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Letters

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Fact in Fiction

Elias Rodriques’s useful review of Zora Neale Hurston’s best-selling Barracoon [June 18/25] is marred by minor errors and the omission of some large issues. Minor errors: Barracoon, according to Hurston, is not from a single interview but from her many with Cudjo Lewis, who was sold by Africans and shipped to Alabama; Timothy Meaher (who was behind the slave ship’s operation) was not on that voyage; and the Meahers did not divide the slaves only among themselves, for about 50 went to other whites.

Significantly, Rodriques omitted what Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway reported in 1977: that she had heavily plagiarized in her 1927 article on Lewis. That finding raises issues, such as whether others’ editorial work, after Hurston’s death, quietly eliminated that problem for the published volume. More important: Can Barracoon’s text be trusted, or is it partly fictional?

Much remains to be explored in understanding Hurston, Barracoon, and its publicity, despite weeks of stonewalling by the publisher on key questions. The results of a study could be enlightening, and unsettling. It might build partly on works by Hemenway, Jeffrey Anderson, Carolyn Long, Sylviane Diouf, Carla Kaplan, Lynda Marion Hill, Hannah Durkin, Natalie Hopkinson, and Rebecca Panovka, and closely examine Deborah Plant’s flawed commentary in the published Barracoon.

Elias Rodriques Replies

I first want to thank Barton Bernstein for his close attention to detail and his correction of the three minor errors in my review. Being as they are minor, however, I want to focus on what he terms a significant omission, which was purposeful. Deborah Plant provides an outline of and defense against the accusation of plagiarism in her introduction. Whether or not one agrees with Plant’s claim that the accusation was misplaced, she does clarify in the published volume where Hurston’s text uses the exact language of other texts and cites the original source. As a result, the book that Amistad published and that I reviewed cannot, to my knowledge, be accused of plagiarism, regardless of what claims one might make about Hurston’s 1927 article or the unpublished manuscript.

Yet it is on the basis of this allegation that Bernstein asks whether Hurston’s text ought to be considered trustworthy or fictional. (I assume the logic behind the question is: If some of the article is plagiarized, perhaps some of the book is falsified.) With regard to the question of fiction or trustworthiness, this is a false binary. There are other options for how people relate to Hurston’s text. A text can be untrustworthy and yet not fiction; fiction can be trusted in particular ways; and so on. As a genre, oral history has long had a complicated relationship to trust—one can always allege that the interviewee misremembered or that an interviewer falsified the interview—but the most vital recent writing on slavery (by Saidiya Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, Jennifer Morgan, and others) has insisted that we should also question the “trustworthiness” of the archives of slavery.

This may all be beside the point with Barracoon. The reader, whom Bernstein’s question obscures in aiming to ascribe meaning to the manuscript (“Can Barracoon’s text be trusted”), assuredly encounters Hurston’s book not just as oral history but also as literature because of Hurston’s fame as a novelist.

Comments drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

(continued on page 12)
Democracy in Crisis

As the 2018 midterm elections approach, there are signs everywhere of an imperiled American democracy. Four weeks before Election Day, Georgia officials put over 53,000 voter applications on hold—an estimated 70 percent of them from African Americans—partly through the state’s controversial “exact match” verification program. The Supreme Court upheld a North Dakota law that bars voting by people without street addresses on their IDs, despite the fact that thousands of Native Americans in the state live on reservations without such addresses. From Dodge City, a majority-Latino community of 27,000 in western Kansas, came the news that the town’s single polling place had been moved outside the city limits, to a location more than a mile from the nearest bus stop. “It is shocking that we only have one polling place, but that is only kind of scratching the surface of the problem,” said Johnny Dunlap, a Democratic leader in Kansas, where party activists are organizing to win a closely contested gubernatorial race.

Dunlap is right about the widespread assault on voting rights, but he won’t get much sympathy from the man charged with overseeing Kansas’s elections, Secretary of State Kris Kobach, who is also the Republican nominee for governor. In Georgia, the secretary of state who put the voter applications on hold is Republican gubernatorial nominee Brian Kemp. In North Dakota, after Democrat Heidi Heitkamp narrowly won a Senate seat in 2012 with strong support from Native Americans, Republican officials crafted a voter-ID law that blatantly discriminates against them. Now, the GOP is implementing that plan as Heitkamp bids for reelection.

There’s a pattern here, one that responsible politicians of all parties must wrestle with as the 2018 election finishes and the race toward 2020 begins. Conservative strategist Paul Weyrich announced in 1980, “I don’t want everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of people. They never have been from the beginning of our country, and they are not now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.” Today, this thug mentality—whether explicitly acknowledged or spun into Donald Trump’s lies about “illegal voting”—has been infused into our politics by Republican officials who draft and implement voter-suppression schemes. What the Brennan Center for Justice has described as “a growing range of threats to voting” is not accidental. It is a deliberate antidemocratic ploy that must be addressed politically and programatically.

This country needs more secretaries of state like Steve Simon in Minnesota and Alex Padilla in California, who have focused on cybersecurity issues, attempted to make it as easy as possible for eligible voters to cast ballots, and called out voter-suppression schemes like Kobach’s ill-fated Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity. Moreover, secretaries of state from both parties should establish clear recusal rules to ensure that they cannot take advantage of their position to aid themselves or their close allies. Democratic governors must follow the lead of Oregon Governor Kate Brown, who approved automatic voter registration after taking office, and Democrats in statehouses must promote high participation in the 2020 Census—and then use that data to end gerrymandering once and for all.

Meanwhile, congressional Democrats must work with the few principled Republicans left to restore the Voting Rights Act and to enact Representative Mark Pocan’s proposal to protect our election infrastructure from cyber-threats. Democrats who campaign for the presidency in 2020 must do so with an agenda for renewing democracy that is bold enough to address this crisis. There is no place now for caution. Because the courts have failed us, that agenda must go big by embracing constitutional amendments to overturn Citizens United, to eliminate the Electoral College, and to declare, finally, that every American has a right to vote and to have that vote counted.

JOHN NICHOLS
GOP Scare Campaign

Once again, they’re attacking safety-net programs.

A majority of working people in this country have zero retirement savings. The three richest Americans now have as much wealth as 30 percent of the population—some 160 million people. So what does Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell do? Having pushed through a trillion-dollar tax cut that lards its benefits on the wealthiest Americans, he announces that he wants to cut Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, and make another run at repealing the Affordable Care Act.

Of course, McConnell didn’t say this in plain English, but in politicoese. He noted that the rising US budget deficit is “disturbing” and that “entitlement programs” are “the real drivers of the debt” and must be adjusted “to the demographics of the future.” This is Beltway argot for cutting Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. McConnell also promised to try to repeal the ACA again, calling the failure to achieve its destruction “the one disappointment of this Congress.” Cuts in entitlements, he suggested, must be carried out in a bipartisan fashion. Repealing the ACA, however, is a Republican fixation. So if Democrats take the House in November, McConnell will probably abandon the attack on it and push for cuts in Social Security instead. But if Republicans retain control of both houses, they will surely try to repeal Obamacare again.

Under Trump and the Republican Congress, the deficit has exploded. The Congressional Budget Office projects it at $793 billion for the fiscal year just ended and moving quickly toward more than $1 trillion, noting that its rise was due to “recently enacted legislative changes,” notably the 2017 tax cuts.

