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All New Digital Magazine
The Devil in the Details

Michael Massing’s attempt to explain the enigma of American evangelical support for Donald Trump (“How Martin Luther Paved the Way for Donald Trump,” May 14) appears to be a straightforward case: Martin Luther’s reform efforts were in fact a faux-populist desire to make Christianity great again, a desire unconsciously transmitted to evangelicals through their indebtedness to Luther’s theology and inflamed now by Trump. In Luther, Massing finds the missing link connecting Trump’s personality to theologies that for him define American evangelicals. Thus, by believing as Luther believed, American evangelicals unwittingly became expectant watchers for a leader like Luther, found in Trump.

Luther would wholeheartedly agree with Massing’s view that our beliefs have unintended consequences. False doctrine, however abstract, if sincerely believed could result in something as tangible as the mass exploitation of people. Or so Luther argued in his epochal work, the 95 theses. There Luther questioned the power afforded indulgences, which for him had supplanted the Gospel, the better to fleece the laity. Luther challenged why the pope sold indulgences rather than dispense them freely, and why he built St. Peter’s Basilica “with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep” rather than his own money. The threats of excommunication that followed did not dissuade Luther, for concerns about his own well-being rarely entered his consideration. Most know his famous stand at Worms, but few recall his subtler braveries, such as leaving hiding to calm a riot by preaching patience for those we disagree with, or housing a bitter enemy in his hour of need.

If the above does not sound like Trump, it is because historical figures are rarely as simple as our need for caricatures to service easy explanations. And Massing’s Luther is a simple one, stripped of his complexity and world to help make sense of our own. Many works already published can correct Massing’s factual and interpretive errors; here, let’s consider some of his omissions. To arrive at his simple Luther, Massing ignores how commonplace crass rhetoric was in Luther’s time. He dismisses Luther’s most popular writings in favor of obscure works, some virtually unknown until the 20th century. He appears unaware of Luther’s foundational “theology of the cross” and insistence upon suffering for the neighbor in love. Lost is Luther’s criticism of those like Trump, whom he called theologians of glory for preferring “works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness,” being blinded by hate and self-love.

Massing’s argument is an instructive study in how complex and nuanced truths are severely disadvantaged compared with caricatures appealing to our preconceived notions. Such caricatures never pave the way but are always constructed after the fact to suit agendas. The idea that evangelicals ate something tainted long ago, which then festered into support for Trump, offers only the bitter consolation of believing opponents beyond hope. Strange that Massing should adopt the same polemical view of the other that he sees connecting Luther and Trump. In this we are reminded that as our hunger for explanation grows, so too must our discernment. For we become what we eat, bones and all.

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Massing Replies

What a nasty letter. Hopgood refers to the Nation’s other responses on page 34:

Letters
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The United States today is in the grip of a devastating affordable-housing crisis. We hear about soaring home prices in the booming coastal cities and gentrification in newly hip towns, but the problem we face is much broader: All across the country, people are scraping and scrambling for one of the most basic requirements of life—a home. This fact rarely cracks the news cycle, and even the most progressive potential contenders in the 2020 presidential election fail to mention it. But travel to any big West Coast city or small Northeastern one, to the growing exurbs or far-flung rural counties, and the evidence begins to mount like clues at a crime scene. You can see it in Rochester, New York, a midsize city where more than half of all tenants spend at least 30 percent of their income on rent. You can see it in Los Angeles, where nearly 60,000 men, women, and children are homeless on any given night. You can see it in the eviction filings, the public-housing demolitions, the waiting lists for housing vouchers. You can see it in the 99.6 percent of counties where a full-time minimum-wage worker can’t afford to rent a one-bedroom home.

To illuminate the contours of this crisis—to mark it as a crisis demanding both outrage and action—The Nation has dedicated this special issue to what one activist calls the “housing catastrophe.” In the first of the two articles, “Give Us Shelter,” Bryce Covert delves deep into the history of affordable-housing programs in this country in search of an explanation. What she finds is a stubborn (and fundamentally American) belief: that housing is a commodity, not a right. This notion has long held our country back from a forceful commitment to universal, noncommercial housing—and as the ideological balance has tipped decisively toward market-oriented solutions, the patchwork of government programs that sustain public housing has become increasingly frayed.

Even so, hope is not entirely dead. As Jimmy Tobias writes in “The Way Home,” the second feature in this issue, the housing crisis has spawned the first rousing signs of a movement. This movement has found its fullest expression to date in the campaigns for rent regulation in San Diego, Chicago, Nashville, and a host of other cities. But what makes it unusual—even thrilling—is that the activists leading the charge see rent regulation as just the first step. They share a more expansive vision, one that wastes little time on the public-private half-measures that pass for solutions today—among them, inclusionary zoning and the low-income housing tax credit—and instead recognizes the vital role that government and other noncommercial actors have to play in fostering big, creative solutions. The focus of their vision can be summed up in three words: “homes for all.”

If that sounds utopian, it is. And yet, from marriage equality to marijuana legalization, free higher education to the Fight for $15, the political landscape is filled with examples of sweeping demands that have migrated from the periphery of possibility toward acceptance, embrace, and even, on occasion, actuality. What they’ve all had in common are movements and, as those movements gained strength, political champions. With the rise of rent-regulation campaigns—and the nascent call for “homes for all”—the affordable-housing crisis is finally getting its movement. Now it’s time for progressive leaders to join the effort, both to call attention to the crisis and to fight for the solutions we really need. This is both good policy and good politics. With millions of Americans struggling to pay the rent, and with key members of the progressive base—including African Americans, Latinos, and millennials—among those struggling renters, progressive politicians can no longer justify sitting on the sidelines. Indeed, they might find that voters respond to their outrage over such a widespread and shameful crisis. As Tara Raghuvan, housing-campaign director at People’s Action, told Tobias, “Housing is the biggest tent issue there is. People are obsessed with housing.”
March to War on Iran?

Renewed sanctions will not get Trump a “better deal.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s speech on May 21 only reinforced what was already known about Donald Trump’s strategy for Iran: Either the president is ratcheting up the pressure on Tehran to get a “better deal,” which is the official story and the gist of Pompeo’s message, or he is merely pretending to be interested in new negotiations, while putting into place the building blocks for a military assault on Iran. Yet even if Trump genuinely seeks new negotiations, he is more likely to end up in a war, because the very premise of Pompeo’s speech is false. That’s because more pressure on Iran would not have secured a better nuclear deal in 2015—it would only have led to war, or to a nuclear Iran.

A persistent mythology on the right insists that President Obama botched his own Iran strategy because he lacked the backbone to fully squeeze Tehran. Obama had assembled an impressive sanctions regime that was doing significant damage to Iran’s economy. With the value of its currency cut in half, its oil sales reduced to a trickle, and its GDP contracting by roughly 34 percent, Iran was on its knees, this narrative claims. All Obama had to do was to tighten the screws a bit more and give it another six months, and the mullahs in Tehran would have surrendered: no more Iranian nuclear program, no more challenges to US primacy in the Middle East, and no more defiance of Israel.

But, alas, Obama opted for compromise instead of forcing a capitulation. Rather than squeeze the country until it broke, he offered to lift the sanctions if Iran agreed to restrict its nuclear program. Tehran smelled Obama’s weakness, this mythology claims, and happily accepted the undeserved lifeline. The result was the 2015 nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which granted Iran relief from nuclear-related sanctions in exchange for a large reduction in its stockpile of enriched uranium and its number of centrifuges, as well as periodic intrusive inspections of every element of its nuclear-fuel cycle by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Iran would still be able to enrich uranium, but only to 3.67 percent—well below what’s needed to produce a nuclear weapon.

Now Trump is seeking to reverse this alleged mistake by reimposing sanctions. Then, once the moment is right, he will go back to the negotiating table—this time not to negotiate, however, but to accept Iran’s capitulation. It all sounds so wonderful, simple, and tidy. What could possibly go wrong?

Everything. Indeed, the very premise of the right-wing narrative is wrong: Iran was not about to capitulate, and US leverage over the country was waning—not growing. When Obama first sought to cripple Iran’s economy to force Tehran to submit, Iran responded by doubling down on its nuclear program. When Obama took office in 2009, Iran operated roughly 8,000 centrifuges; by 2013, it had added another 14,000. Iran had also increased its stockpile of low-enriched uranium eightfold and significantly advanced its nuclear know-how, all of which provided Tehran with counter-leverage. In January 2012, the United States estimated that Iran’s breakout capacity—the time it would take to have enough material for one nuclear bomb—was 12 months. By 2013, that time had shrunk to eight to 12 weeks.

As a result, Iran was outpacing the United States in building leverage. By early 2013, Obama realized that if nothing changed, Washington would soon have only two options: Either accept Iran as a de facto nuclear power, or go to war. Iran would be able to achieve a near-zero breakout capacity before its economy collapsed, so letting the sanctions bite for another six months would only increase the likelihood of war—not the likelihood of Iran’s surrender.

This is why, in March 2013, Obama did the unthinkable. In secret negotiations, he broke with past US policy and offered to accept, given sufficient transparency and limitations, the enrichment of uranium on Iranian soil. This was Iran’s bottom line: It was willing to endure almost any economic hardship before it gave up enrichment. (Most nations, including some involved in the negotiations leading up to the JCPOA, accept Iran’s right to enrich uranium under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which it is a signatory, but this had been a sticking point for US and European Union negotiators.) Obama knew all along that no nuclear deal would be possible unless he conceded this point. But the plan was to play the enrichment card at the end of the negotiations, since it was the United States’ most valuable concession. Instead, Obama had to play it at the outset. It was this move, not the sanctions policy, that ultimately elicited Iranian flexibility and paved the way for a nuclear deal.

Yet the Obama administration also planted the seeds of the right-wing narrative that Trump is now using. Recognizing that domestic political opposition to a deal with Iran might shoot through the roof if the administration admitted the limits of its sanctions policy—as well as the reality that Tehran had outpaced Washington in the leverage department—the Obama team insisted that sanctions had brought Iran to the table.

It was a formulation that falsely credited sanctions, rather than the US concession on enrichment, for the diplomatic breakthrough and gave the impression that the United States had been operating from a position of strength. In fact, the full details of the secret negotiations with Iran, including the intricacies around the enrichment concession, first came to light through the publication of my book Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy.

By using language that insisted the United States was operating from a position of overwhelming strength, the Obama administration helped to give birth to a persistent question: If the sanctions were so successful (continued on page 8)
**Union Strong**

For a period of 40 years, something managed to keep inequality in check in the United States. From 1940 to 1980, the richest 1 percent took home 9 percent of the wealth generated by the economy. Today, just as they did in the 1920s, the top 1 percent grabs about double that share. Surprisingly, the cause of this midcentury “Great Compression” has been largely neglected by economists, with many of them casually dismissing the role of unions.

One influential theory, especially among pundits, is that the supply of skilled workers curbed the growth of income inequality. Starting in the 1940s, the argument goes, the increasing education of the American workforce propelled a broad prosperity. Another recent account, associated with the economist Thomas Piketty, maintains that the devastation of World War II drove down the returns on capital. War II propelled a broad prosperity. Another recent account, associated with the economist Thomas Piketty, maintains that the devastation of World War II drove down the returns on capital.

But a groundbreaking new paper, “Unions and Inequality Over the Twentieth Century: New Evidence From Survey Data,” written by the economists Henry Farber, Dan Herbst, Ilyana Kuziemko, and Suresh Naidu, proposes a different engine for that broad prosperity: unions. The growth of union membership—to a height of nearly 30 percent in 1955, before falling to its current low of 10.7 percent—explains the Great Compression every bit as much as theories about education or any other single factor.

It may surprise some readers that economists consider the statement “unions help workers” a revelation akin to discovering general relativity. (Another recent finding, “where you grow up matters,” has also shaken the economics establishment to its core.) But economists haven’t had the necessary data to study unions in any depth. Detailed data on education goes back to the 1940s, but the government only introduced questions tracking union status in 1973. Yet the authors of “Unions and Inequality” newly applied a Gallup data set that allowed them to analyze workers back to the 1930s.

Before this paper, economists generally believed that unions largely helped the most skilled and educated workers—i.e., those who already had higher wages. Many economists insisted that unions work by creating insiders who benefit at the expense of outsiders—in other words, those who get in the union receive a premium, while those outside the union are denied opportunities. This theory implies that, since unions merely transfer wealth among workers, they wouldn’t lower inequality overall and might even slow economic growth. But the new paper pushes back on all these notions.

It turns out that, at their peak, unions were disproportionately made up of the least-skilled workers and people of color. Historians continue to debate how racially segregated unions were in this period, but this new research finds that nonwhites became more likely than whites to be in a union starting in the early 1940s, and that this trend continued until the late 1970s. (People of color also received a higher union premium.) This rise in union membership among people of color begins around 1941, when President Franklin Roosevelt desegregated the defense industry with Executive Order 8802, a move designed to stop a march on Washington planned by civil-rights leaders. As Suresh Naidu, one of the paper’s authors, told The Nation, “Starting around World War II, labor unions became no more likely to be white than the labor market as a whole. Union households would go on to become less likely to be white up and through the civil-rights movement.”

