of science in conveying it. But his own experiences as a professional have led him to abandon the dream of attaining any final theory—in fact, he views the goal itself as a form of “intellectual vanity” and “monothetic science.” Part of his disillusion has to do with the failure to find possible tests or empirical evidence for the extravagant claims of superstring theory, rendering it closer to metaphysics than physics. Gleiser also immersed himself in the history of science and was reminded that Western science has dreamed of discovering ultimate truth since the discipline’s inception. This faith has never been substantiated at the empirical level, situating it alongside mythic and religious yearnings to attain “oneness.” “There are faith-based myths running deep in science’s canon,” he maintains. “Scientists, even the great ones, may confuse their expectations of reality with reality itself.”

None of these heartfelt observations would surprise philosophers of science; Mary Midgley’s wonderful Science as Salvation (1992)—not included in Gleiser’s bibliography—makes the same points. But Gleiser speaks as a scientist and is thus more likely to be heard by his peers—provided he doesn’t scare them off with his anti-realist stance. He can sound positively postmodern when he defines science as “a human construction, a narrative we create to make sense of the world around us.” But if he opposes the naïve realist belief that science accesses a mind-independent reality, he doesn’t make the equally naïve claim that science is merely a social construction. It does attain verifiable knowledge of reality, its evolving instruments yielding increasingly precise data: but the resultant explanations are inevitably partial and always subject to change. There are no final answers, for new knowledge yields new mysteries to be solved. Science is a limited, interpretive practice and will only be “humanized” if it adopts the epistemological humility that Wieseltier claimed was the purview of the humanities.

These conclusions, and some of the same historical examples, reappear in Gleiser’s The Island of Knowledge. In this work, he underscores the many limits, even “insurmountable barriers,” to scientific knowledge. He likens science to an island situated within a wider sea of the unknown: “As the Island of Knowledge grows, so do the shores of our ignorance.” In thirty-two brief chapters, he provides a stimulating overview of Western science’s shifting interpretations of reality from classical Greece to the present, including informative discussions of atomism, alchemy, classical physics, quantum mechanics, quantum entanglement, the Big Bang, the multiverse, superstring theory, mathematics, information theory, computers and consciousness.

Gleiser is a brilliant expositor of difficult concepts, and his raw enthusiasm is transporting. He is equally fervent about the uncertainties of science, having once been a believer in its unalloyed truth: “I find myself in the difficult role of being a romantic having to kill the dreams of other romantics.” However, as with many disillusioned votaries of absolutist creeds, his new stance can be as fundamentalist as the one he rejects.
As he argued in his previous book—and continues to argue in this one—science's “essential limitations” include the imprecision of its instruments and the cultural contingency of its concepts. In *The Island of Knowledge*, he eagerly gathers other objections to any final theory as kindling for a bonfire of the vanities. He contends that nature itself posits absolute limits to what we can know empirically, such as the initial conditions that generated the Big Bang or the existence of multiple universes implied by current theories of cosmic inflation. In addition, the quantum world is impervious to deterministic explanations. And mathematics is likely not mind-independent but rather a human invention—one whose formal structures cannot be both consistent and complete.

These assertions may be valid—only time will tell, if that—but Gleiser's temperamental absolutism sometimes subverts his pragmatic faith in an unfinished universe. He insists that “there are aspects of reality that are permanently beyond our reach,” and also that “we can never know for certain.... We should build solid arguments based on current scientific knowledge but keep our minds open for surprises.” He notes that some mysteries will always remain mysteries—“there is an essential difference between ‘we don’t know’ and ‘we can’t know’”—but also admits that “‘Never’ is a hard word to use in science.” He inadvertently becomes his own best example of how hard it is to practice epistemological humility even when one is committed to it. Attaining that outlook, rather than certainty, is the true noble dream.

It is this lesson, above all, that makes Gleiser's intervention in the “two cultures” debate so valuable. As scientists, both he and Bronowski have established underlying unities: not in the forces of nature, but in the humanities and the sciences. Bronowski stressed their common reliance on imagination, which subsumes “numbers and pictures, the lever and *The Iliad*, the shapes of atoms and the great plays and the Socratic dialogues.” Gleiser emphasizes science's inherent limitations, which make it “more beautiful and powerful, not less.” Despite its commitment to establishing verifiable knowledge of reality, science remains an interpretive and contingent practice—indeed, a humanistic enterprise. In the “two cultures” debate, one hopes that Gleiser's words are among the last, especially his claim that science aligns “with the rest of the human creative output—impressive, multifaceted, and imperfect as we are.”
Puzzle No. 3334
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

**ACROSS**

6 Shock crazy running back (4)
7 See 19
11 See 21
12 Killer of diplomat adores stuffing (7)
13 Unsavory thugs, hot for ideas…(8)
16 See 18A
18 and 16 …are well positioned as pets try dancing outside it (3,6)
18 and 32 Caesar has a vehicle, taking time for a labor action (3,4,6)
19 and 7 Be exceedingly formal or expressionless when eating alongside formerly disbanded rock group from Athens, GA (5,2,8)
19 and 23 Distant stall where you might buy a bass? (11)
21 and 11 Failing alien test, I appear in public after death (3,2,5)
21 and 31 Art song or spiritual chant shaking off sun god’s slumber (3,7)
23 See 19
24 Source of ivory, say, near the center of Deep Southern city (8)