This is the Republicans’ strategy, clear as day: They pass tax cuts for the rich and corporations, then use the exploding budget deficits to justify slashing the core safety-net programs that most Americans rely on. Social Security, for example, provides at least 50 percent of the cash income for about half the country’s seniors, and at least 90 percent of income for one-fifth of them.

McConnell’s statements haven’t exactly proved popular. He’s now getting criticized for handing the Democrats a campaign issue, but slashing the social safety net has been Republican gospel for years. After being reelected in 2004, George W. Bush promised to use his political capital to privatize Social Security, an attempt that proved a spectacular failure. The Republican speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, says that he’s been dreaming of eliminating Medicaid since he was “drinking at a keg” at fraternity parties (probably not the kind of guy you’d want to have a beer with). Republican governors have blocked the expansion of Medicaid in several states—even though 90 percent of its cost would have been borne by the federal government—and have joined together in a lawsuit to have the ACA declared unconstitutional, which would end, among other things, its coverage for preexisting conditions. Although Donald Trump loudly proclaims that he’ll protect Social Security and Medicare, his budget proposal calls for cuts in these very programs, and his Justice Department withdrew from its prior defense of the ACA in court.

McConnell’s only heresy was to mention his plans a few weeks before the midterm elections. As committed as Republicans are to cutting Social Security and Medicare, they are even more committed to never admitting as much during an election campaign; to that end, more than a dozen vulnerable Republicans scrubbed their websites of any mention of their pledge to repeal Obamacare. This year, emulating Trump’s penchant for the big lie, many have been even more brazen, posing as Medicare’s defenders against Democrats who favor a Medicare for All program. Trump himself weighed in on this front with a characteristically dishonest opinion piece in USA Today, arguing that the Democrats would “eviscerate Medicare.”

However, it’s not so easy to fool the public on this score. Health care has emerged as a leading issue this year, even before McConnell made his comments. Democrats are on the attack against all those Republicans who voted to repeal Obamacare, deprive millions of their health insurance, and end coverage for those with preexisting conditions. The Wesleyan Media Project, which tracks paid advertising by candidates, super PACs, and party committees, reported that from September 18 to October 15, nearly half of the ads in federal races mentioned health care, including almost 55 percent of pro-Democratic ads.

The latest Morning Consult/Politico poll, taken from October 11 to 14, reports that among voters who make a priority of issues like Social Security and Medicare, Democrats enjoy a 19-point advantage (52 to 33 percent) over Republicans. And 17 percent of voters said that these issues were their leading concern. In recent years, seniors have been the most conservative cohort among voters, and have also had the highest turnout. Republicans won the senior vote convincingly in 2010 and 2014, and Trump won it with 53 percent in 2016. If concerns about attacks on these programs begin to dent the GOP’s margin among seniors, a blue wave would be virtually assured.

The sad part about this Republican attempt to dupe and cover is that it delays the debate we need to have. Corporations continue to abandon their pension plans; indeed, most Americans now have no retirement plan at work. The baby boomers are beginning to retire, after working over several decades of unprecedented wage stagnation. Rising health-care costs continue to eat up the small raises that workers ever see. Congress should be moving to expand Social Security, not cut it, and to make health care universal and affordable, not weaken the programs we currently have. If Trump and the Republicans succeed in their mendacious scare campaign against those calling for Medicare for All, they will torpedo progress on any of these issues. And for that, millions of Americans will pay dearly.

—Nawal Arjini

Source: IPCC
In South Texas, as the restrictions tighten, there is an extensive black market in abortion pills from Latin America (check out the flea markets). But for more reliable drugs and support, look into an organization called Aid Access, run by doctors and abortion-rights activists, which has been shipping abortion pills to women in the United States for the last six months. The group's website includes information on how to take the abortion pills safely, and Aid Access even offers Skype consultations.

Such DIY measures not only help you, Gileadean; they can also, Brown emphasizes, become a force for change. In Ireland, when abortion was illegal, the prevalence of women performing it themselves “freaked out the authorities and also made a mockery of the law.” This greatly boosted the momentum for legalization, which succeeded—by a landslide—in a referendum this past May.

Dear Liza,

Women are staring down the barrel of a conservative Supreme Court that will likely dismantle Roe v. Wade. Abortion, as a right, is already hobbled, with many states essentially regulating it into oblivion.

Faced with increased career opportunities but a lack of support systems, women are postponing or refusing motherhood. I think that an awareness of the falling birthrate will soon reach the people in power. To me, this all seems like a perfect storm. Should we expect an even more brutal backlash against reproductive rights?

As a career-focused 30-year-old woman with no plans for a baby, I feel as though I should be making arrangements. What if my current methods of birth control fail? I've already started mapping states that will outlaw abortion—and mine, Texas, tops the list. Should I save money for emergency travel?

I have no sense of how far this backlash will go. What do you think the state, and our society, are actually capable of?

—Future Gileadean

Dear Gileadean,

Actually, says feminist activist Jenny Brown, the author of Birth Strike: The Hidden Fight Over Women’s Work, which will be published next year by PM Press, “we’re already experiencing this.”

In Birth Strike, Brown argues that the crackdown on women's reproductive rights is a response, on the part of US policy-makers, to our declining birth rate. The ruling class worries that when women stop having babies, the smaller workforce will mean rising labor costs. Instead of improving the conditions for parenthood through universal child care and health care, free college tuition, more generous family leave, and higher wages, our elites have seized on what is, for them, a far less expensive solution: forced procreation.

With women holding significant social power, we’re unlikely to wind up living in The Handmaid’s Tale, or even in the pre-1970s United States, an era when my mother needed her husband’s permission to get her own library card. However, with right-wingers controlling Congress, the White House, and many state governments, our reproductive rights are under attack. The good news, according to Brown, is that “women are already taking this into their own hands. There’s never been a better time to have a DIY abortion.” Given where you live, preparing to exercise this option would be smart.
PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Big Bird Gets a Pension

On October 18, Sesame Street waved farewell to one of its most beloved denizens. After nearly 50 years, Caroll Spinney, 84, who played both Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch, has retired.

As far back as the Nixon era, many conservatives have argued that public broadcasting—Big Bird’s primary home until 2015—was a frivolous expenditure of taxpayer money. Just this year, President Trump’s proposed 2019 budget would have slashed funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to zero.

In response to Trump’s plan, PBS president Paula Kerger pointed out that the cost of public broadcasting is small—about $1.35 per citizen per year. And while taxes subsidize only a tiny percentage of Sesame Street, the show’s positive influence on millions of children across the world has been a huge return on that investment.

In the long political fight over public broadcasting, the image of Big Bird has frequently been invoked—most memorably when then-GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney pledged to reduce the federal deficit by axing public broadcasting, the image of Big Bird has frequently

I recently spent an afternoon with some new friends in Connecticut, writing letters to registered Democrats in Georgia who hadn’t voted in the past few elections. It was a nice time: one man and five “middle-aged hysterics” (as one of the Chapo Trap House brocialists once called the women of the Resistance) trying to allay our prelection jitters and feel a bit less useless. As we were getting ready to leave, having written a collective total of 199 letters, I put on my columnist’s hat and asked how people felt about Elizabeth Warren. The general verdict from this tiny sampling was revved-up white, liberal, neveryoneliness-New England Democrats was that she’s finished—or should be.