Most economists have also been wrong about unions and wealth distribution. If unions were largely about helping insiders at the expense of outsiders, they wouldn’t bring down every indicator of economic inequality—but that’s what happened with the Gini coefficient, the 90-to-10 ratio, and the rest of the jargon-heavy measures of inequality. The paper also reveals that decreasing inequality doesn’t reduce economic growth: The researchers couldn’t find a single model in which the economy slowed because of a high union share.

These results should end the simplistic tales in which education alone challenges the dominance of the 1 percent. If we want to change who our economy works for, we must change who gets to exercise power. And this paper makes it clear: There is power in a union.

---

**Unions Keep Inequality in Check**

Fewer workers are unionized today.

- 30% in 1955
- 11% in 2017

That’s a problem because:

1. **Unions win higher wages for their workers.**

   In 1962, the income boost from union membership was nearly 10–20% more pay than nonunion workers, over the past 80 years.

2. **People of color benefit most.**


3. **So, more unions mean less inequality.**

   If union membership had stayed at 1950s levels, the growth in income share of the top 10% would have been reduced by 50%.

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2018 Infographic: Tracy Matsue Loeffelholz
Eric Alterman

A Marriage on the Rocks

Is the relationship between Israel and liberal American Jews at the breaking point?

The 70th anniversary of Israel’s founding, coupled with the opening of the US embassy in Jerusalem and the mass protests and killings in Gaza, gives every indication of being a turning point. Israel is not divorcing America’s liberal Jewish community quite yet, but it is well on its way to estrangement.

Not surprisingly, the media coverage of what’s happening on the ground has fallen behind. The sight of Israeli Defense Force snipers shooting unarmed protesters is indeed appalling. Yet the punitocracy remains filled with those who do not merely excuse Israel’s use of excessive force but actively praise it.

This is particularly true of the New York Times op-ed page, which, aside from Michelle Goldberg’s laments for the fate of liberal Zionism, is dominated by apologists for the Netanyahu government. Shmuel Rosner is one of a dwindling number who see their role as defending Israel to liberal Jews. He authored a Times op-ed that was headlined with a phrase that ought to shock defenders of Israel: “Israel Needs to Protect Its Borders. By Whatever Means Necessary.” In the piece, Rosner argues, “Guarding the border was more important than avoiding killing, and guarding the border is what Israel did successfully.” Rosner even tried to justify the use of live bullets. We so often hear that Israel is a technocratic marvel, but is murder by sniper the best method of border control it can come up with?

Yossi Klein Halevi is a more skillful and honest pro-Israel commentator. In The Wall Street Journal a few weeks earlier, Halevi wrote a measured, relatively balanced column, whose essential thesis was nevertheless irrelevant: “What has been missed by most observers is the rare clarifying moment that this confrontation has offered: The March of Return is an explicit negation of a two-state solution, with a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza coexisting beside Israel.” This may be true, but it is beside the point, since Israel is ruled by a party that not only explicitly rejects Palestinian statehood but also seeks to make such a solution impossible in the future. If Israel is not practicing apartheid today—and that point is arguable—there can be no doubt that it is planning its implementation soon. There is simply no other way to continue the 51-year occupation and retain the state’s Jewish character.

No doubt the most prominent member of the “Israel is always right” brigade is the Times’ Bret Stephens, formerly of the Journal, where he was known to complain of the “disease of the Arab mind.” In his latest column on Gaza, Stephens can’t even write the word “occupation” without derisive quotation marks. He whines, Trumplike, “Why is nothing expected of Palestinians, and everything forgiven, while everything is expected of Israelis, and nothing forgiven?”

This, of course, is transference of the first order. As the pro-Israel (and mostly conservative) Economist observed in a lead editorial, “Gaza is a prison, not a state…one of the most crowded and miserable places on Earth. It is short of medicine, power and other essentials. The tap water is undrinkable; untreated sewage is pumped into the sea.” Israel, the editors go on to observe, “insists that the strip is not its problem, having withdrawn its forces in 2005. But it still controls Gaza from land, sea, and air. Any Palestinian, even a farmer, coming within 300 metres of the fence is liable to be shot.”

The fact that Israel chooses to perpetuate this enforced misery within and beyond its ill-defined borders is evidence of a political transformation that would horrify the founders of Zionism and its earliest pioneers. Who are Israel’s political enemies, according to Bibi Netanyahu? They are human-rights groups, Jewish civil-society organizations, and even American rabbis who belong to groups like Jewish Voice for Peace.

And who are its friends? As Anshel Pfeffer, the prime minister’s astute biographer, notes, Netanyahu is “the toast of the new wave of right-wing, populist and autocrat-like (if not outright autocratic) leaders. They see in him a kindred spirit, even a mentor.” Look at who was invited to speak at the opening of the Trump administration’s Jerusalem embassy: John Hagee and Robert Jef-
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Another new development: Netanyahu refuses to even pretend that he cares what liberal American Jews think or feel about Israel.

That’s not what history shows us. Iran has shown no willingness to eliminate those aspects of their program that they maintain are for peaceful purposes, even in the face of unprecedented sanctions.

Other officials, speaking privately, put it more bluntly. “The Iranians simply won’t capitulate,” even if faced with war, a senior Obama official said during a closed briefing at the White House that I attended in July 2015. “Because they’re Iranians,” he added after a brief pause.

But the damage had already been done, and the right-wing mythology started to take hold. Today, it constitutes the basis for Pompeo’s speech and Trump’s Plan B. But even if the Trump team manages to rebuild the sanctions coalition against Iran—which remains unlikely, given the strong support for the JCPOA by the European Union as well as by Russia and China, all signatories to the agreement—it is difficult to imagine Trump succeeding where Obama failed: that is, by overwhelming Iran with pressure that would force it to surrender rather than expand its nuclear program.

When Obama realized the limits of sanctions and pressure, he avoided war by going to the negotiating table. There’s little indication that Trump is capable of the same courage and prudence. Indeed, with Mike Pompeo as secretary of state and John Bolton as national-security adviser—both anti-Iran hardliners—Trump’s strategy seems designed to fail. Instead of a Plan B aimed at securing Iran’s capitulation, it appears designed to pave the way for Plan C: war.

Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, is the author, most recently, of Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy.
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Who Owns Public Space?

Racists who threaten and police people of color are finally getting called out.

S
ome years ago, while we were getting ready to move out of state, my husband and I held a garage sale. We'd advertised it in our community newspaper and on flyers around the neighborhood and had a huge turnout as a result. Dozens of bargain hunters milled about, asking about this or that item. “Cuánto quiere usted por el sofá?” an older gentleman asked me, pointing to our old green couch. I quoted him a price, adding, “Es un sofá cama.” Hearing our exchange, a white woman turned around and yelled, “Speak English! You’re in America.” “Hey—” I said, but she walked away in a huff, got into her car, and drove off.

I've been thinking about that moment, and the fiery anger behind it, as I hear about incident after incident in which white people lash out at people of color in public spaces. There's the white lawyer who berated the workers at a Manhattan deli for speaking Spanish—insisting that “I pay for their welfare. I pay for their ability to be here. The least they can do is speak English”—and then threatened to report them to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

There's the white student who reported a black student for taking a nap in the common room of their dorm at Yale, saying, “I have every right to call the police—you cannot sleep in that room.” And there's the white mother who called the police about two Native American students participating in a campus tour at Colorado State University, telling the dispatcher that “they are not, definitely not, a part of the tour.”

The language in these complaints—“I pay,” “I have every right,” “they are definitely not”—is quite illuminating. It indicates a belief on the part of these white people that they are the custodians of public space and can enlist the police to enforce its boundaries. The offenses committed by people of color are arbitrary and nearly limitless: waiting too long at a Starbucks in Philadelphia, having a mariachi band to perform outside an apartment building. The public shaming that followed his rant could have a salutary effect: Maybe, just maybe, racists will think twice before making frivolous reports or issuing threats.

Few people have come to Schlossberg's defense, yet there are some who say that the popular outcry against him is “unnerving” and constitutes harassment by modern mobs who demand nothing less than “conformity of thought.” Online mobs are scary, no doubt about that. But Schlossberg's rant doesn't amount to a civilized difference of opinion; it's racism, pure and simple, followed by threats.

Schlossberg's assertion of authority over public space now comes with a social cost. That's a useful development.
tions are, in fact, exercising their own free-speech rights to object to his racism and nativism. The simple truth is that if racist behavior is insulated from social shaming, it will likely continue and multiply until it becomes accepted. What happens when a majority of Americans hold views like Schlossberg’s?

The history of this country is replete with examples of how public space was regulated to ensure that one racial group was made comfortable at the expense of others. This is why it’s important to speak out, and speak out now. Allies can help to stop the harassment, or at least deflect it. In the cell-phone footage of Schlossberg’s rant, for example, an Asian man can be seen interposing himself between the lawyer and one of the Spanish-speaking women he’s verbally abusing. In the Philadelphia Starbucks incident, an older white man repeatedly challenged police officers about why they were arresting the two black men when they’d done nothing wrong.

At the garage sale that day, after the woman took off in a huff, I turned to my husband in disbelief. “Did you just hear what that lady said?” I asked him. This question, I now realize, was an attempt at documenting the moment by having a witness for it. It was my first intimation that people’s relationship to public space is political, and that some of us move through it under surveillance by others. “I heard,” my husband replied, and then told me of many similar experiences he’d had as a Cuban American here in Los Angeles.

But public space belongs to everyone. If racists don’t like hearing Spanish being spoken in a deli, or having Native American teens on a campus tour, or seeing black folks going on about their lives, they should just stay home.
Nearly half of all renters can’t afford rent, and over half a million Americans are homeless on any given night. How did we get here?

By Bryce Covert
When Rosalina Hernández and her husband moved into their studio apartment on Los Angeles Street in South Central LA 15 years ago, the place was just for the two of them and the baby they were expecting. Back then, it wasn't too hard to find what they needed: an apartment they could afford with just a bit more space.

But as their family grew, they remained stuck in place. Eventually, six people—Rosalina, her husband, and their four children—were sharing the one main room, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. Today, the tidy living room is also the dining room and bedroom; the bathroom serves as a makeshift closet. “It is hard, because we’re six,” Rosalina says in Spanish, clasping her hands in her lap. “It’s too small for six.” When her oldest son, now a freshman in college, needed to concentrate on schoolwork, he’d lock himself in the bathroom until the early-morning hours.

Her children ask her why they can’t have their own rooms. Her second-oldest son has always had a particular dream: to have a house, a dog, and a tree. “I would have liked to,” Rosalina says haltingly, wiping away the tears. They’ve looked for a bigger place, but they just can’t afford it. “We have to choose between [paying more] rent [for] a bigger space, or giving [our children] food and shoes.” They currently pay $700 a month in rent, something that Rosalina and her husband can afford on his salary as a garment worker. A three-bedroom apartment in LA easily goes for more than triple that. Soon, though, the Hernándezes will have no choice: All of the residents in their building are being evicted. The owner has decided to sell it, and a developer plans to raze it and build a new complex in its place. Many families have already left, plywood nailed over their doors to mark their departure.

Bryce Covert is a contributing writer at The Nation and a contributing op-ed writer at The New York Times.
The Hernándezes were able to get a year's extension because their youngest daughter has a severe learning disability, but the grace period ends next May.

The uncertainty has taken its toll. Rosalina's 4-year-old daughter asks her, “Mommy, am I still going to have my same friends? Mommy, am I going to have my same teacher?” If she could, Rosalina would keep her family in that same small apartment—at least it’s home. “Cuatro paredes tienen historia,” she says. Four walls have a history.

Among American cities, Los Angeles is second only to Las Vegas (and tied with Orlando, Florida) in having the severest shortage of affordable housing for its poorest renters, with just 17 homes for every 100 extremely low-income families. The median rent for a one-bedroom apartment is nearly $1,400 a month, making it one of the most unaffordable markets in the country. Over half of the renters in LA are paying more than 30 percent of their income in rent, above what's considered affordable; for nearly a third of those residents, rent eats up more than half of their income. “It’s not a housing crisis,” says Larry Gross, executive director of the grassroots group Coalition for Economic Survival, “It’s a housing catastrophe.”

When rents are that high, those people lucky enough to find a place have to make other difficult choices. “They have to sacrifice health care, food, clothing for their children, education, transport—all the basic necessities,” says Dagan R. Bayliss, director of organizing at Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, which is working with Rosalina and her family. Many families have two or even three people living in a single room to bring down costs. More than half of the most heavily crowded areas in the country, where the homes have more than one person per room, are located in Los Angeles and Orange counties, according to US Census data spanning from 2008 to 2012.

Other people decide to move where rents are cheaper, but that often means longer commutes and higher transportation costs, not to mention leaving behind family or a familiar community. The Hernándezes have considered it. Rosalina's sister and brother-in-law went to San Bernardino, where the rents are much lower, but her husband would have to drive more than an hour into the city for work every day. He currently walks to his job, and Rosalina can walk to her children's schools, so they don’t need a car. If they moved, they'd have to shoulder that extra expense and travel time. Still, many working people make that trade-off. “We’re becoming a tale of two cities: the very rich, and the very low-income who are on some type of subsidies,” says Larry Gross. “The middle class, the working class, are being pushed out.”

But if LA is the extreme, it is also a harbinger of trends that are under way everywhere in a country in which rents are increasing while incomes stagnate. There is nowhere in the United States that a family like the Hernándezes can easily find an affordable and adequate place to live. Nationwide, there are just 35 affordable and available rental homes for every 100 extremely low-income families—those who either live in poverty or earn less than 30 percent of the median income in their area. It’s a problem in every major city and in every state. Nationally, nearly half of renters spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing.