29 Peachy cereal mentioned in a kind of speech (7)
31 See 21
32 See 18A
33 Hollered “Go away, mule” (4)

**DOWN**

1 Top and sides of trumpets supported by trumpeter Al (1-5)
2 Need more tangled thorns to fill square up (3,5,2)
3 Turmoil disrupted tuners (6)
4 Mail-order carrier for aristocrat (4)
5 Yes, Frost recited Keats and Yeats, for example (3,5)
8 Award from 2000 included in the old retrospective (4)
9 Whole drain under the middle of avenue (6)
10 Enthusiast, terminally long in tooth (4)
14 See 20
15 Capsized conveyances cause pain (5)
17 Wires to the roof she originally tied around standard set (10)
18 Mysterious task: code pen (8)
20 and 14 Put down men’s culinary creations (6)
22 Ties an idiot around a bed (6)
25 Author’s musical instrument taking dip, unfortunately (6)
26 Spock finally has to irritate his captain (4)
27 L oudly badger topless woman in the Bible (6)
28 Carry an animal (4)
30 Be bored as “Over There!” is played on the radio (4)

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**SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3333**

**ACROSS**

1 BLOGOSPHERE
2 WRAPS GAZINESS
3 EGGPLANTS CAKES
4 BLOGOSPHERE
5 Wraps Gauziness
6 He Edict
7 Peaches Cakes
8 N(n)ber A A S
9 Building BLOGOSPHERE
10 N(N)ber A A S
11 Building BLOGOSPHERE
12 N(N)ber A A S
13 Building BLOGOSPHERE
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You deserve a factual look at . . .

The Shame of Gaza

Hundreds of innocents have died in Gaza. Who is really to blame for this tragedy?

Israel left Gaza completely in 2005, freeing the Palestinians to build an autonomous state there. Yet since then, the Hamas terror regime has instead chosen to use its resources to wage an unrelenting war against the Jewish state from military installations located in the midst of densely populated Arab residential areas.

What are the facts?

When Israel evacuated its citizens and military from Gaza in 2005, Israelis hoped this would be the beginning of a win-win, land-for-peace exchange with the Palestinians. American Jewish donors even paid $14 million to purchase 3,000 greenhouses left by Israeli settlers and transferred them to the Palestinian Authority.

But instead of creating a thriving agricultural enterprise, the greenhouses were vandalized and destroyed. Gaza’s golden Mediterranean beaches could have made it a Middle East tourist mecca. But instead of the vibrant state that both Israel and many Palestinians envisioned, today under Hamas Gaza’s poverty is worse than ever, its cities are ravaged by self-inflicted warfare and its people suffer under an Islamist dictatorship. What a shame that is.

What’s worse, since Hamas strong-armed the Palestinian Authority out of power in Gaza in 2007, the terror group began attacking Israel with a nearly continuous barrage of unsophisticated, but still deadly short-range rockets. Awfully committed to destroying Israel, Hamas and other Gaza-based jihadis have since 2001 fired more than 15,000 rockets at Israeli cities and kibbutzim.

Israel responded in 2009 with a ground offensive in Gaza and in 2012 with intense shelling of Hamas military positions, most of them purposely located in Gaza’s heavily populated urban areas. Israeli military responses did untold damage to Gaza’s infrastructure, and led to short-term ceasefires by Hamas. Unfortunately, Israel’s defensive responses also resulted in approximately fifteen hundred deaths, many of them Arab civilians living near Hamas military positions. What a shame that is.

Recently Hamas has acquired longer-range, Syrian-produced missiles via Iran that are capable of reaching Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion International Airport and Jerusalem. In the first seven months of 2014, Hamas militants launched more than 3,500 such high-powered rockets, threatening 80% of Israel’s population—and sending many of those six million people fleeing in terror to bomb shelters.

By basing its military operations in urban centers, Hamas’ intention seems precisely to allow its citizens to be killed and injured for propaganda purposes.

Thanks to Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system and the Palestinians’ poor targeting capabilities, these attacks have yet to kill large numbers of Israelis. But it’s not for lack of trying: Hamas aims to kill as many Jews as possible.

What Is to Be Done? In 1945, during World War II, the United States bombed Dresden, Germany, and, a few months later, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, killing 220,000 people, most of them civilians. Who was to blame for these tragic deaths? Was it the United States, which was responding defensively to two deadly enemies, or was it the leaders of Germany and Japan, who had sworn themselves to the enslavement and destruction of many nations, including our own? The U.S. believed it needed to demonstrate to Germany and Japan that unless they surrendered, their military, their infrastructure and, if necessary, their people would be decimated.

Israel’s situation today is even more dire than that of the U.S. in 1945. Israelis are being attacked daily by a Palestinian terrorist group sworn to the Jewish state’s destruction and launching military offensives on Israeli civilians. This is an existential threat that no nation would or should tolerate. An implacable enemy like this must not merely be temporarily deterred, it must be defeated.

We pray that few Arab civilians are harmed in Hamas’ deadly adventure, but demands by the international community that the group move its military operations out of populated areas have been ignored for more than a decade. Indeed, by basing its military operations in urban centers, Hamas’ intention seems precisely to allow its citizens to be killed and injured for propaganda purposes. Such use of human shields is, of course, a war crime.

Above all, we pray that Hamas and other radical Arab groups give up their blood vendetta against Israel. One thing is clear: If tomorrow Hamas were to lay down its arms and declare peace with Israel, we would have peace immediately. But another thing is also clear: If tomorrow Israel were to lay down its arms and declare peace with Hamas, there would soon be no Israel. This is the ultimate shame.

Contrary to some media reports, the conflict between Hamas and Israel is not a “cycle of violence,” nor does it require “mutual restraint.” Rather, Israel, a nation smaller than tiny El Salvador, surrounded by a sea of hostile Arab and Muslim nations, is responding logically to protect its citizens from an enemy directly on its border. What nation would not respond to such existential threats with definitive force meant to defeat this enemy?

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