“Too much has happened,” said one, referring to the current flap over Warren’s DNA-test results. “It’s too much of a negative.” Another said, “I don’t like that ‘angry woman’ T-shirt,” referring to the one for sale on Warren’s website that reads “Impolite Arrogant Woman,” which is what White House chief of staff John Kelly called her in an e-mail. (My friend thought it would rub moderates the wrong way.) “She’s shrill,” said a third—the kiss of death for a woman candidate.

“Who would you like to run?” I asked. “Phil Murphy,” one replied. He’s the governor of New Jersey—and yes, I had to ask.

So there it is. Two years ago, Warren was a left-liberal political goddess: smart, energetic, with a great economic agenda and a background in the “ragged edges of the middle class.” She was the woman that lefty men who hated Hillary said they’d love to vote for—so how could they be sexist? But now Warren is a bumbling racist with a screechy voice who’s pushing way too hard for the Andrea Dworkin vote. Oh, and she used to be a Republican. And she’s had meetings with Jamie Dimon and other bankers. Plus, any day now, lefty Twitter will remember that Warren endorsed Hillary in the primary, and then it will really be all over for her.

Right now, though, the issue is her attempt to prove her Native American ancestry by releasing the results of a DNA test, accompanied by a video about her barely-middle-class family and childhood in Norman, Oklahoma. For the record, I thought the video hit just the right notes: It was friendly, genuine, down-to-earth, and actually informative. It turns out that a lot of people in Norman didn’t know that Elizabeth Warren is their own highschool classmate and neighbor Betsy Herring, because that’s what happens when a woman takes her husband’s name.

But the release of Warren’s DNA results did not go as planned—at all. Many Native Americans were outraged. Chuck Hoskin Jr., secretary of state of the Cherokee Nation, accused her of “dishonoring legitimate tribal governments and their citizens.” “I am a Cherokee woman. Elizabeth Warren is not,” remonstrated Rebecca Nagle at ThinkProgress. In a New York Times op-ed, the brilliant sociologist Alondra Nelson charged Warren with reifying genetic testing as determinative of racial identity, while Masha Gessen at The New Yorker lambasted her for advancing an “outdated, harmful concept of racial blood.”

These critics have a point. The relation of biology to identity is tremendously complicated and, moreover, changing rapidly. Also, Warren should have reached out to Native American communities before releasing the video—that’s just Politics 101. But I wonder if, in making their case so vehemently, people on the left haven’t taken the least charitable view of a rather more nuanced message. After all, Warren didn’t claim to be a member of a tribe, and she takes care to point out that “only tribes determine tribal citizenship.” She condemns both the “casual racism [of] war whoops and tomahawk chops” and the generations of discrimination and violence that Native Americans have faced. In the video, she’s simply confirming her family’s history: Her father’s people didn’t want him to marry her mother because it was understood that she was part Native American. That turns out to be true.

On the other side of the aisle, Republicans doubled down on their mockery. Among many other racist memes, former congressman Jason Chaffetz

Katha Pollitt

Against Purity Tests

Too many are writing off Senator Elizabeth Warren over one video.

For the record, I thought the video hit just the right notes: It was friendly, genuine, down-to-earth, and actually informative.
“A terrific book! Readers of any age will find this an exciting and startlingly self-aware memoir of a life transformed in our dangerous epoch, and most will find in it radically new perspectives on these perilous times, up to the present mind-boggling moment.”

—Daniel Ellsberg, author of The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner

“This absorbing memoir [is] the record of a remarkable life, with rich and varied experience; and [an] astute analysis of the background of critical historical events.”

—Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor Emeritus, MIT, author of Requiem for the American Dream

“Only the late great Howard Zinn comes close to H. Bruce Franklin as truth-telling historian whose ‘the personal is political’ oeuvre should be read by every American, left or right, who aspires to be informed beyond headlines and rumor.”

—Jayne Anne Phillips, National Book Award Finalist, author, Machine Dreams and Lark & Termite

Crash Course
From the Good War to the Forever War
H. Bruce Franklin

A Kirkus *starred* review
Dear Unheard,

During the week of the Kavanaugh hearings, says Dr. Christie Jackson, a psychologist specializing in trauma, all of her patients spoke about them. And since the hearings, she reports, many more victims of violence are seeking therapy. Not being believed “makes it incredibly hard to heal,” says Dr. Jackson, who has a clinical practice in New York City. But you certainly don’t have to “like” or repost content from people who didn’t believe you, Unheard. In fact, you should take steps not to see their posts, especially during a high-profile event of this kind. Facebook’s “unfollow” feature is your secret weapon: It renders the offending person’s posts invisible to you without them knowing.

While you may—like most people—have less control over your work environment than your electronic one, you can and must set some boundaries there as well. If people in your workplace have tormented you, Dr. Jackson says, your therapist can help you work on how to “be polite, but keep your distance,” as well as to set limits on their behavior. You have a right, online and off, to live free of abuse.

Most urgently, you deserve solidarity and deserve to be believed. Research shows that social support is what we need most when recovering from assault. It’s crucial that you find a few people—whether a partner, co-workers, friends, or a PTSD support group—who believe you.

To that end, remember that even as social media present painful dilemmas, they’re also a source of collective love. What if you were to post on Facebook—in vague terms, of course—about seeing people who didn’t believe you virtue-signaling their support for other assault victims? You could set the post so that only a select few would see it. If this seems too risky, what about posting on how tough it is to weather a public #MeToo event as a person suffering from PTSD? Either way, you will likely be flooded with supportive messages from people who do believe you.

For those of you happy to consign Warren to an early political grave, I have bad news: There is no candidate without an Achilles’ heel.

(continued from page 5)

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Helping Jail Saudi Women

Throughout most of October, the US State Department was recruiting American contractors to train prison officials and guards in Saudi Arabia, according to The Young Turks, an online news show. Federal procurement records describe the project’s goal to develop a women corrections academy training that graduates [Saudi General Directorate of Prisons] staff that are prepared to work in a modern correctional setting.

The move prompted human-rights organizations to once again condemn the United States for enabling Saudi abuses. Adam Coogle of Human Rights Watch told The Young Turks that Saudi prisoners are often “mistreated with a view towards coercing confessions that are later used in court to convict the person.”

The need for trained personnel to work in women’s prisons comes from the increasing number of women behind bars in Saudi Arabia. Around the time that the country lifted its ban on female drivers this summer, the authorities arrested several women’s-rights activists.

As a result, the country launched its first women’s prison, as the US government is reportedly considering a plan to train prison officials and contractors’ bids—about a month before the due date for October 29 as the due date for a whole women’s pledge, and walk out.… The authorities arrested several female drivers this summer, and the country lifted its ban on female drivers.

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First, Build a Movement

The “what” and “why” of politics are more urgent than the “who.”

Like a child keen to move on to dessert before they’ve eaten their greens, the Democratic Party has started wrangling over who would make the best presidential candidate before the midterms are even over.

As I write, California Senator Kamala Harris is on her way to Iowa, two weeks after New Jersey Senator Cory Booker headlined the party’s fall gala there. Since her visit comes only a few days after she went to South Carolina, Harris has apparently mapped out an electoral strategy that goes after California and the South via Iowa and cedes New Hampshire to Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren. Meanwhile, journalists parse Sanders’s words to divine whether he is making a progressive pact with the Massachusetts senator. In a recent Politico story headlined “Sanders hints at reckoning with Warren over 2020 ambitions,” the Vermont senator acknowledged that he and Warren talk nearly every day, but not about 2020, although “I suspect that in the coming weeks and months, there will be discussions.” Julian Castro, the former secretary of housing and urban development, was also recently spotted in Iowa and says he’s “likely” to go for it as well. And whatever the outcome of the current contest between Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Beto O’Rourke, his Democratic challenger, “Beto 2020” T-shirts and beach bags are already on sale.