It may feel as though the country has always failed to offer an affordable home to everyone who needs one. But in 1960, only about a quarter of renters spent more than 30 percent of their income on housing. In 1970, a 300,000-unit surplus of affordable rental homes meant that nearly every American could find a place to live. “When there was an adequate supply of housing for low-income people, we did not have widespread homelessness in this country,” says Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. At the time, “the word ‘homelessness’ was relatively unknown,” says the Rev. David Bloom, a longtime advocate for the homeless, who adds that when he first used a word processor in the early 1980s, the spell-check didn’t even recognize the word. Today, there’s a deficit of more than 7.2 million rental homes inexpensive enough for the lowest-income people to afford, and nearly 554,000 Americans are homeless any given night.
thus addressing the twin crises of unemployment and unaffordable housing. PWA-built homes, which housed both the poor and the middle class, were often attractive, equipped with laundry facilities, meeting rooms, playgrounds, even libraries.

Yet the PWA wasn’t a comprehensive housing program, and it provided housing only for a small share of Americans. It also inaugurated the long history of racial segregation in public housing, as most of the PWA-built developments were either divided by race or open only to whites. But the PWA’s housing initiatives were significant enough that the real-estate industry, which realized it had a growing competitor, fought back. Members of the National Association of Real Estate Boards—today known as the National Association of Realtors—took to publishing columns in The Saturday Evening Post railing against the New Deal housing program as communistic.

Meanwhile, social reformers and their allies in Congress, like Senator Robert Wagner, were pushing for a true federal housing program—one that “must not be confined to demonstration projects, or to the improvement of conditions in limited though well-selected areas,” Wagner declared in a speech in 1936. “It must encompass the basic housing need of the population as a whole.” Their solution was a bill that became the Housing Act of 1937, which, when first drafted, reflected an entirely new way of thinking about housing in the United States. It would have provided public housing for both the poor and the middle class, as well as give the federal government more power to determine where that housing would be built. But over years of debate—Wagner introduced housing bills in each of the three years leading up to 1937—the legislation’s most radical pieces were hollowed out. The National Association of Real Estate Boards proved to be a powerful enemy of high-quality, widely accessible public housing, and succeeded in profoundly weakening the bill. Ultimately, the 1937 law provided housing only for the poor and allowed communities to opt out of constructing any affordable housing at all. It included low cost ceilings, which meant that public housing couldn’t become too desirable, as well as eligibility criteria that prevented the middle class from qualifying for it. Southern Democrats ensured that the housing could be racially segregated. Perhaps most counterproductive, the legislation included a requirement forcing public-housing authorities to demolish one unit of substandard housing for every new one built, raising costs and keeping the supply capped. “If it had been the bill that housing experts had imagined,” Lasner says, “we would be facing a very different housing landscape today.”

The public housing built thereafter was in line with what we think of today: housing projects for the poorest, cheaply built and concentrated far from the communities that refused to accept them. Though public housing still supplies more than 2 million people with permanently affordable homes, it provides housing for only a fraction of the 40 million Americans in poverty, and it leaves the private housing market almost entirely intact.

The legacy of the 1937 law is clearly seen in Los Angeles today. There are just 14 public-housing facilities, with just over 6,500 units, in a city of about 4 million people, an estimated 21.5 percent of whom live in poverty. In the 1950s, the City Council sank a plan to build 10,000 units of public housing using $100 million from the federal government. Around the same time, California voters approved a referendum requiring city or county approval for public-housing site selection, hamstringing development. For its part, New York City runs 326 facilities—23 times as many as LA—though it has double the population and a lower poverty rate. “Even though we’ve had all these liberal mayors,” says Gary Blasi, a law professor emeritus at UCLA, “there’s still virtually no coordinated or strategic policy to increase the amount of affordable housing.”

Subsequent federal efforts fell prey to the same forces that undermined the 1937 bill. The Housing Act of 1949 aimed to provide “a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family,” and resulted in the construction of nearly 324,000 units over ten years, but Congress failed to appropriate adequate funding. Southern Democrats, joined by some of their Northern counterparts, again prevented the law from prohibiting segregation.

Congress’s failure to allocate sufficient funds for public housing would, over the ensuing decades, lead to the long-term neglect of public-housing projects. As a result, many were demolished. Starting in 1972, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) doled out grants that cities used to tear down abandoned or dilapidated housing. The country has lost 250,000 public-housing units since the mid-1990s alone.

In 1973, citing “mounting evidence of basic defects in some of our housing programs,” the Nixon administration issued a moratorium on nearly all subsidized-housing programs. The symbolism was clear: During congressional hearings on the move, Senator William Proxmire declared, “The historic pledge of a decent home in a suitable environment for all Americans has been abandoned.” A year later, Congress authorized a new approach to housing the poor: the Section 8 program, which provides poor people with vouchers that they can spend on private housing. Yet obtaining housing with a voucher in the private market can be fraught with challenges; not only are there few affordable units, but in many parts of the country, it is legal for landlords to reject voucher-holders. If a voucher recipient can’t find a home within 60 or 90 days, she loses her sub-

Nationwide, there are just 35 rental homes available for every 100 extremely low-income families.
And as with public housing, Congress has never given Section 8 enough funds to meet the demand: Today, just one in four families who are eligible for federal rental assistance actually gets it. Meanwhile, moderate-income families who can’t afford housing don’t qualify.

And things only got worse. When Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency, public housing became one of the biggest targets of his anti-government, pro-market worldview. With Reagan in the White House, HUD’s budget was cut by more than half, falling from $83.6 billion in 1976 to less than $40 billion by 1982; it has never recovered. Federal spending on housing assistance hemorrhaged by 50 percent during the same period. Homelessness, in his administration’s view, was a personal failing; homeless people were homeless “by choice,” Reagan said on Good Morning America in 1984.

Like Nixon, Reagan combined cuts to public housing with a housing program that expanded the role of the private sector. In his landmark 1986 tax package, he included a measure that is still the main source of federal funding for affordable housing today: the low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC). Developers gain access to the credit by pledging to build affordable housing. But the housing they build usually doesn’t reach the poorest families, and it requires securing complicated funding sources, which prolongs construction time. Plus “developers would almost always prefer to build more [LIHTC] housing in low-income, segregated neighborhoods,” says Richard Rothstein, author of The Color of Law. “The land is cheaper there, and they don’t have to hold 100 community meetings to explain why they’re putting poor people in their precious community.”

Decades after Nixon and Reagan, these two market-based solutions—tax credits to get developers to build low-cost units, and vouchers that supposedly help poor people afford them—provide the dominant share of affordable housing. Leaders and lawmakers, including Democratic presidents, have by and large failed to challenge this status quo. Bill Clinton, who failed to increase HUD’s budget and even let it decline for most of his tenure, once declared, “Public housing has never been a right; it has always been a privilege.”

As the federal government disinvested, other cheap housing vanished too. From 1970 to the mid-1980s, 1 million single-room-occupancy (SRO) apartments—modest units that people could rent by the day or week—disappeared as cities cleared them out and developers tore the buildings down to build commercial properties or luxury housing. Multifamily housing was converted into co-ops and condominiums. Some of these homes hadn’t been decent places to live, but the former residents weren’t given a replacement. “A lot of times, when we improve things, we don’t improve them for the people who are living there,” says Nan Roman.

Los Angeles’s skid row, 52 blocks where the city has corralled both its homeless services and homeless population, is the logical result when a housing market in a booming city is left to its own devices. Past the shiny skyscrapers of New Downtown and the hipster cafes of Little Tokyo, the sidewalks are filled with tents, shopping carts, folding chairs, pots, pans, and the other bits and pieces of people’s lives. The tents that line almost every inch of the sidewalk are makeshift homes, connected to one another with ropes, tarps, poles, and umbrellas. The air hums with quarrels and boom-box music and smells of bodies and trash. Skid Row has been described as a refugee camp for Americans—and in its appearance and purpose, that’s exactly what it is.

Jojo Smith lived in a tent on San Pedro Street for six years starting in 2006. He tried to get into a housing program but was always told that the waiting lists were full. For those six years, Smith was woken up in the early hours of the morning every day by the police and told to pack up his stuff and move along, only to have to set everything up back up that evening. The wake-up calls are less regular today, but they still make people’s lives chaotic. There are few water fountains or public bathrooms, let alone showers or laundry facilities. The scant trash cans fill up quickly and are rarely emptied by the city. “It shows you that the city is not caring about people,” Smith says. “Homeless people are humans too.”

Most of those living in tents would prefer four solid walls. They’re constantly saying that folks are resisting services. No, people are resisting shelters because of the simple fact that it’s not your own home,” Smith says. “They want housing.” Shelters come with a maze of rules and regulations to navigate, including bans on pets and couples living together. Some people with mental-health issues struggle to sleep in the crowded rooms.

At the last official count, there were nearly 60,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County on any giv-
L.A’s laissez-faire approach to housing shows up in the factors driving its swelling homeless population. The city does little to prevent affordable housing from being demolished. Gross’s organization estimates that 23,550 units of affordable housing have been lost thanks to a law that allows landlords to evict tenants when they decide to demolish or sell their buildings—exactly the circumstances that the Hernández family now faces. LA also has few robust rent-control laws, which played a role in rents rising 20 percent between 1990 and 2009, even as incomes dropped.

And decades of failing to construct new affordable units have resulted in a situation in which the demand for single-room apartments is so acute that there is virtually nothing available. Zoning restrictions and local opposition, which were given outsized political power in the 1940s and ’50s, make it virtually impossible to build more housing in the city. “There is really powerful NIMBYism,” Blasi says. “Anywhere middle-class people get a toe-hold, they’re pulling up the ladders as quick as they can.”

In the 1990s, the national crisis in affordable housing didn’t feel as acute because income growth was relatively strong, giving people more of a cushion to afford their rent. But when the subprime-mortgage crisis hit in 2007, America’s long-term refusal to deal with housing was once again laid bare. If modern mass homelessness began in the 1980s, the foreclosure and housing crises at the end of the 2000s represented a second wave that redoubled the problem. Nearly 3 million homes were foreclosed on in both 2009 and 2010; those homeowners sank back into the rental market, competing for cheap units with the low-income people who were already renting. Millennials delayed homeownership. The share of households renting in the country’s 50 largest cities climbed from 36 percent in 2006 to over 40 percent in 2014. Roughly 10 million more families rented in 2016 compared with the decade prior. The vacancy rate for rental units has fallen since the end of the recession and is lower today than it was in 1986. “The supply is just not keeping up,” says Diane Yentel, president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition. “That is leading, in many communities, to skyrocketing rents, which are felt most severely amongst the lowest-income people.” There’s been a 32 percent rise in the median asking rent since 2000, and the number of households that are rent-burdened, or forced to spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent, increased 19 percent between 2001 and 2015.

The financial crisis meant that Ericka Newsome didn’t get a raise in January 2009, yet the rent on her studio apartment in her hometown of Pasadena, just northeast of downtown LA, went up. Newsome had been hired as a teller by a bank in 2005 and was promoted soon after. For the first time, she was living in her own place. But by March 2009, she was living in her car. Her boss eventually found out, and she lost her job in June over concerns that customers would see her sleeping in her vehicle.

“I didn’t know where to go or where to turn,” Newsome says. She couldn’t afford a new apartment without a job, and she couldn’t find a shelter with an available space. She lived briefly with a childhood friend in 2010, working during that time to earn her certification as a pharmacy technician. But she couldn’t find a job in the midst of the recession. She struggled with mental-health issues. Eventually, her friend asked her to leave, and she had to give up her car.

Newsome found her way to Skid Row in 2016. She still remembers her first night there: She tried to find a spot that felt safe where she could sleep for the night, but as a solitary woman, she attracted men’s attention. So she chose an isolated spot to set up camp. “The first night was scary,” she recalls. “I had to stay up all night for my safety.” Newsome spent her days sleeping or walking through the streets and riding the trains. An outreach team eventually helped her get into temporary housing and then an SRO, but both felt unsafe and unsanitary. Finally, she had a stroke of luck: Newsome was approved for a housing voucher, and an organization called Brilliant Corners connected her with a case manager who helped her look for an apartment. That help was needed: Although she found a number of apartments close to Pasadena that she really liked, landlords...
From California to New York, a radical new housing movement is rising, upending the status quo.

By Jimmy Tobias

Crossing the Frederick Douglass–Susan B. Anthony Memorial Bridge (locally known as the “Freddie-Sue”) on a brisk spring morning in Rochester, New York, the first thing one sees is a small tent city scattered about the banks of the Genesee River. It’s a sprawl of black tarps, folding chairs, and a charcoal grill, all set up on private land. The property’s owner, a cable company called Spectrum, has attempted for some time to tear it down, urging local officials to clear the encampment. In an effort to forestall the destruction of their fragile shelters, the homeless people who live there have hung a banner at the edge of a nearby highway that reads, simply, “Forgive us our trespasses.”

Continuing on toward the city’s southwest side, one finds a 48-unit building on Thurston Road. It’s a horseshoe-shaped structure of crimson brick; its facade is pleasing and clean. Inside, however, the mostly low-income tenants of color are subjected to bursting pipes, peeling paint, broken windows, and skittering mice—and the absentee landlord doesn’t seem to care much about correcting the problems. “See?” says resident Marianne Caleo, a chatty white woman who relies on Section 8 housing subsidies, as she points to a caved-in bathroom ceiling, its rubble sprinkled about like a noxious spice. “They haven’t done anything!”