The indecent haste with which the punditocracy moves from horse race to horse race, obsessed by who will win rather than what will change, is infuriating but hardly new. The credulousness that allows so many progressives to be distracted by that obsession is equally familiar but more frustrating.

It’s not difficult to see how this happens. Elections are a multibillion-dollar industry; so, too, are the media. And politics is much more easily sold as a never-ending reality show than as an evolving power struggle in which actual issues are involved.

At the best of times, this can be written off as the kind of irritating obstacle that we simply have to navigate and negotiate: meeting people where they are in the hope that you might persuade them to go to a better place.

The trouble with this approach is twofold. First, these are not the best of times. Small children have been taken from their families at the border; a rapey, shouty, partisan frat boy was just confirmed to the Supreme Court after lying under oath; a president has privileged arms deals with a theocracy over the torture, murder, and dismemberment of a journalist. And despite the appalling clarity of this moment—the brazen bigotry and misogyny of President Trump, the moral deficiency of US foreign policy, the growing budget deficit caused by Republican tax cuts for the rich, the broken promises to “drain the swamp”—Democrats still anticipate little more than a modest majority in the House of Representatives. After the first two years of the Trump presidency, and four of the five largest demonstrations in American history (all of them progressive), the Democratic Party has become merely the inadequate electoral beneficiary of people’s anger, rather than the vehicle through which it might be channeled to emerge as strategy and policy.

The second problem is that concentrating on candidates and their personal qualities in this moment is no longer meeting people where they are. By saying and doing a number of things that would have ordinarily sunk another candidate—boasting of sexual molestation, advocating violence at his rallies, calling for the jailing of his opponent, indicating that he would refuse to accept the election’s result if he lost—Trump has effectively changed the rules of engagement.

“Character” was once a key factor in US presidential elections. True, this perception of character was usually shallow, mediated, and easily manipulable: In 2000 and again in 2004, George W. Bush was the candidate that people most wanted to have a beer with—even though he was a teetotaler and a recovering alcoholic. But that perception of character still mattered.

That no longer holds true in the same way. During the 2016 election, I reported from Muncie,
Indiana. A year after the inauguration, I went back to see what people were feeling. Republicans, for the most part, said they didn’t like President Trump personally. One supporter said she wouldn’t socialize with him; another told me, “He completely embarrassed the United States.” But when it came to taxes, deregulation, anti-abortion judges, and the economy, they thought he was getting the job done. “I would take an asshole doctor who was going to fix me over a nice guy who wouldn’t,” said Jamie Walsh, a mortician trainee in her mid-30s. “The nice guy doesn’t always get things done.”

This same phenomenon has been seen on the left, where candidates who are not remotely telegenic, like Bernie Sanders (crotchety) or Jeremy Corbyn (bumbling), have nonetheless proved popular. (Though even if it’s unclear what the new rules are, it’s safe to say that they don’t apply to candidates who are not white, straight, or male, so that hasn’t changed.) It’s arguably too soon to know where all of this is going, but it’s enough to understand that when it comes to character in politics, we are not where we were.

The fact that the Democrats have not yet decided on the “who” shouldn’t concern us. If progressives keep on building movements and making compelling arguments, an electoral champion will emerge who is willing to embrace them. Since Corbyn’s Labour Party has proved itself electorally viable, it is amazing how many MPs have suddenly found their conscience and their progressive principles. If liberal opinion keeps shifting to the left, the candidates will follow.

What is far more urgent at this moment is the “what” and the “why.” If the left wants people to turn out, it has to stand for something more than power; and if it wants to prevail, it has to do more than simply hang on to that power once it’s achieved.
AOC Prepares for DC

Re “What’s Next for AOC?” [Oct. 29]: Rhetoric is not action, and I plan to reserve judgment on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez until there is a record upon which to judge. Having said that, her description of John McCain’s legacy as an “unparalleled example of human decency” is so ridiculous on so many levels that I don’t know what to think. And her answer on Israel shows a gaping hole in an incredibly important place that I can only hope will be filled ASAP. The politics of the left is ascendant, but we’ll soon find out if the power of the left is equally so.

RICHARD FLOYD

Ocasio-Cortez, my Puerto Rican sister, is a breath of fresh air in a progressive movement that has historically marginalized the struggle of the Puerto Rican community. Coming out of that experience, she has incorporated folks of every class, race, gender, and ethnicity in her call for social change. While she must continue to be held accountable by the people, the political correctness and ideological purity of many from the left would drive any newly elected official behind her, rather than at their usual desks.

Unfortunately, it appears that the rules of The Patriarchy are tribally embedded in this corrupt Republican Party, as evidenced by, among other things, the hyper-partisan performance of the Maine senator.

SAL R. PAUCIELLO
IRVINGTON, N.J.

Corrections

The article “Destination, Lancaster” [Nov. 12] mistakenly stated that the Pennsylvania Republican Party filed a pair of campaign-finance complaints against both Lancaster Stands Up (LSU) and the Jess King for Congress campaign. In fact, the complaint only targeted LSU.

In “The Dual Defeat” [Nov. 12], Hubert Humphrey’s 1968 running mate is referred to as Edward Muskie; his first name, in fact, was Edmund. The Nation regrets these errors.
In a speech spanning two days in May 1856, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner spent five hours on the floor of the Old Senate Chamber denouncing the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a compromise bill that left the fate of slavery in those territories to be decided by local popular vote. In the course of his remarks, Sumner called Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, chief architect of the act, a “noise-some, squat, and nameless animal.” He described Andrew Butler of South Carolina, a leading supporter of the act, as so desperate for “the harlot, Slavery,” that he “discharged the loose expectoration of his speech” at the very thought of embracing her—an allusion to the fact that Butler was known to lisp and drool.

Two days later, on May 22, while Sumner sat at his desk preparing copies of his speech to be mailed around the country, a second cousin of Butler’s, Representative Preston Brooks of South

Andrew Delbanco teaches at Columbia. His new book, The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America’s Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War, is out this fall.
Carolina, entered the Senate chamber. After waiting for the last female spectator to leave the visitors’ gallery, Brooks approached the Massachusetts senator, told him that he had read his words with “as much impartiality as was possible,” and then beat him over the head with a walking stick made of gutta-percha—the same hard material still used today to fill the excavated root canals of infected teeth. Sumner collapsed in a pool of blood and, in the days that followed, nearly died.

Many historians have described this assault as the moment when all pretense of civility between North and South broke down and the question of civil war became a matter of when rather than if. The Yale historian Joanne Freeman now casts doubt on the singularity of the event in a revealing new book, *The Field of Blood*, which takes its title from a commiserating letter sent to Sumner by a friend. Between 1830 and 1860, Freeman reports, “at least eighty violent incidents between congressmen in the House and Senate chambers or on nearby streets and dueling grounds” took place. The caning of Sumner was just one attack in a long tradition of mayhem on Capitol Hill, or what Freeman calls “the ongoing Congressional floor show” of verbal abuse and violence. The Civil War scholar David Potter wrote long ago that, by the 1840s, “Congress was beginning to lose its character as a meeting place for working out problems and to become a cockpit in which rival groups could match their best fighters against one another.” Freeman discloses a surprising amount of literal truth in Potter’s metaphor.