Meanwhile, across town on the east side sits the modest two-story home of Liz McGriff. A resolute black woman in her 50s, she bought the place before the 2008 financial collapse. But when Wall Street went under, McGriff lost her job and, with it, her ability to pay the mortgage. Soon after, the foreclosure notice arrived, sparking a decade-long battle with the police, the courts, and the bank, and turning her into an insecure tenant in her own home. At least, McGriff says, “I am still there.”

These places, these people, and so many others like them represent the face of today’s housing crisis—a crisis so pervasive and enduring that it has become this country’s status quo. In Rochester, a midsize postindustrial city on Lake Ontario’s southern shore, evidence of the crisis is everywhere. During the 2016–17 school year, the city school district reported that 8.8 percent of its students—roughly 2,500 children—were homeless at some point. Last year, some 3,510 eviction warrants were issued. More than 50 percent of tenants in the city are rent-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. And while Rochester stands out as the fifth-poorest city in the country, it is no anomaly.

The national numbers are scandalous. On any given night, more than half a million homeless men, women, and children sleep on the streets or in shelters. In 2016 alone, according to research by the scholar Matthew Desmond, roughly 900,000 households were subject to eviction judgments. The same year, more than 11 million households spent at least 50 percent of their income, and another 9.8 million spent more than 30 percent, on rent. Nearly half of the nation’s 43 million renting households, then, live with the crushing weight of excessive housing costs.

None of this happened overnight. As Bryce Covert explores in “Give Us Shelter,” the roots of the current crisis extend back to the Nixon era. But it has intensified in recent decades, growing and spreading as the federal government engaged in a slow-drip campaign against public and other deeply affordable housing programs, all while stoking a relentlessly market-driven system.

At the same time, this country has suffered from the relative absence of a powerful national movement capable of agitating for transformative solutions. While progressives have pushed forcefully for immigrants’ rights, universal health care, fossil-fuel abolition, and a living wage in recent years, they have given short shrift to human shelter. There is no equivalent of the Fight for $15 when it comes to housing—and prominent political leaders speak far too little of rising rents, eviction rates, and homelessness. During the last presidential election, the issue was almost entirely missing from the public debate.

But change, at last, seems imminent. Right now, from coast to coast, fed-up renters and their allies are creating some of the most compelling tenant-rights campaigns to emerge in a generation. In places like California, New York, Denver, Chicago, and beyond, residents and organizers are pushing for a slew of interventions like rent control and “just cause” eviction protections that will offer immediate relief to tenants. Such policies, they say, will alter the power balance between landlords and renters and offer tenants stronger tools to build their movement. In fighting for them, they hope to haul the housing crisis to the very top of the national political agenda.

This organizing, though, goes well beyond rent regulation—it aspires to the truly radical. Movement leaders and thinkers are strategizing for a future in which the private market is diminished and noncommercial, community-controlled housing plays a central role in American life.
In this alternative reality, public housing is massively expanded and cooperatives, mutual-housing associations, and other nonmarket ownership models take root in cities large and small. Social housing, in all its varieties, thrives. Such a future, of course, feels like a distant dream—but in places like Rochester, people are already reaching for it.

The revolt began last January, when residents at the horseshoe-shaped apartment complex in Rochester united to resist the slum conditions in which they were living. They began deliberately, strategically, knocking on neighbors’ doors and cultivating a sense of camaraderie. Before long, they had formed a tenants’ union and were filing official complaints with housing inspectors, speaking out at City Council meetings, and lobbying the local media to cover their struggle. By March 1, they had decided to take combative action: They stopped paying their landlord. They went on a rent strike.

“We knew that that was the best thing—to withhold that rent money, get ‘em where it really hurts,” says Mary Brown, a warm and stylish black woman in her 60s who serves as the union’s leader. She says the residents will withhold their rent until adequate repairs are made or the city exercises its legal authority of receivership and takes control of the property. “We just want to live well, and we should be able to live well,” Brown says. “Everybody should.”

The Rochester strike is a radical break from the recent past. Organizers say it’s the first such strike in decades. And it didn’t happen in a vacuum; it is intimately tied to a national movement for renters’ rights that is sweeping the country like a summer storm.

Consider California, where a robust tenants’ movement has electrified local politics in recent years. In 2016, the Bay Area city of Richmond passed an ordinance that enacted into law both rent control and just-cause eviction protections. No longer can landlords in the city raise rents willy-nilly, or evict renters on a whim.

“People didn’t think it was possible.”

Now the possibilities are plentiful. In at least a half-dozen California cities and counties, including San Diego, Sacramento, Santa Cruz, and Pasadena, housing organizers are working to put rent-control initiatives on the local ballot this year. And across the state, a network of political organizations is advocating a ballot initiative that would repeal the state’s Costa-Hawkins Act, a law that prohibits rent control in buildings constructed after February 1995.

But the rent-control ferment isn’t confined to the far side of the Sierra Nevada. Organizing drives are also bubbling up in cities like Chicago, where a coalition called Lift the Ban is pushing to repeal Illinois’s longtime prohibition on rent control, as well as in Seattle, Minneapolis, Providence, Nashville, and other places where tenants sense the political ripeness of the moment.

Any of the new renters’ groups are affiliated with a national housing-justice campaign called Homes for All. Launched in 2013 by the Right to the City Alliance, a network of progressive political organizations, the campaign is assembling a federation of tenant activists across the country to press their demands at the local, state, and federal levels.

The housing agitation in Rochester offers a fitting example of the movement’s aims and methods. Last winter, organizers there launched a citywide tenants’ union that includes a half-dozen unions in private developments, including Mary Brown’s building, as well as a homeless union and a union of senior citizens in subsidized housing. The group grew out of militant anti-eviction organizing in the aftermath of the financial crisis, when Rochester activists regularly erected foreclosure blockades to prevent homeowners from being forced onto the street.

One of the union’s meeting places is a mural-covered Catholic Worker house known as St. Joe’s. During the day, organizers decamp from the house to recruit new tenants to their cause, knocking on doors and teaching renters about their rights. At night, the crew hits the streets to conduct outreach at Rochester’s homeless encampments.

Ryan David Acuff, a bearded white activist in big winter boots and a beanie, is a St. Joe’s resident and an organizer with the citywide tenants’ union. Armed with a sharp anti-capitalist analysis of the housing sector, Acuff can tick off details about local building codes, eviction statistics, and the legislation that the citywide tenants’ union is advocating in Albany.

It was enormous that rent control passed in Richmond in 2016, because that hadn’t happened for 30 years in California or anywhere, really,” said Aimee Inglis, the associate director of the California-based renters’ group Tenants Together, speaking to The Nation earlier this year. “People didn’t think it was possible.”

Congress authorizes the HOPE VI urban-revitalization demonstration program to provide grants to support low-rise, mixed-income housing rather than high-rise public housing to address a severe lack of funding for repairs. Atlanta uses its funds to clear slums and construct mostly private housing, an approach copied by cities across the country.
“There are two major stages to this movement,” the 35-year-old says over coffee and eggs at a humble neighborhood cafe. “The first is building a mass movement and consolidating our forces around some of these really immediate anti-displacement needs, including the need for universal rent control and [just]-cause eviction protections.”

To that end, the citywide tenants’ union recently joined a new formation of New York community groups called the Upstate Downstate Housing Alliance. Sensing an opportunity in this year’s Democratic gubernatorial primary fight, the alliance is pressing Governor Andrew Cuomo to take progressive action on housing issues. Among other things, they want Cuomo to establish just-cause eviction protections for all New York tenants—a cause his challenger, Cynthia Nixon, has already endorsed. They’re also gearing up to push for the expansion of New York City’s rent-regulation system to the entire state in 2019.

“Rent control is a major, major thing,” Acuff says between bites of breakfast. “Not only does it stop displacement, but it means housing is no longer completely governed by the market.” But, Acuff adds, even the rent-control fight “is sort of making preparations for a more transformative struggle. That’s the second stage of the movement: to move toward universal social housing.”

Indeed, nearly all of the activists and organizers interviewed for this story acknowledged that reforms like rent control and just-cause protections will not be enough to strike at the root of the housing crisis. To truly eradicate housing insecurity, to put an end to displacement, segregation, eviction, and homelessness—these goals demand radical solutions, the kind that don’t merely chip crumbs of affordability from the market-rate mega-developments spouting up in our cities. These solutions have to be bold. They have to push back against a national housing policy that benefits monied homeowners while leaving most low-income renters to fend for themselves. Above all, they have to begin to promote models that exist outside the market.

Needless to say, that won’t be easy. But scratch the surface of US history, and you will find that this country is filled with ideals on which activists can build—and, in many places, already are.

Politicians of both parties have spent decades denigrating the egalitarian American institution that we call “public housing.” Relying on heavily racist tropes, they have portrayed it variously as a failed socialist experiment, a den of iniquity, and an ugly architectural blight—a place of squalor and violence that residents seek to escape as soon as possible.

Yet the actual story of public housing tells a far more nuanced tale—one of hopeful promise despite government defunding, and stubborn resilience despite serious structural flaws. “The United States has gone out of its way to undermine public housing,” says David Madden, a housing expert at the London School of Economics. “But at its core, public housing is a crucial lifeline for people structurally excluded from private-housing markets, as well as a living demonstration that alternative residential arrangements are possible.”

This vital role is evident in public housing’s enduring popularity—in spite of imperfections and popular misconceptions. In Washington, DC, the housing authority closed its waiting list, which contains 70,000 names, back in 2013. The New York City Housing Authority has a 1 percent vacancy rate and a waiting list of hundreds of thousands. Indeed, most of the roughly 3,000 housing authorities across the country have waiting lists.

That’s because many people appreciate their public-housing communities. They are places where residents spend 30 percent of their income on rent, making them consistently affordable. They often boast deep networks of mutual aid, where neighbors look after one another, barbecues, and take care of the kids. And they aren’t necessarily stepping-stones to a “better” neighborhood or a house in the suburbs, because for many, they are home. That’s why public-housing residents so often come to the defense of their buildings when bureaucrats attempt to destroy them.

This is precisely the story that has been playing out at Barry Farm, a neighborhood of beige row houses and sloping green lawns in Washington, not far from the Anacostia River. After years of neglect and insufficient funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and DC’s local housing authority, the latter now wants to follow the neoliberal recipe du jour by demolishing all 432 units of Barry Farm and replacing them with a mixed-income complex that will be controlled in part by a private developer. The new development will provide 100 fewer public-housing units on the site.

Already, the local authority has removed hundreds of tenants as it prepares for the demolition, but some refuse to leave. They want to remain in their community, with its extremely low rents and lawns perfectly suited for family picnics, and they fear that the new development will exclude some current residents, forcing them...
Public housing, then, is a crucial base from which to fight for real and enduring affordable housing. It’s part of the solution, but it doesn’t stand alone. History points to other possibilities.

For a brief time in the early 20th century, the United States engaged in an experiment that had the potential to radically reshape the country’s housing sector. It started in 1933, when the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt established a Housing Division within the Public Works Administration (PWA), a New Deal agency that put people to work building dams, bridges, and other large-scale infrastructure.

The PWA’s Housing Division emerged out of the exigencies of the Great Depression, but its path was also influenced by a cohort of left-wing labor unions and progressive urbanists who called on the federal government to follow the European example and engage in the direct construction of noncommercial housing for a broad American constituency. Among the most forceful of these advocates was Catherine Bauer. In 1934, she published Modern Housing, which sought to introduce alternative nonmarket housing models to US readers. Soon after, Bauer became the executive secretary of the union-backed Labor Housing Conference.

As the historian Gail Radford has written, Bauer’s vision was rooted in the idea that housing should be insulated from the cold logic of the capitalist market. Or as Bauer herself once wrote: “The premises underlying the most successful and forward-pointing housing developments are not the premises of capitalism.” And during its brief existence, the PWA Housing Division came to embody much of this ethos. It built or financed 58 public-housing units, around 25,000 units, containing 25,000 units, around the country. As important, the division’s work wasn’t focused solely on alleviating poverty, nor were its units completely means-tested, as public housing is today. With the help of leading architects, it built stylish, quality housing open to poor, working-class, and struggling middle-class people. Its work included the Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, a complex of 20 four-story buildings designed by the modernist architect William Lescaze, as well as the Harlem River Homes, a 574-unit complex where residents enjoyed amenities like a community newspaper, a women’s club, and a nursery school.

These developments could not be bought or sold, nor could landlords raise the rents at will, so they remained consistently affordable. However, this made them a threat to the real-estate industry. David Walsh, a US senator at the time, complained that the PWA-constructed houses “in New York, Cleveland, and Boston elsewhere are really in competition with private property.”

One of the Housing Division’s most grievous failures, it is essential to note, was its unwillingness to challenge
racial segregation in American cities. In many cases, it even spread the sin by developing separate white-only and black-only developments. The legacy of this government-sanctioned segregation lives on in federal housing policy to the present day.