*The Field of Blood* is an impressive feat of research in the face of recalcitrant sources. For one thing, early Washington newspapers depended on government printing contracts—and so, lest they offend their patrons, they offered a sanitized view of what went on in Congress. Over the first three decades of the 19th century, the *National Intelligencer* and later the *Congressional Globe*, published detailed reports of congressional debates. But Freeman points out that lawmakers were allowed to make revisions before publication, so what readers actually got were “speeches as congressmen wished they’d made them,” rather than accurate transcriptions of what they had said. Moreover, their violent behavior was obscured with glosses like “threatening exchanges” or “remarks of an unfortunately personal nature.” Freeman enumerates the facts concealed by the circumstances: “canings, duel negotiations and duels; shoving and fistfights; branched pistols and bowie knives; wild melees in the House; and street fights with fists and the occasional brick.”

To unlock this rude truth behind the screen of euphemism, she turns to a manuscript diary kept by a government bureaucrat named Benjamin Brown French, a Jacksonian Democrat who arrived in Washington from New Hampshire in 1833 and rose through the (then-thin) ranks of federal employees to become clerk of the House in 1845 and commissioner of public buildings in 1853. Today, one would call him “conflict-averse.” Like his fellow New Hampshire Democrat Franklin Pierce, whom he served during Pierce’s presidential campaign in 1852, French thought that abolitionists were fanatics and worried that sectional tension over the issue of slavery threatened the ability of the federal government to go about its business. “Singing a song,” in Freeman’s words, “of Union and Jackson,” French also approved of the so-called gag rule, which tabled without debate all petitions that Congress received from constituents on the subject of slavery. By the later 1850s, however, with secessionist sentiment rising among Southern Democrats, he joined the emerging anti-slavery coalition of Whigs and Northern Democrats that became the Republican Party. The capstone of his career came in 1861, when he served as chief parade marshal at Lincoln’s first inauguration.

For the better part of 40 years, French enjoyed what Freeman calls a “ringside seat” close to the rhetorical and actual fighting in Congress. She uses his diary to good effect in describing the congressional arena as a “den of braggarts and brawlers.” Beginning with the Capitol building itself, she points out that in the original House chamber, completed in 1807, there were 145 seats representing 17 states, while over the next 50 years the number of states rose to 31 and representatives to 240. In the larger space to which the House moved in 1857, it was not unusual for the temperature to reach 100 degrees in the summer, and for the air—such as there was in a windowless room—to fill with the stench of sewage wafting up from the Capitol basement.

“With its clubby intimacy and luxurious red Moroccan leather chairs,” the Senate had a somewhat better atmosphere—but not always. Six years before Brooks brought the spirit of the House into the Senate at Sumner’s expense, Senator Henry Foote of Mississippi drew a pistol on Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton over the fate of California, which Foote wanted open to slavery and Benton wanted closed. Benton jumped to his feet, ripped open his jacket to bare his chest, and dared Foote to fire. Cartoonists had a field day with the image of the brawny Benton taunting the scrappy Foote, who was already retreatting by the time a colleague snatched his weapon away and locked it in a desk.

The picture of Congress we get from this book is less of a deliberative body of sober adults than of binge-drinking adolescents left alone without adult supervision. At first, the rowdy behavior took place within the confines of a quasi-private club, and thanks to the reticence of the early newspapers, what happened in the Capitol mostly stayed in the Capitol. But by the 1840s, with the rise of a commercially independent and increasingly partisan press, congressional brawling turned into a spectacle greeted by different factions of the public with delight or disgust.

The New York Times, for example, wrote: “If one-half of our Congressmen would kill the other half, and then commit suicide themselves, we think the country would gain by the operation.”

By the time Brooks attacked Sumner in 1856, there was no keeping the truth about Congress under wraps. Word of the attack, carried by telegraph, reached *The New York Times* within 45 minutes.

In the early years, it was usually a Southerner who threw the first punch, pulled out the weapon, or—before the widespread adoption of anti-dueling laws—made the formal challenge demanding satisfaction. Following historians such as William R. Taylor (*Cavalier and Yankee*, 1961) and Bertram Wyatt-Brown (*South-
Cutting through the often alarmist rhetoric, Norris and Inglehart present a sober, level-headed, and deeply researched assessment of the challenges posed by authoritarian-populist parties and the ways liberal democracy can be protected from further erosion.

E.J. Dionne Jr., coauthor of One Nation After Trump
The larger context of Freeman's narrative is that of a political culture that's more cruel than comic: Antebellum America was rife with shootings, stabbings, and brutality of one kind or another. "Congressional violence," Freeman writes, "was of a piece with this world." In the South, the regime of slavery was of course founded on violence in the form of whipping, beating, lynching, and rape—not to mention the chronic psychological violence endured by every enslaved person at every moment of life. But violence was prevalent in the North as well. In the free states, "hand to hand combat and rioting at polling places" was not unusual. Parents beat children, teachers beat students, and citizens appointed themselves vigilantes in the service of this or that cause. By the 1830s, mob action was a commonplace specter in political speeches by Whigs and Democrats alike. When John Quincy Adams, who hated slavery and fought the gag rule, wrote in his diary in 1836 that "I shall henceforth speak in the House of Representatives at the hazard of my life," he was not being histrionic.

Journalism, too, was a dangerous business—especially for antislavery newspapers. In 1838, the Philadelphia office of The Pennsylvania Freeman, edited by the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier, was trashed and burned. In 1845, proslavery thugs drove the True American, edited by Cassius Clay in Lexington, Kentucky, out of the state despite Clay's having fortified the office with a cache of rifles and gunpowder. Elijah Lovejoy's abolitionist paper, the Observer, was attacked three times by a mob before Lovejoy was murdered by a fourth in 1837. In 1856, after the New-York Tribune ran an article critical of Albert Rust, Democrat of Arkansas, Rust spotted the Tribune's editor, Horace Greeley, walking on Capitol Hill, punched him in the head, and, in a mildpreview of how Brooks was soon to treat Sumner, followed him to his hotel, where he struck him again, this time with his cane.

Nor did violence as a political tool belong only to the partisans of slavery. After passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, mobs in states from Ohio to Massachusetts attacked officials attempting to enforce it. In all these respects, one could say that America's congressional representatives represented America passably well.

Freeman is too good a historian to trot out facile parallels with the present, but there is an implicit presentism throughout her book. Conceived and researched largely before the rise of Donald Trump, The Field of Blood nevertheless feels current. The political discourse it documents, if not quite (yet) the level of political violence, is alarmingly familiar in our own time, though so far members of Congress like Gabby Giffords and Steve Scalise have been attacked by enraged constituents rather than by one another.

Still, to read this book is to be disabused of the notion that there is anything unprecedented in the degraded political discourse of our own day. In 1848, after a white mob fell upon black people in the streets of Washington to avenge a failed escape attempt by a group of slaves, Senator John P. Hale of New Hampshire proposed that persons guilty of "riotous or tumultuous" behavior be held accountable—to which Mississippi's Henry Foote responded that, if Hale would like to visit his state, he would "grace one of the tallest trees of the forest, with a rope around his neck." In 1856, Nathaniel Banks of Massachusetts, the first Republican who served as speaker of the House, received a cordial letter calling him a "Shit ass traitor to my country" and recommending that he "Quit the US God damn you and your party if you don't like us."

One question that Freeman doesn't entirely answer is whether she sees the behavior of antebellum politicians as a cause of, or a correlation with, the nation's descent into warfare against itself. Sometimes she reproaches them for inciting violence, as when she writes that "by performing sectional warfare in the halls of Congress... they stoked the flames of disunion." Yet the metaphor of fanning the fire, which recurs throughout the book, seems something of an evasion. Could the fire have been doused with a splash of courtesy? Would lowered voices have slowed the drift toward civil war? At times, Freeman appears to direct some of the blame toward the press, as when she writes that "ironically, the workings of a free press enforcing congressional accountability—the very touchstone of democracy—were helping to tear the nation apart." She certainly does not mean to call upon the press—retrospectively or prospectively—to censor itself, but one theme in the book is that the tone of public rhetoric really does matter, that violent words can provoke violent deeds—a point of grim salience at present. As for Freeman's view of the Civil War, it's
not clear whether she sees it as an unavoidable catastrophe or, in New York Senator William Henry Seward’s famous phrase, an “irrepressible conflict.” Sometimes she appears to split the difference such as when, toward the end of her book, she acknowledges that the story she tells in The Field of Blood could not have had a different outcome, while at the same time admonishing the principal figures for allowing it to happen as it did:

In a sense, America was backing its way into civil warfare. The fire-eating rhetoric, the threats and dares, the talk of bloodying the Capitol, the pervasive guns and knives, and now the group fights on the floor: they were clear signs of a nation being torn in two. They were also blunt reminders of a lack of faith in the institution of Congress, even on the part of congressmen; a body of armed legislators is a body of men with no confidence in the power or practices of their own institution. The implications of this loss of faith were profound. If the nation’s representative body couldn’t function, could the nation long survive? Where else but in Congress could the interests of America’s many regions and constituencies be addressed through debate and compromise?

It’s not quite clear whether Freeman means to say that a more mature Congress could have found some way to reconcile America’s regional differences or that those differences were so far beyond compromise that it did not matter how Congress behaved. Either way, she does seem to be signaling that dysfunction in Congress is an early warning sign of national catastrophe.

Although The Field of Blood is unsurprising when it comes to describing the failure of the politicians, Freeman is relatively reticent about the intractable issue that underlay their bitterness and hatred. The “spike in congressional violence” narrated in her book coincided with a spike in racial fear concentrated in (though hardly exclusive to) the South—fear of slave rebellion, of miscegenation, of losing the whole structure of white supremacy. From the appearance of organized abolitionism in the 1830s to the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s, Freeman depicts Southern politicians as blustering bullies trying to goad their Northern counterparts into accepting the permanence of slavery as a feature of American life. But all the shouting and swaggering and threatening seems less an expression of confidence than a cover for fear. As James Oakes has shown in his books Freedom National and The Scorpion’s Sting, the slave states felt increasingly confined, besieged, even cornered as the free states grew in population and power, so much so that slave owners dreamed of establishing an international slave-based empire—an aspiration documented in Matthew Karp’s This Vast Southern Empire. In this context, the spasms of personal aggression that Freeman discloses in The Field of Blood would seem to manifest panic on the part of people who felt their power and status ebbing away. These were people who feared—with good reason—that they were on the losing side of history.

The Field of Blood is a work of substantial historical scholarship deployed on a topic of contemporary urgency. It is about local loyalties overwhelming the national interest. It is about politicians oblivious to the destructive power of their words. It is about the breakdown of what is sometimes called “comity,” defined 50 years ago by Richard Hofstadter as that social condition wherein “contending interests have a basic minimal regard for each other” and “civility is not abandoned” between political adversaries, who realize “that a community life must be carried on after the acerbic issues of the moment have been fought over.”

Yet despite disturbing similarities between our America and the one that Freeman writes about, there are considerable differences. The political conflict of the 1850s was over the one issue in American history—slavery—on which it would seem that no amount of civility, courtesy, or compromise could have preserved common ground. Today, it remains possible to imagine measures that some future Congress could take—even on such contentious issues as economic inequality, immigration, health care, and racial disparities in treatment by the law—that could ameliorate the problems that are driving Americans apart.

The Field of Blood is both a sobering and a hopeful book. It is sobering because it reminds us of what can happen when the spirit of comity collapses under pressure from a radical reordering of the nation’s economic and social life. It is hopeful because there is still reason to believe that the anger and resentment threatening our polity today are, by comparison, not beyond redress.
What happened to the steady job? Gig-economy start-ups like to imply that it has outlived its usefulness. Americans are supposed to have rejected it, leaving behind the ornery supervisors, fixed schedules, and rigid corporate culture that come with dependable employment. Whether they are freelance writers or cab drivers, engineering contractors or couriers or cleaners, these workers, we are told, want to choose their own hours and assignments—to be their own bosses—and the rise of mobile technology has at last made that possible.

Of course, all this independence comes with more than a few drawbacks. Unlike full-time employees, temps don’t have paid sick days or vacation days, and their positions are, by their nature, short-term, which can make planning for the future difficult in basic ways. (Will the next job mean moving to a new city? Will next month bring a significant drop in income?) For a specialist who can demand generous fees, these might be minor considerations. But freelance work is now common at almost every level: 94 percent of jobs created in the last 10 years were “nontraditional” employment, and one-third of Americans now do some form of contract work. More often than not, it is far from a liberating option: In many cases, the pay is meagre—after operating costs, Uber drivers in Detroit would have made more working at Walmart—and stringing together hours can itself be a struggle.

Louis Hyman’s new book, Temp: How American Work, American Business, and the American Dream Became Temporary, shows that this shift in work did not happen on its own, and that it began long before the founding of Uber or TaskRabbit. In this persuasive and richly detailed history, Hyman traces a decades-long campaign to eliminate salaried positions and replace them with contract work. Between the emergence of the first temp agencies in the 1940s and the growing power of management consultants in the 70s, American business adopted a new set of principles and began to squeeze not just...
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blue-collar workers but also middle managers and top executives. The unmaking of the good job, Hyman argues, followed not from technological advances but from an organizational breakthrough, as executives at companies like Manpower Inc. and McKinsey & Co. convinced businesses to add and shed staff at a moment’s notice, with little regard for their employees’ well-being or the effects on society.

For Hyman, this leads to the conclusion that stable employment was always a too-fragile thing. Overly reliant on the economic growth of a unique historical moment, it was always vulnerable to prophets of disruption. As a result, he sees little point in trying to replicate the labor relations of the postwar era; today’s conditions require a different and, in his view, more “flexible” arrangement. Yet Hyman’s history seems to suggest the opposite conclusion: throughout Temp it’s the actions of people that decide what work will mean, what it should offer, and who should benefit. Those people have often been executives and consultants seeking to undermine the stability and security of jobs, but they can also be workers, fighting for more stable, equitable visions of work.