The PWA Housing Division was ultimately short-lived. It was abolished and replaced by the foundational but fundamentally flawed Housing Act of 1937. What emerged over the following decades was a two-tier approach to national housing policy. On the one hand, the federal government developed a public-housing program that was constrained by cost controls and served only the lowest-income people in the country, many of them politically marginalized people of color. On the other, it established massive incentive and insurance programs that fueled the commercial real-estate industry and bankrolled homeownership for middle-class (and mostly white) Americans. The universalist approach to noncommercial housing that Catherine Bauer imagined never materialized.

Now, however, Bauer’s vision is being resurrected, embraced by a growing corps of thinkers and activists under the rubric of “social housing.”

Last month, the People’s Policy Project (3P), a socialist-leaning think tank founded by the writer and lawyer Matt Bruenig, released a report, “Social Housing in the United States,” which argued that the country’s market-oriented approach to affordable-housing development is woefully inadequate. Programs like Section 8 vouchers, the low-income housing tax credit, and inclusionary zoning use a variety of incentives and subsidies to encourage private developers to build or maintain affordable housing across the nation. While these are important tools in the current political context, they are too small, too timid, and rely too heavily on private interests to truly meet the needs of desperate renters. They simply haven’t provided enough affordable housing.

In place of such market schemes, 3P offers the radical solution of mass social housing in the United States. Social housing, as a recent exhibit at New York City’s Center for Architecture describes it, is defined by “a mix of public projects led by city authorities, philanthropic schemes led by charities and collective schemes led by residents. Common to them all...is the idea that there are alternatives to a purely market-oriented system of housing provision.”

With this concept as context, the People’s Policy Project put forward its proposal: The American people should endeavor to develop 10 million units of “large-scale municipal housing, built and owned by the state,” over the next 10 years (the country currently faces a shortfall of an estimated 7 million so-called deeply affordable units). Such a program, the 3P researchers contend, could model itself on the social-housing developments that thrive across the Atlantic. They point to Sweden, where municipal governments built 1 million social-housing units over the course of a decade beginning in the 1960s. They point as well to Vienna, where three in five residents live in housing built, owned, or managed by the municipal government. This housing provides not just for the municipal government. This housing provides not just for the lowest-income people in the country, many of them politically marginalized people of color. On the other, it established massive incentive and insurance programs that fueled the commercial real-estate industry and bankrolled homeownership for middle-class (and mostly white) Americans. The universalist approach to noncommercial housing that Catherine Bauer imagined never materialized.

The 3P report’s authors call on the federal government to institute a revenue-neutral low-interest loan program to fund urban housing authorities across the country. They also call for a suite of federal capital-grant programs, including one that would provide financing to municipal housing authorities equal in value to what the private sector receives under the low-income housing tax credit. And if federal funding fails to materialize in the near term, they call on municipalities to start building right away with financing from the bond market and other available capital sources. As for where to site these developments, the 3P authors believe that cities should turn first to unused public land.

A social-housing program of this sort would be different from traditional public housing in many respects, but one of the most essential ways is this: By developing homes for a broad range of Americans, such a program would quickly generate a powerful constituency capable of resisting the sort of political attacks that have plagued public housing for decades. It would also create an enormous number of jobs.

Plus there’s a precedent for it—many, in fact. “Americans are used to national parks, state parks, fire departments, police departments, public schools, public-utility companies, water utilities—they are used to public ownership of essential services, but somehow they don’t think of housing in the same way,” Dreier says. The challenge will be to change their minds.

(continued on page 32)
Dear reader,

Sinclair Broadcast Group recently caused controversy for forcing newscasters to read pronouncements from the corporation presented as news—putting profiteering ahead of the public interest.

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Katrina vanden Heuvel
Editor and Publisher, The Nation

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To do that demands a movement—a movement capable of reshaping popular narratives and overcoming a gargantuan real-estate lobby that has spent untold sums to safeguard the speculative housing market. That movement will need to reach beyond the traditional borders of housing advocacy and include unions, environmentalists, racial-justice advocates, feminists, and, yes, politicians. It will require, as Catherine Bauer once wrote, an army of people “who need better houses to live in and workers who need work building those houses.”

Tara Raghueer of People’s Action agrees—and believes the current political atmosphere is ripe. “We’re in an incredibly urgent moment that requires a movement response,” she says. “Housing is the biggest tent issue there is.” It’s an issue that should be at the top of the left’s political agenda and on the tip of every progressive politician’s tongue.

BACK IN ROCHESTER, TENANTS AND ORGANIZERS are anxious to undertake this necessary work. In 2016, they helped found Rochester’s first community land trust, a legal tool with roots in the civil-rights movement that enables community-controlled landownership. In January 2018, the City Roots CLT, as it’s known, finalized a deal with the bank that foreclosed on Liz McGriff’s home. The CLT purchased and will hold in perpetuity the land under her residence, while she regained title to the structure. She now lives there as an owner, without fear. “I am happy. I sleep better at night. I am putting things back together,” says McGriff, now a leader with the citywide tenants’ union.

On Thurston Road, meanwhile, the residents continue their rent strike. They’re pushing the city to invoke its receivership authority and take temporary control of the building. If they succeed, they hope to raise money and use their leverage to purchase the property from the owner at a reduced price. They say they’d like to place the land under the control of the CLT and convert the building into an affordable cooperative managed by the tenants themselves. “The landlord could sell the building to us,” says Mary Brown, “and we’ll get our own property manager and have it renovated and fixed up the way we want it fixed up.”

For Ryan David Acuff, cooperatives, CLTs, and other community-controlled housing are the building blocks for a truly democratic social-housing system. “The way I define social housing,” Acuff says, “is permanent affordability and resident control.”

Yet even as the Rochester tenants inch toward that ideal, they must respond to the bitter emergencies that define this country’s housing system. In late April, Spectrum moved to evict the homeless encampment near the Freddie-Sue Bridge. Under police supervision, company employees arrived in hazmat suits to tear down tents and confiscate possessions, to erase the inconvenient evidence of our housing crisis. But the citywide tenants’ union and its allies mobilized. They arrived en masse, in militant style, and physically blocked the eviction. There was one arrest, but the police and hazmat men soon retreated. For now, the tent city doggedly endures. “Forgive us our trespasses,” its occupants insist.

(continued from page 23)

HE HOUSING CRISIS “IS LIKE A GAME OF MUSICAL chairs,” says Nan Roman. “There’s just not enough chairs for the number of people.” And the private sector simply can’t solve this problem: Even if developers put up buildings without taking on any debt, the poorest tenants still can’t pay enough rent to cover a building’s expenses. However, most affordable developments do take on debt to finance construction, putting the eventual units even further out of poor people’s reach. Without a subsidy, the only housing that private developers can afford to build is for high-end customers. Income inequality only fuels the rush for developers to cater to the top of the market with luxury housing, while ignoring the middle and bottom. “There’s a market failure, and the government should be stepping in to ameliorate that,” Yentel says. But so far, the debate in Washington over housing is limited to helping veterans off the street or preserving the tax breaks enjoyed by wealthier homeowners.

If there is a silver lining to LA’s affordable-housing crisis, it’s that things have gotten so bad that the city’s residents are finally paying attention. Street homelessness appears in every community; it’s not just crammed into Skid Row. “We see huge amounts of activism that have sprung out of this crisis,” Gross says. In the absence of assistance from the federal government, the city is attempting to patch together solutions. In November 2016, three-quarters of city voters approved Proposition HHH, an increase in property taxes to raise $1.2 billion for 10,000 units of permanent supportive housing for the homeless over the next decade. But now comes the test of whether the city can actually get the units built. “The money’s there,” says Paul Beesemyer, a program director at the California Housing Partnership Corporation, but “the potential ‘gantlet of community opposition is a tough thing.” Early last year, voters also approved Measure H, which raises the sales tax by a quarter of a cent and uses the money to fund homeless services.

“It’s a sea change for Southern California,” Beesemyer says. “We’re in a fundamentally more hopeful place than we have ever been.” But, he adds, “we’re in a deeper hole than we’ve ever been in.” Advocates warn that, while the money is welcome, it’s a trickle in a chasm of need. “There’s going to be this big influx of resources that hasn’t existed in 30 years,” Dennison says. “But without federal resources, none of it works.”

(continued from page 17)
The Association of American University Presses (AAUP) is now the Association of University Presses (AUPresses). The visual identity you can see here is a vibrant expression of the Association’s purpose and vision: open and engaging, representing a forward-thinking and mission-driven publishing community that holds to—and stands for—high standards of scholarship and professionalism.
to my “factual and interpretive errors” without giving any examples. He instead focuses on my “omissions,” such as my dismissal of Luther’s most popular writings in favor of obscure ones “unknown until the 20th century.”

This is simply false. I quote from To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, a famous work whose first edition of 4,000 copies sold out so quickly that another was quickly arranged, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants and An Open Letter on the Habsb Book Against the Peasants, both of which were widely read—and condemned—at the time; Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil, a remarkably vulgar work that became a key tool of Protestant propaganda against Rome; and the widely read On the Jews and Their Lies, which persuaded a number of contemporary German princes to crack down on the Jews in their realms. That last tract might well be the wildest work ever written against the Jews, and since World War II Lutherans around the world have struggled to come to terms with it and with the horrible legacy left by Luther’s detestation of the Jews.

As I try to show in my book Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind, the rhetoric of the period was indeed crude, but Luther’s was in a class by itself, and Erasmus repeatedly warned him that it would likely lead to violence if he didn’t desist. One of the great tragedies of Luther’s life is that his early and admirable populism, defense of liberty of conscience, and embrace of suffering gave way to a toxic mix of intransigence, intolerance, and paranoid hatred. But, as I try to show in my article, the populist aspects of Luther’s work remain discernible in American evangelicalism. For someone decrying polemic and caricature, Hopgood serves up a pretty good helping himself, bones and all.

Michael Massing
New York City

The ACLU Forsworn

Re “The ACLU Reborn,” by Dale Maharidge [May 21]: Although the American Civil Liberties Union courageously stands up for our constitutional rights, there is a darker side to the story: The ACLU also supports the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision. The reasoning is that “money is speech,” and so unlimited and anonymous speech is a First Amendment right. This is stretching the point. Indeed, the Citizens United decision set democracy so far back that we most likely will never recover from it.

I had been an avid ACLU supporter for most of my life (even supporting them as a Jew during the Skokie episode). I was an ACLU speaker for western Colorado, standing up for the separation of church and state when the city of Grand Junction wouldn’t remove the Ten Commandments from public property. But I felt that I had to resign after they became part of decimating US democracy. I still support many of the things they do, but I cannot be part of an organization that supports the takeover of the US government by corporations and the wealthy.

Bob Bogner
Aspen, Colo.

Correction

The article “Off to the Racists” [May 14] claimed that Joe Arpaio is running for the Arizona Senate. He is, in fact, running for a US Senate seat from Arizona. The Nation regrets the error.
Now that Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has become a staple of high-school and college classrooms, it’s easy to forget that Hurston herself was almost forgotten. In her lifetime, critics lambasted Hurston’s writing—as well as her sexuality and even her style of dress. Her books brought her little remuneration in her old age. She lived her last days in a welfare home, and her burial was paid for in installments. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and her other works fell out of print. Plants overran her burial plot, obscuring her grave.

Although her fiction is much more famous now, it was her anthropology that catalyzed Hurston’s revival. Researching voodoo practices back in 1970, Alice Walker found a single unprejudiced text in a sea of racist anthropology books: Hurston’s 1935 folklore collection, *Mules and Men*. Astonished by “this perfect book,” Walker shared it with her relatives, “and a kind of paradise was regained. For what Zora’s book did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed.” Walker was so captivated that she later searched for Hurston’s unmarked grave, an effort she documented in “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” a 1975 essay for *Ms.* magazine. After finding the grave site in a field of snakes and thigh-high weeds in Central Florida, Walker purchased a headstone with the inscription *A Genius of the South*.

Since then, Hurston’s reclamation has proceeded at a rapid pace. In 1975, Hortense Thornton chaired a seminar on her at the Modern Language Associa-
tion. In 1977, Robert Hemenway published a biography. In 1978, Harper & Row leased the rights to Their Eyes Were Watching God to the University of Illinois Press, which issued a paperback edition of that tumultuous tale about a black woman from rural Florida named Janie Crawford, who “saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone.”

At the time of its republication, Janie’s story fed a growing demand for black women’s fiction. The paperback edition was so profitable that Harper & Row refused to renew the lease and, hoping to capitalize on the Hurston revival, reprinted her other work, helping to transform her into an emblem of the Harlem Renaissance and black literature.

_Barracoon_, a work unpublished in Hurston’s lifetime, captures both her anthropological spirit and her capacity for storytelling and narrative. Started in 1927, _Barracoon_ is an oral history based on an interview that Hurston did with Kossula Oluale, the last survivor of the last American slave ship. For Hurston, interviewing Kossula—nine years before the Works Progress Administration compiled its oral histories of slavery—held the potential to transform histories of the transatlantic slave trade, most of which described everything but the experience of enslavement. “All these words from the seller,” Hurston noted in _Barracoon_, “but not one word from the sold.”

With the book so heavily focused on Kossula’s experiences, readers looking for descriptions of black women like those in _Their Eyes Were Watching God_ will be disappointed. But the book nonetheless has a powerful story to tell: Forcibly ripped from his home, Kossula spent the rest of his life in search of community, family, and a sense of home. Even after more than 60 years of enslavement. “All these words from the seller,” Hurston noted in _Barracoon_, “but not one word from the sold.”

Kossula’s narrative begins in Bantè, a town in what is now Benin, where his upbringing differed greatly from the life he would live in America. Kossula was one of six children born to his father’s second wife. His family was neither rich nor poor. Many responsibilities in Bantè were commonly shared, like child-rearing. Laws were also universally applied. When Kossula was young, one of Bantè’s hunters broke a law forbidding the removal of a leopard’s whiskers, which could be used in making poison, and the town held a public investigation, trial, and execution. “Everything be done open dere,” Kossula said. No one could break the law without being held accountable, and no one could be prosecuted for a crime without public oversight. “In Afficky de law is de law an’ no man cain make out be crazy lak here, an’ get excusee from de law.”

If custom and law bound the Bantè townspeople together, the denizens of nearby Dahomey would eventually tear them apart. According to Kossula, the Dahomeans subsisted on a war economy, acquiring wealth by raiding towns to enslave their inhabitants. When Kossula was 19, Dahomey demanded half of Bantè’s crops in exchange for peace. When Bantè’s king refused, the Dahomeans raided the village. At daybreak, Kossula witnessed Dahomean soldiers decapitating his people and collecting the severed heads as proof to their comrades and their king of their deeds. Then they captured and bound the survivors, including Kossula. “When de men pull me wid dem I call my mama name,” Kossula recalled to Hurston. “I doan know where she is. I no see none my family. I doan know where dey is. I beg de men to let me go finde my folks.” They refused.

Kossula’s newfound isolation brought him closer to the other survivors. After the massacre, the defeated were marched in chains while their captors traveled alongside, the decapitated heads of their family members in tow. En route to Dahomey, when the stench from the rotting heads became unbearable, the warriors smoked the skulls for preservation in sight of the captives. In Dahomey, they were herded into a barracoon, a physical enclosure that held enslaved people. Days later, the army marched them to the port of Ouidah and into another barracoon. These structures lined the coast—“each nation in a barracoon by itself.”

Elsewhere in the world, outlaws were planning Kossula’s future. Although the United States had prohibited the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, many slavers were still smuggling slaves into the country. In Alabama, word of the Dahomeans selling enslaved people reached Timothy Meaher and William Foster, who outfitted a ship called the _Clotilda_ to transport the captives. Sailing on the _Clotilda_, the pair arrived in Ouidah around 1860. One of them came to Kossula’s barracoon, inspected the people, and singled some out for purchase. Kossula felt anxious about being separated from his new family. “Den we cry,” Kossula recalled, “we sad ’cause we doan want to leave the rest of our people in de barracoon. We all lonesome for our home. We doan know what goin’ become of us, we doan want to be put apart from one ‘nother.”

Hired workers loaded Kossula’s compatriots into boats. Left on shore, Kossula stood facing a difficult choice: Say nothing and risk an unknown fate in Dahomey, or protest and join what remained of his home. Kossula spoke up.

Once on board the _Clotilda_, Kossula found himself in the midst of many different people from various regions of Africa who spoke many different languages, but their shared captivity made a new people out of these disparate individuals. Forced below deck, this new nation remained in its dark and crowded quarters for 12 days, pitched back and forth by an ocean on which Kossula had never traveled and sustained by little food and water. On the 13th day, the crew brought them above deck. Their legs were so weak that the crew had to support them until they regained their mobility, which was done only to ensure that they retained their value as property.

After Kossula and the others landed in America, enslavement once more dispersed their community. They were taken to the home of Burns Meaher (brother of Timothy) in Alabama, where the Meahers divided the captives among themselves. Of that moment, Kossula recalled: “We very sorry to be parted from one ‘nother. We cry for home. We took away from our people. We seventy days cross de water from de Afrika soil, and now dey part us from one ‘nother.”

Thus separated, the African captives struggled to fit in with the other enslaved people. “Everybody lookee at us strange,” Kossula recalled. “We want to talk wid de udder colored folks but dey doan know whut we say. Some makee de fun at us.” They especially disdained how Kossula and his countrymen danced “lak in de Afficky soil” on Sundays, for which the American enslaved called them “savage.”

Culturally and linguistically isolated from their peers, the survivors of the _Clotilda_ struggled to adjust. They had no experience with the agricultural methods used on Alabama plantations, so the American-born slaves had to train them. Those who didn’t work on the plantations worked on...
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(SOUND FAMILIAR?)

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After Emancipation, the survivors of the Clotilda congregated in Magazine Point, Alabama, to re-form their community. Now that they were free, however, they needed money and housing. Some of the men took jobs at the sawmill and the powder mill; some of the women raised vegetables and sold them in Mobile. They considered returning to Africa but couldn’t afford the voyage. Instead, they decided to ask their former masters for land, on which they would make a home. Appointed spokesman by the group, Kossula was the one to make that request. Tim Meaher’s response, as Kossula described it: “Fool, do you think I goin’ give you property on top of property?” Their hopes thwarted, the freed slaves lived frugally—eating molasses with their bread to stretch their food—in the hopes of saving up their wages. Eventually, they purchased land from the Meahers, who refused even to discount its price.

On their new property, the Clotilda community tried to create a society that blended the customs of their native lands with those acquired in America. They named their new home “Africatown. We say dat ‘cause we wan’ to go back in de Afficka soil and we see we cain go. Derefo we make de Afficka where dey fetch us.” In their African America, the Clotilda survivors appointed a village head and judges, built a school and church, and created laws. They hoped to make Africatown a sanctuary in and from America.

Unfortunately, Africatown was neither autonomous nor separate from Alabama. Most of its residents had adopted Christianity, so when Kossula and Abile, an African woman, married according to their homeland’s tradition, they found themselves scolded by the local clergy:

“[I]n de church dey tell us dat ain’ right. We got to marry by license. In de Afficka soil, you unnerstand me, we ain’ got no license. De man and de woman dey ’gree ‘tween dey-selves, den dey married and live to-gether. We dean know nothin’ bout dey have license over here in dis place. So den we gittee married by de license, but I doan love my wife no mo’ wid de license than I love her befo’ de license.

In Africatown, the couple struggled to uphold their customs. Kossula wanted to use his father’s name, “O-lo-loo-ay,” as his last name, but people considered it too long and “crooked.” As a result he took the last name Lewis and the first name Cudjo.

At every turn, American institutions undermined their attempt to rebuild Africa in Alabama. These institutions severely affected their children’s lives. As Kossula told it, other children—born to American parents—derided his kids and called them “savage cannibals.” In response, his boys got in fights with them. The parents of these other children expressed their concern to Kossula, who told them to teach their kids to leave his alone. Yet these parents continued to insist that his children were the dangerous ones. A deputy sheriff eventually took issue with Kossula’s youngest boy (the details are unclear) in 1902. “He say he de law, but he doan come ’rest him.” Instead, the deputy shot Kossula’s son through the neck, extrajudicially condemning him to two days of suffering, blood gurgling in his throat, until he finally died, with the family forced to helplessly witness his pain as they attempted to care for him in their home.

After his son’s death, Kossula’s life became a story of losses. A train in Mobile decapitated another son. A third son asked Kossula to sue the railroad company. But Kossula had sued a different railroad company years earlier and had never received any of the funds promised him. Distrusting the American legal system, Kossula saw no point. Shortly after that, his third son disappeared, never to return. Kossula recalled his son’s unhappy life this way:

He say when he a boy, dey (the American Negro children) fight him and say he a savage. When he gittee a man dey cheat him. De train hurtte his papa and doan pay him. His brothers gittee kill. He doan laugh no mo’.

Kossula never knew if his son had run away or if someone had killed him. Months later, while the family was still grieving this loss, another son fell ill and died. In 1908, Abile awoke from a dream in which her children were cold. The next day, she visited the graveyard, where she mimed covering her children’s burial plots with blankets. One week later, she died. A month later, Kossula’s last remaining son died as well, leaving Kossula without a family of his own. Even with freedom, there were still chains.

In the account that Hurston records, Kossula spends more time lamenting the families he lost, both in Africa and the United States, than he does praising the communities he helped make. Hurston said as much herself when she wrote, in her 1942 autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, “After seventy-five years, he still had that tragic sense of loss. That yearning for blood and cultural ties. That sense of mutilation.” Slavery’s assaults on “blood and cultural ties” have long been chronicled, most memorably by Harriet Jacobs, who wrote, in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, “Why does the slave ever love?” The historians Heather Williams and Tera Hunter have argued persuasively that these assaults couldn’t annihilate marriages or families, but that loving while enslaved—and, indeed, loving after being enslaved—guaranteed a considerable amount of pain in America.

Kossula’s story reminds us that Emancipation did not end those assaults on the communities and families of African Americans, but rather enabled their continuation through other means. A combination of xenophobia and police impunity led to the death of one of Kossula’s sons. A railroad company killed another without making the slightest effort at compensation. Poor medical care guaranteed the death of several other children. And grief likely killed his wife. An assault on African families was not just foundational to the black presence in America during the long era of slavery; it continued in the years after Emancipation.

Given this grim history, one wonders about the women who survived the Clotilda: What were their experiences like? This is a question that Hurston never answers in Barracoon. (Hurston also found a female survivor of a transatlantic slave voyage, but chose not to write about her.) This might also have corrected some of Kossula’s descriptions of Abile and her experiences,
which are frequently so sparse that they don’t seem to capture very much of her life or thoughts at all. When Abile died, Kos- sula recalled: “She cry ’cause she doan want me be lonesome.” It’s certainly possible that her husband’s impending loneliness moved Abile to tears on her deathbed, though it’s hard to imagine that this was the only reason. Hemenway, in his biography of Hurston, described Kossula as embodying “the process of acculturation that presum- ably created Americans out of Africans,” but Kossula’s narrative does not provide a complete portrait of how that process cre- ated African-American women.

From what we can infer, care was espe- cially important to Abile. When Kossula asked her to marry him, she responded, “You think if I be yo’ wife you kin take keer me?” Later, when she placed imagi- nary blankets on her children’s graves, she was demonstrating a mother’s need to care for them that sought to transcend the boundaries between this life and the next. Yet that connection must also have pained her greatly; otherwise, the dreams of her deceased children struggling with the cold would not have stirred her from her sleep. If, for Kossula, freedom ultimately entailed the destruction of his family by means other than enslavement, this was the case for Abile as well, and the pain of outliving the children she carried must have wreaked havoc on her, though we’ll never know its full extent.

Abile witnessing the death of so many of her children may seem specific to the turn of the 20th century. Sadly, it’s not. As Linda Villarosa documents in her recent New York Times article, “Why America’s Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis,” the disparity between black and white infant mortality is greater now than it was in 1850. If we move beyond deaths proximate to birth, black people in the United States have higher death rates than white people in every age group under 65, according to 2017 reports by the Cen- ters for Disease Control. To live as a black parent in the United States is to live with a much higher chance of witnessing the death of your children.

Barracoon was among the first of many documents to highlight this. So too does Abile’s life imply that caring and grieving can be a large part of life for black women. Although Kossula’s account fails to give us many details about Abile’s life, he too par- took in caring and grieving, even after most of his family had died. As a widower and a grieving father, Kossula spent many of his last years as a sexton in the church that held the graves of his children and his wife.

We Learned the Mountains by Heart

We went to school we ate pink beef we drank lots of water we snorted ritalin our nostrils turned red we lifted weights we killed a mama moose we sold her teeth online we poked each other’s muscles we laid our large bodies down on docks and smelled the wind we bucked hay our skin was hard we touched our palms together speeding down the highway we turned the headlights off and felt a little holy we were strong but we were thin we slept on couches we tore rotten stumps with our big hands we swaddled our little sisters we wrestled our dogs we punched each other in the kidneys we shinnied up magnolias we closed our eyes we went to church we pelted magpies off the cherry trees we watched moonlight spread across the snow we trapped a spider and then we let him go

JACKSON HOLBERT
FLIGHT OR ALCHEMY

Abstract painters Joe Overstreet and James Little subvert the demands of representation

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

“Abstraction represents self-determination and free will.” So avowed the painter James Little at a recent panel discussion held in conjunction with an exhibition of works by his fellow painter Joe Overstreet, but with the broader purpose of examining the question of “Black Artists and the Abstraction Idiom.” Little’s ringing declaration of aesthetic independence was couched in a language both explicitly political (self-determination being a right underwritten by the United Nations in its 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which held that “All peoples have the right to...freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”) as well as theological (though the problem of free will has earlier roots, it became urgent when Christian thinkers had to explain the origin of sin and damnation in a world created by a perfect and benevolent God). The implication of Little’s statement is that abstract art, by eschewing the forms of representation through which political and religious narratives are conveyed, enacts and exemplifies a kind of self-emancipation.