This stability didn’t trickle down to employees as a matter of course; they had to fight for a share in it. Labor had agreed not to strike during the Second World War, but as soon as peace arrived, unions resumed the vigorous activity of the 1930s, starting with the biggest walkout in American labor history in 1945. As workers continued to organize, industrial behemoths were forced to give them a better deal, since “whatever labor cost,” Hyman writes, “it cost less than the machines going idle.” In 1950, the United Auto Workers and General Motors drew up the so-called Treaty of Detroit, a five-year agreement that granted workers cost-of-living raises, health insurance, retirement funds, and a grievance process; it was, GM admitted, good for management too, as it guaranteed a period of calm and fixed labor costs. As other large companies committed to similar arrangements in the years that followed, the standard for the good postwar job was set.

But not everyone was so enthusiastic about this new era of stable employment. An early critic was a Midwestern lawyer named Elmer Winter, who founded the temping agency Manpower Inc. in 1948. Winter recognized that every man and woman who works wants “a good job—good health and security,” but he insisted that these things were too expensive for American companies to provide. They would be more profitable if they relied more on temps, who were not eligible for benefits and didn’t expect raises. Temps were also, Winter claimed, more efficient. They didn’t require training or time to adjust to their new setting. They didn’t get distracted by office gossip. And if they made a mistake, they could simply be replaced with new temps. All of which could also make the permanent staff more productive, as they’d need to work just as relentlessly if they wanted to keep their positions.

It was a grim vision of the workplace—pitting colleagues against one another in a relentless competition—and Winter knew it would be a tough sell. Companies wouldn’t necessarily trust outsiders, and other workers wouldn’t like the idea of temps replacing them. But Manpower Inc.—along with its rivals Kelly Girl and Olsten—found a neat way around these fears: No one needed to worry about temps taking over, because their temps were women. A temp could fill in for a secretary when she went on vacation or help out with a sudden influx of paperwork, but she would never want to stay for a long period. She was just picking up a few hours here and there in order to get out of the house or to earn money for fancy clothes—or so Manpower Inc. claimed. Agencies also used the temp’s sexuality as a selling point, instructing her on dress and comportment, and sending her to assignments wearing white gloves—an alluring symbol of propriety and efficiency. If a client requested “a size 10 secretary’ to double as a secretary and model,” they could produce one.

The charming, feminine image that the agencies created concealed the hard realities of temping, which became increasingly clear in the decades that followed. A survey from 1965, a working-women’s collective started in the 1970s, noted that a temp’s paycheck was often her “bread and butter, not pin money,” as her employers liked to assume. Temps supported themselves and their families, and their work was often essential to the local economies. In Boston, clerical workers made up nearly one-fifth of the workforce; they were as important to their city as autoworkers were to Detroit, one respondent pointed out. Yet, unlike autoworkers, temps doing clerical work didn’t have the protections of a union contract. They described feeling underpaid, disrespected, and duped. The supposed variety of temping was a “bogus lure,” one respondent wrote, comparing the system to a “roulette wheel.”

The temp agencies were far from the only holdouts against the stable job in the years after World War II. Hyman devotes a large portion of his book to the labor practices of the electronics industry, a sector that never embraced the postwar vision of planning. Semiconductor manufacturers released new products and models much more quickly than, say, automobile companies, and they didn’t have time to automate the bulk of their rapidly changing production processes. Instead, they relied largely on extremely poorly paid recent immigrants and undocumented people to assemble their products by hand. They didn’t employ them directly, but through subcontracting firms, which allowed them to claim ignorance of the low safety standards and appalling working conditions. Hyman describes women screwing components onto circuit boards using their fingernails. For these people, the good postwar industrial job was never accessible.

More and more Americans would soon find themselves similarly shut out. It had been a mistake, Hyman notes, for unions and long-term employees to ignore the plight of less fortunate workers, since “the experiences of the people who were left out of the good postwar jobs became the rehearsal for most people’s jobs today.” In the new world, there would be more temps, and less security even for the permanent.

If it was the strong economy of the postwar era that supported stable companies and stable jobs, then it was the crises of the 1970s that helped undo both. As recession and stagnation threw a wrench in big corporations’ long-term planning, uncertainty crept back in. Businesses began to doubt the virtues of being big. The 1960s had seen most of the United States’ largest companies transform themselves from rigorously structured corporations into conglomerates sprawled across many different industries. For a few years, their valuations had soared. But when the conglomerate bubble burst in 1969, they found themselves in a tangled mess. In their attempts to restore order, they turned to management consultants, who finally got an opportunity...
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to reconfigure huge organizations around the ideals of flexibility and nimbleness.

For this reason, the rise of management consultancy as a profession, and the workings of individual firms (particularly McKinsey, the Boston Consulting Group, Price Waterhouse, and Coopers & Lybrand) is central to Hyman’s story. The peculiar internal cultures of these companies, he shows, affected decision-making at the corporations they were hired to help reorganize. The ranks of these firms were filled, especially in their earliest decades, by privileged young men, handpicked for their impressive academic credentials and for their lack of real-world experience. They were also selected for social class and certain personality traits; when hiring an associate, McKinsey’s second chairman, Marvin Bower, insisted it was important for him to feel he had chosen someone he “would be glad to go on a tiger hunt with.”

In their experience of work, these consultants also differed significantly from most employees in most postwar companies. They did a lot of their work autonomously, as they visited other companies to make reports. They were expected to find “self-expression and personal fulfillment” in their duties. And they had low expectations of job security. From its early years, McKinsey enforced a Darwinian “up-or-out” policy: If an associate wasn’t promoted within a few years, he was asked to leave the company. In the 1960s, only 17 percent of post-MBA consultants made partner. For those who didn’t, the odds were that they would quickly find lucrative work elsewhere (unlike, perhaps, a machinist or middle manager laid off at their recommendation). Despite the pressures of the job, many of the firm’s alumni believed fervently in the system, evangelizing it in their own firms and in books like Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman’s In Search of Excellence.

This new generation of management consultants thought that companies should be built around workers who were like them. Corporations had grown too big and stable; they were weighed down by labor costs and long-term investments and couldn’t respond quickly to changes in the economy; their employees were complacent and unproductive.

“The dinosaur skeletons in the museums remind us,” said Gilbert Clee, Bower’s successor at McKinsey, that “great size has its dangers.” To survive the economic flux of the 1970s and ‘80s, corporations would need to become leaner and more agile, outsourcing most of their routine operations and retaining a core staff of only the most adaptable employees. These employees wouldn’t have traditional jobs; instead, they would jump from project to project, problem-solving in “groups of relative strangers.” Where once the ranks of company men formed an organization’s backbone, the new professional would be “part of the organization only on an individual, ad hoc basis.”

These ideas saved money, because they allowed companies to reduce their staffs; they also glistened with the prestige of forward thinking and cultural relevance. It was easy to criticize the organization man and the large bureaucracies he inhabited: The cultural critics of the 1950s blamed postwar ennui on him, and the counterculture of the ’60s rebelled against him. By contrast, business “gurus” styled themselves as visionaries, speaking the language of “creativity” and producing a steady stream of buzzwords. Warren Bennis heralded the 1970s as an age of “organizational revitalization,” while Alvin Toffler in Future Shock forecast the coming of the “adhocracy,” a system with no set structures, in which teams could regroup as needed to take on any range of new tasks.