That’s a hefty burden to place on abstract painting, but it gives a distinctly polemical edge to what an earlier wave of black modernists saw, according to the art historian Darby English, as “the opportunity to make a way forward on one’s own terms, to choose one’s own resources according to one’s tastes, and to work them to independently determined ends.” For African-American artists of Overstreet’s generation, even more than of Little’s—Overstreet was born in 1933, Little in 1952—the question of how to paint was urgently bound up with a triple burden of representation: Could art participate in the struggle for equality? If so, could anything but figurative, realist art contribute? And does such a paradigm restrict the artist’s freedom? Overstreet was among the artists who, confronting this question, staked out a skeptical position.

a particularly ebullient period in the artist's career, leading up to and including a series of paintings he called the “Flight Patterns” (1970–72). Approaching his 40s at this point, Overstreet seems to have retained a young person's reckless willingness to try anything, coupled with sufficient experience and skill to make it work. Born in tiny Conehatta, Mississippi, Overstreet grew up mainly in Oakland, California, and studied art in the Bay Area, where he gravitated toward the Beat scene. After briefly working in Los Angeles as an animator for Walt Disney, he moved east around 1958, settling on New York's Lower East Side. In the mid-1960s, he became the art director of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, founded in Harlem by Amiri Baraka. In 1974, Overstreet co-founded Kenkeleba House, an art center in Lower Manhattan.

Overstreet's paintings from the early 1960s show him working in several figurative styles, from vehement expressionism (Birmingham Bombing, 1963) to brash political pop (The New Femina, 1964, in which the no-longer-docile Mammy gleefully wields a machine gun). But by the end of the decade, as shown at Firestone, he had switched to an abstract mode. In the earliest works on view, we see Overstreet experimenting with highly eccentric elaborations on the traditional wall-mounted stretched canvas: North Star (1968) is made of a pair of canvases, both of them shaped with large triangular cuts and extensions and situated one above the other in such a way as to leave a large, roughly W-shaped area open between them. The serrated patterns formed by the painting's geometric zones of acrylic color, possibly influenced by the jagged patterns of Navajo "eye dazzler" textiles, echo and counterpoint the angular vicissitudes of the canvases' inner and outer borders.

The composition is divided into five main sections, each with a distinct color scheme. The lower central zone is largely a tawny ochre but also includes green and a sort of twilight orange; this would be the earth and its horizon. The upper zone consists of shades of yellow, along with some dark blue and black—as if the night sky had been cracked open by the brilliant light of the titular star. Two narrow verticals on either side contain patterns of intersecting triangles (darker on the left, where contrasting red and blue zones predominate; more softly hued on the right, with earthy tones that echo those of the lower central portion of the painting). These “wings,” which don't pick up on the allusions, however abstracted, of the sky and earth at the center of the painting, serve to establish the standard of pure abstraction from which the painting as a whole deviates.

North Star shows that Overstreet had digested the work of a number of mostly New York–based painters who had employed shaped canvases earlier in the '60s, including Frank Stella, David Novros, Neil Williams, and Kenneth Noland. But Overstreet's idea of what could be done with a shaped canvas was rather different from theirs. Stella and the others shared a desire to make shape, color, and structure a seamless, interlocking whole in such a way that, as Michael Fried wrote in 1966, “depicted shape may be said to have become dependent upon literal shape.” Not only does Overstreet swerve away from such literalism, but he sets shape, color, and structure into counterpart rather than unifying them; the paintings open up to the world rather than closing in on themselves. His work is allusive, atmospheric, and metaphorically charged in ways that Stella and his cohort would have avoided.

Made two years later, in 1970, Overstreet's Mandala and HooDoo Mandala exemplify a different way of working with shape, as well as a different way of working with canvas. A number of artists at this time were pinning their canvases loosely to the wall rather than stretching them across rigid frames. They included, in New York, Alan Shields (whose "unstretched textilelike paintings conjured…pliant mandalas or sky maps," as Roberta Smith once wrote) and, in Washington, DC, Sam Gilliam, whose stained canvases were draped, bunched, and tied, sometimes effacing all sense of the traditional picture plane. Overstreet, in his adaptations of the circular Hindu and Buddhist symbols, neither stretched his canvases across a wooden armature nor hung them loosely. Instead, he tied them to the wall, floor, and ceiling, using cords to hold the grommeted canvases just in front of the wall. Pulled taut at eight points, the overall shape of HooDoo Mandala recalls a square, but it has arcing edges that curve in a direction contrary to the circles-and-spokes-based composition, like a compass rose, that fills the canvas.

Both mandala paintings seem more abstract and self-contained than North Star, despite the flaunting of their literal tie to architecture. The way their polyrhythmic color sequences move in and out from the edges to the center and back again gives them a force of contraction and expansion that might well justify the assertion by Jeff Chang that HooDoo Mandala's chromatic patterning contains "a whole worldview"—one that in-spired Ishmael Reed, a friend of Overstreet's, to compose the “Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto” that he published in the Los Angeles Free Press in 1970. In his book Who We Be: The Colorization of America, Chang writes that “Overstreet described the color fields” of HooDoo Mandala to Reed as “‘landing strips for loas;’ the saints of Haitian syncretism.” And Reed thereby “began to see the links between African religion—vodun, santería, macumba, and candomblé, African American hoodoo—and the absorptive, protean creativity of Afrodisiatomic art.”

Actually, Overstreet's syncretism was even more encompassing, finding no contradiction between the symbolic forms of Haitian vodoun and those of Hinduism and Buddhism or of modern Euro-American art, from the lyrical Orphism of Robert and Sonia Delaunay to the (arguably) more logical investigations of so many painters of Overstreet's own time. It's worth pointing out that this synthesis demands a rereading of all those traditions: Religion can be seen as a set of techniques, art as a system of belief.

Quite quickly, Overstreet made another shift: Still holding his canvases in place with rope, he took them away from the wall and into three dimensions—yet without denying their sense of being a painting (as opposed to, say, a polychrome sculpture). A kind of culmination to the sequence described in “Innovation of Flight” comes in his 1971 painting Purple Flight, installed across the corner of two walls at Firestone. The work plays with singleness and multiplicity in ways that are themselves multiple. A canvas has been stretched by ropes to define three distinct areas: two squarish pieces connected by a trapezium, each on a different plane. Unlike Gilliam's unstretched canvases, Overstreet's always have a distinct front and back (though in contrast to traditional wall-mounted paintings, the back is visible), even when the planes multiply or, as in some of his other works at Firestone, the front faces the floor or ceiling rather than the middle of the room.

In Purple Flight, however, the color isn't organized into geometrically defined zones. Instead, the whole work is covered by a single iridescent field of mutating hue—mostly purple, as the title says, though my eye finds no purple paint in it; a densely layered, multicolored splatter of blues, greens, yellows, and reds, sprayed out in a sort of fine pointillistic shimmer, produces the overall sense of purpleness. The sheer sensuality of color here is surprisingly congruent with an
analytical bent; indeed, *Purple Flight* seems as close as Overstreet ever gets to the kind of self-referential abstraction pursued by Stella or Noland. And yet, maybe not quite. Corrine Jennings, the curator and writer who is married to Overstreet, has said that the work “alludes to New Orleans hoodoo beliefs, traceable back to West Africa, in which the colour purple is linked with various attributes, including the power of spiritual protection.”

Reading that statement, I couldn’t help but think of how Romare Bearden turned from abstraction to a figurative art that resonated with the black folk culture of the American South. Perhaps Overstreet was able to make that same connection without giving up abstraction. But he was not unreservedly committed to abstract art: An untitled 1972 painting at Firestone includes (almost camouflaged by the optically active geometrical patterning of mainly blue and yellow) images of human legs, as if in motion—or dangling in the air. The period following the extraordinarily productive six years traced in “Innovation of Flight” includes a one-man show at Kenkeleba House. He is, above all, a colorist, as well as something of a paint technician; he mixes his own oil-and-wax concoction and has stated, “If I hadn’t been a painter, I would have been a scientist. There’s alchemy in it too.”

Little’s compositions employ hard-edged patterns that essentially serve as vehicles for the presentation of color, and yet he finds inspiration for this mode of painting in the everyday world: “What I picked up on were the stripes in shirts or plaids, advertising signs, construction.” His recent show at the June Kelly Gallery in New York, “Slants and White Paintings,” included two very distinct bodies of work. The “slants” will be less of a surprise to those who have followed Little’s work until now, although the geometrical division of the paintings has become a bit more intricate than in the past: Each one is made of four to six slightly misaligned stacks of diagonal bands, rather than the vertical stripes, interlocking rays, or chevronlike arrangements he’s often used before. The British painter Bridget Riley employed a similar kind of patterning in many of her works in the 1990s, with the curious difference that, reading the canvas from left to right, Little’s diagonals point downward, as if toward the earth, while Riley’s were oriented upward, toward the sky (compare, for instance, her 1993 painting *Naturaia*, in the collection of the Tate Britain, with any of Little’s “slants”). A more significant difference would be the impersonal facture of Riley’s paintings, executed by assistants, and the sense of investment in the mark and in the physical presence of the paint evinced by Little’s work.

Each of the “slants” on view here employs some six to eight different hues in patterns that appear to have been intuitively worked out. Often, Little seems interested in exploring the impact of small differences in color. For instance, in Democratic Experiment (2017), most of the tones are from the blue-green portion of the spectrum, and the work’s effect comes in large part from the interaction between two slightly different shades of greenish yellow or yellowish green, which seem to be continually measuring themselves against each other while somehow trying to convince me that the reiterated turquoises might actually be different.

Three smaller “slants” have been painted using raw pigment rather than Little’s usual mixture of oil paint and wax. The physical sense of the mark on these isn’t as heavy, the color a bit clearer and brighter than in the larger works. And yet the smaller paintings feel just as weighty. The accent in Noticeable Similarities (2017) is on gray and black, despite the quantitative preponderance of moss green, a sort of cream yellow, pale pink, and a couple of different blues—the black, in particular, resounds like a drummer’s rim shots.

Little’s “white paintings” are a distinct change from the geometrical architecture of his other work. These small paintings (23 by 29 inches) aren’t exactly white: Their thick impasto has been stamped out with irregular rows of oval apertures, each slightly different, creating a sort of grille through which one sees seemingly random splotches of soft color. Despite its prevalence, the white is not so much a presence in itself as it is a veil that allows one to glimpse, without quite grasping, the shifting hues behind. It’s as if each of these works wore a mask with a couple hundred eyeholes, from behind which it could see you better than you could see it. If the geometry of Little’s other works comes from the design of manufactured products—clothing, signage, and so on—the cellular structure of the “white paintings” relates more to nature, to the singularity amid similarity of masses of living things. The effect is seductively hypnotic: I found that I could look at these pieces a long time, wondering exactly what it was that I was looking at through this opaque fog of white, without feeling let down at never knowing.

The zigzagging nature of Overstreet’s career suggests considerable self-questioning, perhaps even self-doubt—which, in his case, has been immensely productive. It also hints at an unwillingness to be defined, even by himself. His art seems tied to a sense of what the poet Fred Moten calls “fugitivity.” The “Flight Patterns” inescapably conjure experiences of nomadism by way of their allusions to tents, sails, and even the muslin surfaces of the Wright brothers’ jerry-rigged aircraft, so that “flight” in the sense of air travel is always linked to “flight” in the sense of fleeing, escaping, getting away.

Little, by contrast, has pursued a more narrowly focused project, digging into his chosen territory rather than being tempted, like Overstreet, by the impulse to keep lighting out for new ones. He became convinced (against the grain of the time) that an abstract, modernist formalism remains capable of helping the artist to continue to unfold the as-yet-untold implications not only of 20th-century abstract painting but of African-American vernacular art, from the renowned quilts of Gee’s Bend to the paintings, drawings, and sculptures of folk or outsider artists like Horace Pippin, Bill Traylor, and William Edmondson. “I’m representing black folks,” Little insists, not by painting pictures of them, but by embodying an ethic of accomplishment that is not constrained by external expectations or limitations.

That Little remains what he calls a “sleeper”—that is, an artist who flies under the radar of wider acclaim—suggests that today, just as in the 1960s and ’70s, the public has a hard time coming to terms with black artists who don’t put race at the forefront of their subject matter. The longer arc of Overstreet’s career is a reminder that some artists may not be at ease with any resolution of what Darby English calls “the representational(ist) imperative imposed on them by popular opinion and institutional practice and extended even today in certain histories of art.” Abstraction, in the hands of artists like Joe Overstreet and James Little, is not an evasion of those demands—though it may indicate an impulse to flee—but rather a creative way of wrestling with them.
LONGING TO TELL YOU

Finding new life in Broadway’s golden-age shows

by ALISA SOLOMON

There are few things more dialectically riveting in the theater than a great musical actor standing downstage-center, in the demarcating glow of a spotlight, and singing her heart out. It’s a spectacle at once intimate and grandly histrionic, advancing the plot and removed from it. The character shares her innermost thoughts; the actor radiantly shows off her chops. The female leads in two Broadway revivals are blazing through such numbers eight times a week these days, both in unorthodox takes: Jessie Mueller as Julie Jordan in Carousel and Lauren Ambrose as Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady.

A certain critical consternation awaited these productions, with good reason. Here, as several commentators have noted, are shows (along with the upcoming Pretty Woman and next season’s Kiss Me Kate), written by men and directed by men and based on source material mostly by men, whose female protagonists can seem to succumb cheerily to being beaten, bullied, rescued, or tamed by their male counterparts. A measure of these times of debate over what to do with historical expressions that now seem dishonorable, the revivals of Carousel (Rodgers and Hammerstein, 1945) and My Fair Lady (Lerner and Loewe, 1956) opened in mid-April, the same week that New York City, in response to protests, removed a statue from Central Park of one J. Marion Sims, a 19th-century surgeon who operated on female slaves without anesthesia or consent. Should sexist old shows—notwithstanding charms like Carousel’s soaring score or My Fair Lady’s high entertainment quotient—meet a similar fate? Should they be knocked from the repertoire?

Not necessarily. Theater is made of flesh and voice, not of marble or bronze, and when live human beings embody theatrical roles, they bring perspectives, quirks, critiques, and sheer virtuosity that can contribute to contesting a show’s hoary elements. And there’s no great risk in trying. Unlike a statue, a play can’t be smashed irretrievably to smithereens. Even the clumsiest staging or most boneheaded interpretation cannot define a show; someone else can come along and make another production.

Artists and scholars have been thinking about how to grapple with the apparent misogyny in the masterful midcentury musicals since long before me too became a hashtag. Meanwhile, the tight licensing grip that creators (or their estates) have long maintained, demanding absolute fidelity to the original stage versions of their works, has started to loosen, allowing—to cite just a few examples—a female Bobbi in Marianne Elliott’s upcoming London production of Company; new choreography by Hofesh Shechter for the most recent Broadway revival, in 2015, of Fiddler on the Roof; and same-sex couples as the parallel romantic pairs in Bill Rauch’s version of Oklahoma! at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. So the questions for the “golden age” musicals now on Broadway—as for any production, anywhere—must be: Why now? And, especially, how now?

In the case of My Fair Lady, the remarkable center-stage number comes in the latter half of the first act. After being worked to the brink of exhaustion, Eliza Doolittle successfully pronounces some phrases without her Cockney accent leaking through. “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” she manages to say, and the line lilts into a refrain for a celebratory tango she slides through with her taskmaster, the linguist Henry Higgins (a droll and driven...
Harry Hadden-Paton), who has bet that within six months, he can pass off the poor, unwashed, undereducated flower girl as a duchess at an embassy ball. When Higgins and his kindly colleague Colonel Pickering (Allan Corduner) retreat happily for the night, Eliza, too keyed up for sleep, cradles her books and, giddy at her own achievement, sings “I Could Have Danced All Night” with a full-out abandon we haven’t heard from her until this point. Though it is often treated as a song suggesting that Eliza is falling in love with Higgins, here Ambrose plays “I Could Have Danced” more for the sense of self-discovery, which is really what impels it: “I could have spread my wings / And done a thousand things / I’ve never done before.”

Director Bartlett Sher has staged something extraordinary here. Toward the end of the song, he has Ambrose walk out of Higgins’s lavish two-story study—with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, Oriental rugs, and oh-so-progressive Kandinsky-like painting on the wall—straight through its fourth wall toward the lip of the stage; meanwhile, the study (the set is designed by Michael Yeargan) glides upstage into the deep, dark expanse of Lincoln Center’s Vivian Beaumont Theater. Eliza stands alone on the vast stage, bursting with song and newly found confidence. Sher hasn’t changed the script, and yet this subtle bit of staging is emotionally seismic. Eliza finds her voice by singing. *Hear her roar.*

In general, Sher’s production revolves around Eliza’s process of coming into her own, but never in an overblown, unsupported way (not even in the innovative, heart-quaking ending, which I won’t divulge here). This, after all, is the arc of the show itself, no matter how often it’s thought of as a love story. True, the transformation is mutual: Eliza has just as much impact on her priggish, chauvinistic tutor as he has on her, and Hadden-Paton delivers Henry’s own musical inner monologue, “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face,” with a touching sense of bewilderment over the unfamiliar rise of sentiment in his heart.

But—and weeks after a self-identified incel, or “involuntary celibate,” drove a van into a crowd, killing mostly women, in Toronto, this, lamentably, still needs to be said—just because Higgins discovers some affection for Eliza, that does not mean she has any obligation to reciprocate it. Especially not after his persistent belittling and name-calling. He refers to Eliza as his property; calls her “baggage,” a “squashed cabbage leaf,” a “presumptuous insect,” a “draggletailed guttersnipe,” and more; and sings not one but two misogynistic manifestos (“A Hymn to Him” and “I’m an Ordinary Man”). Hadden-Paton’s performance is nimble enough to turn the professor’s obtuseness about his own entitlement and white-guy fragility into comic irony, but Eliza’s musical riposte stands as the show’s general attitude: “There’ll be spring ev’ry year without you / England still will be here without you… / Without your pushing them, the clouds roll by / If they can do without you, ducky, so can I.”

The source for *My Fair Lady*—George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* (along with the screenplay for the 1938 film version)—makes the case for Eliza’s independence even more strongly, and Sher and company have clearly returned to it for guidance. Shaw was so annoyed by the romantic reading that Herbert Berenbohm Tree gave to Higgins in *Pygmalion*’s first London production in 1914—“I writhed in hell” watching it, Shaw wrote—that the playwright appended a sort of fan-fiction scenario to the drama, in which he describes what might happen to Eliza after the action of *Pygmalion* ends: that she would emphatically not marry Higgins, but rather just remain his friend.

Of course, Shaw was as interested in class as in gender—Eliza is an intersectional hero!—and the musical adaptation carries over his mockery of bourgeois hypocrisy and his critique of capitalist inequity. When she was in Covent Garden, Eliza tells Higgins, who has commented that marriage is her best option for the future, “I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now you’ve made a lady of me, I’m not fit to sell anything else.”

Sher and his team underline the class/gender nexus throughout the play, most efficiently and hilariously in a bit of business during the scene at the races—Eliza’s first effort to pass in public as a lady. The crowd of wealthy spectators, dressed in sumptuous, creamy pearls and mauves with sleek Edwardian contours (the costume designer is Catherine Zuber), moves in tidy lines and upright postures. When Eliza enters in her own shiny narrow dress and is offered a seat, she finds that she can’t fully bend her knees and has to stagger in his scenes outside a pub, and when Alfred comes into lots of money (long story), he rues his ascent into “middle-class morality,” not least the expectation that he wed his partner. Into a raucously staged “Get Me to the Church on Time,” Sher first brings out a line of can-canning dance-hall women, then
of can-canning men wearing the same sort of lurid red skirts, and then a mock marriage procession featuring a cross-dressed couple; the assembled carry a prone Alfred aloft, as if to his own funeral.

Apart from the pleasures of its exuberant theatricality, the mayhem suggests an alternative world beyond the constraining options to which Eliza has been exposed. And so does a column of white-clad women—suffragists with sashes and signs demanding “Votes for Women”—who silently cross the stage in a couple of crowd scenes. *My Fair Lady* originally premiered at a time when American popular culture was promoting a perkily domesticated image of white, middle-class femininity (soon after the show opened, images of June Cleaver vacuuming in pearls became a familiar sight on living-room TVs across America), and it became a colossal hit, running on Broadway for more than six years. Today, without radically altering the show, Sher lets us feel the same exhilaration that Eliza discovers when she risks giving up her comfort for her self-sovereignty.

In *Carousel*, a show that’s not as given to disruption as *My Fair Lady* has been from the start, it’s much harder to challenge the genre’s gender conventions—not does director Jack O’Brien seem to have been much interested in trying. Set in late-19th-century Maine, *Carousel* tells the troubling story of a rough-hewn carnival Barker, Billy Bigelow (Joshua Henry), and the quiet but headstrong mill worker, Julie Jordan (Jessie Mueller), whom he marries. With the exception of one brief and shining moment—when Mueller sings right out to the audience—this is a standard-issue *Carousel*, albeit one featuring a first-rate cast and a full pit orchestra. The production’s primary (and substantial) pleasure is in its ardent delivery of the resplendent score. If you don’t get chills when Mueller and Henry, both strong, emotional singers, convey the reluctant siege of their romance in the duet “If I Loved You,” and if you aren’t thoroughly beguiled by Lindsay Mendez’s ebullient rendering, as Julie’s friend Carrie, of “(When I Marry) Mister Snow,” check your pulse.

And yet. Never mind a clunky choral scene or two (“This Was a Real Nice Clambake” is as inert as cold fish)—the show’s central arc needs fresh framing if a contemporary audience is to engage with it wholeheartedly. The difficulty isn’t only that Billy hits his wife and that she rationalizes his violence in dialogue (“He’s unhappy”) and in a cringe-inducing song (“Oh, what’s the use of wond’rin’ / If he’s good or if he’s bad / He’s your feller and you love him / That’s all there is to that”). We know, alas, that such dynamics persist in abusive relationships. The deeper problem is that the show itself seems to rationalize the abuse as a function of Billy’s frustration—his failure to find work after being fired, in the first scene, from his post as a carousel Barker, and his inability to fit in with Julie’s community.

Though Carrie encourages Julie to leave Billy after he hits her, the very structure of the show counters this possibility. As in other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals (and many they influenced), there’s an implicit comparison between a main couple and their foils (here, Carrie and the fisherman Mr. Snow). As a character, Carrie may object to Billy’s violence, but as a structural parallel to Julie, she places her friend in an analogous position. “The first time he kissed me, the whiff of his clothes / Knocked me flat on the floor of the room,” Carrie sings to Julie. “But now that I love him, my heart’s in my nose / And fish is my fav’rite perfume.” The conventions of the musical prime the audience to expect Julie to stand by her man too, even if what knocks her flat on the floor is a slap.

How Julie might actually feel we have little chance to learn, and not only because, as Carrie puts it, she’s “as tight-lipped as an oyster.” Apart from “What’s the Use of Wond’rin’,” Julie doesn’t have any solo numbers. It’s Billy to whom Rodgers and Hammerstein gave a show-stopping, eight-minute opportunity to spill his heart—an event that brings the audience sympathetically close to an otherwise unlikeable character—and it’s a tour de force for Henry, who performs it like a bouncing spring that suddenly tightens into a tenser and tenser coil. In that song, “Soliloquy,” which closes the first act, Billy reacts to news that Julie is pregnant. At first, he happily imagines a son, who will be “tall and as tough as a tree”; but then he panics: What if it’s a girl—“sweet and petite”—who will require his protection? That anxiety pushes him to seek money in a robbery, precipitating his death, and then his opportunity for redemption at the rear gates of Heaven.

Julie is left to mourn, but even before Billy’s death, she has little to do other than wring her hands over him—except at the show’s beginning. In the first two scenes, she pursues her desire for Billy with a forthrightness that shocks Carrie. (Mueller and Henry convey a sexual attraction that sends a charge clear to the back of the Imperial Theatre’s balcony.) Left alone along a pathway after Carrie rushes back to make the curfew at the mill workers’ barracks, Billy and Julie sing their stunning duet in what’s known as the “bench scene.”

Running about 12 minutes, the scene picks up strains of earlier melodies and uses underscoring to develop their relationship through a conversation in music. Because of these innovative techniques, Stephen Sondheim called the scene “probably the singular most important moment in the evolution of contemporary musicals.” In the most radical piece of staging in this production, O’Brien leaves them standing for most of the exchange (despite its name) and, most important, brings Mueller downstage to sing “If I loved you” not to Billy, but to the audience.

For a few stirring lines in the two-and-a-half-hour show, we are privy to Julie’s interior life as she imagines—in Mueller’s deeply grounded acting and beautiful singing—what loving Billy might mean. “Longin’ to tell you / But afraid and shy,” she sings, considering what would happen if she didn’t express her love: “I’d let my golden chances pass me by!” In that dialectical moment, as Julie searches her soul, Mueller transmitted passion and tenacity right into mine. And it made me wonder what golden chances the show itself let pass all of us by.
Puzzle No. 3468

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

1 Composer’s pants: Sample of inseam is blue, unfortunately (4,8)
9 After onset of tragedy, regretful one is more loyal (5)
10 Lebanon long ago crushed hope in American spooks (9)
11 Lay it out in a condescending way: “37.5 percent of Manitoba is prairie” (9)
12 Choose segment of science lecture (5)
13 Bats can be heard in a dark river (4)
14 Measure ruffle around front of Ukrainian passport, perhaps (5,5)
17 Large pieces of concert equipment? Hell, they’re meant to control the lighting (10)
19 Confuse Rio with the center of Santa Fe (4)
22 Doctor among handsome Dickens characters (5)
23 Spicy? Season with something you might find in Yellowstone (3,6)
26 Ed crossed out guidelines on what to wear (5,4)
27 Cutting into small bits, having thrown away the first to make part of cake (5)
28 Begged to share, finally, in prankster’s oversize sandwich (6-6)

DOWN

1 Travel in vessel taken over by young Australian? (7)
2 Sudden rude burp splits a shirt (6)
3 Photograph and letter from Greece tossed into the ocean (5)
4 What they serve in college dining halls in Providence and Houston? (5,4)
5 Knight’s beginning to lament an animal found in the jungle with its head cut off (8)
6 I give up ace with no foul (7)
7 Moat destroyed with a kind of bomb (4)
8 Place bug in mobile phone for temple (8)
13 Like some millionaires, they claim—flipping over cheese and meat, mostly (4-4)
15 Abhorrent, despicable mole represses curses (9)
16 Encourages exotic spy to start to calmly shove back (6,2)
18 My dear, I went through changes in June or July (7)
20 Mountain with more precipitation (7)
21 Boost image that captures time in Great Britain (6)
24 Unifying idea in an article on Maine (5)
25 Jobs’ units of computer storage (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3467

28 Begged to share, finally, in prankster’s oversize sandwich (6-6)

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24 Unifying idea in an article on Maine (5)
25 Jobs’ units of computer storage (4)
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—Carmen Yulín Cruz, Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico

“A revealing, on-the-ground report that ably shows that the real looters after disaster are not the poor.”

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