These futuristic visions of disruption aligned perfectly with Elmer Winter’s vision of temporary staffing. Manpower Inc., which had begun by claiming that temps were never meant to replace full-time staff, now talked openly about “using staff on an ad-hocary basis” and proposed “hiring the very best skills possible for a particular job and then terminating the people when the work is completed.” Rivals like Kelly Services (which had dropped the “Girl” from its name as the dominion of temp work expanded) similarly proposed a “core and ring” model—a core of permanent staff, surrounded by temps who came and went with fluctuations in the business cycle.

Within a decade, this model became the norm. In Search of Excellence would become one of the most influential management books of the ‘80s, with its recommendation that no company needed more than 100 employees at its headquarters. Walmart believed in “empty headquarters.” So, the authors boasted, did Intel, where “all staff assignments are temporary ones given to line officers.” By 1988, 90 percent of all businesses in America employed temp workers. Santa Clara County, the heart of Silicon Valley, had 180 temp agencies alone. Hewlett-Packard, a company once staunchly committed to job security for its employees, retooled for flexibility, creating its own internal pool of temps called Flex Force. The steady jobs that remained were everywhere becoming fewer, and the people who held them often found themselves running faster and faster, like Wile E. Coyote, over a chasm.

What Hyman shows with striking clarity is how extensively the ideal of the steady job had been undermined before the start of the 21st century. Long before computers cut down on office work, companies had been splitting up tasks and outsourcing many of them to temps. Almost everyone was replaceable; computers just made it worse.

Similarly, it is not technological brilliance, he argues, that has enabled the rapid ascendency of companies like Uber. The main reason so many people have turned to on-demand apps to pick up work since 2008 is that good jobs are so scarce. The alternative to driving for Uber or delivering takeout for Seamless is not a union job on an assembly line or an entry-level position at a corporate headquarters; it is other precarious work, like waiting tables or stocking shelves at a Walmart. “Uber is possible because shift work, even with a W2, is so bad,” Hyman writes, listing the indignities to which low-wage workers are subjected, from bag searches to routine drug-testing.

Hyman is less than optimistic that the turn toward temping can be reversed. He describes mostly failed efforts to fight back. Some of these are cultural—he unearthed zines with titles like Temp Slave! and Processed World, which, furtively printed on office-owned Xerox machines by night, chronicled the contingent worker’s plight. But the contributors’ attempts at resistance were not particularly well coordinated; in one article, the author recounts deliberately making mistakes while doing data entry for General Electric, in an act of sabotage that probably had little effect in the grand scheme of things. Other writers praise slow workers and “time thieves,” but note that to tip the scales even modestly, workers would need institutions, like labor unions or political parties, to negotiate on their behalf.
The women of 9to5 did exactly that, forming a local with SEIU and lobbying the Massachusetts Legislature for better regulation, but they enjoyed little success. Later, programmers at Microsoft sued the company for misclassifying them as contractors when they were doing the work of employees, but the $97 million settlement they received—less than half a percent of Microsoft's annual revenue—was, Hyman judges, a “bargain” for the company. And more recently, taxi drivers’ associations have taken Uber to court, while some drivers have launched grassroots campaigns to demand better terms from the company.

These efforts all reveal clear limitations. The protections established in the mid-20th century, Hyman concludes, have long been insufficient for an age in which so much work is now temporary and precarious. Freelancers, contractors, and gig workers need expanded labor policies and new labor organizations to establish fair practices and protections. Hyman doesn’t go into detail about what these institutions might look like. Workers could, he suggests, form digital cooperatives and start their own Uber-style platforms; they should also push for changes through the political system, though again he doesn’t say what their goals should be.

Most surprising, however, is that he sees little potential for established labor unions to help win greater stability for more workers. This seems to be an oversight at a moment when precarious millennials are enthusiastic about organized labor, and when unions are making inroads among white-collar workers as never before. It is true that unions cannot solve the whole of the problem, since they cannot represent contractors, under current law. But Hyman overlooks their potential to stem some of the damage, by organizing permanent employees who are currently not represented by a union. With union density at just under 7 percent in the private sector, there is plenty to be done on this front.

Hyman also overlooks the role that unions can play in educating a broad range of workers about organizing strategies and labor issues. What's vital is that new and long-standing union members develop and strengthen forms of solidarity with nonmembers, especially with contingent workers. That might mean helping misclassified permalancers gain recognition as full-time employees, or joining temps in advocating for fair treatment. Union-backed living-wage campaigns like the Fight for $15 have already found ways to organize outside of traditional shops, while groups like the National Domestic Workers Alliance bring together isolated independent contractors. Hyman seems to dismiss unions mostly because he sees them as a direct counterpart to the lumbering, bureaucratic corporation of the postwar era, with all the same flaws; but he misses a crucial difference between them—the fact that a union was always built on the principle of solidarity, and the power of raising a collective voice.

Today’s temps, permalancers, subcontractors, and underemployed do have an advantage that their predecessors didn’t: The effects of the gig economy permeate society more thoroughly and visibly than any of the downsizing and outsourcing that came before them. There are hints of disruption and quiet reminders of insecurity anywhere you care to look. You can order almost anything—cleaning, furniture assembly, food—at the touch of a button and never have to go outside or consider the effects of Uber, TaskRabbit, Seamless, and Craigslist on the industries they’ve taken over. But at the same time, as you scroll through the apps on your phone, how can you be sure your own job won’t be chopped up and posted on Upwork?

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Let me begin on a personal note. Over half a century ago, my uncle, the historian Philip S. Foner, rescued Frederick Douglass from undeserved obscurity. Beginning in 1950, he edited four volumes of Douglass’s magnificent speeches and writings, each with a long biographical introduction that chronicled his rise to international renown as a crusader for abolition and racial equality. It is difficult to believe, given his prominence during his lifetime, but Douglass was virtually unknown outside the black community at the time. Almost all of the books about him were by black writers—Benjamin Quarles, Shirley Graham Du Bois, even Booker T. Washington—or by white ones, such as my uncle, oriented to the Old Left and attuned to the problem of racial justice. My own high-school history textbook, by Columbia University professor David S. Muzzey, contained no reference to Douglass (indeed, the only black person mentioned by name in the entire book was Toussaint L’Ouverture). Today, Douglass is ubiquitous. Avenues, plazas, and schools are named in his honor. He has been the subject of poems, novels, and plays and is among the few African Americans whose statues grace the public landscape. Every aspect of his life, it seems, commands

**THE DOUBLE BATTLE**

Frederick Douglass’s moral crusade

by ERIC FONER


Frederick Douglass

*Prophet of Freedom*

By David Blight

Simon & Schuster. 912 pp. $37.50
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SARA BATKIE
“Sara Batkie is a writer for our times: lyrical and smart, clear-eyed and true. Better Times may portend just that—better times, at least for literature, in these dark hours.”—Darin Strauss

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scholarly attention. In the past few years, books have appeared about Douglass's ideas on race and politics; the public reception of his writings; his relationships with women; the similarities and differences between him and his contemporary, Abraham Lincoln; and his ideas on freedom as compared with those of Frantz Fanon and Michel Foucault. There is even a Douglass encyclopedia. Indeed, Douglass's fame has attained such heights that even President Trump—not known for his deep familiarity with American history—appears to have heard of him.

Douglass's current status as a national hero poses a challenge for the biographer, making it difficult to view him dispassionately. Moreover, those who seek to tell his story must compete with their subject's own version of it. Douglass published three autobiographies, among the greatest works of this genre in American literature. They present not only a powerful indictment of slavery, but also a tale of extraordinary individual achievement (it is no accident that Douglass's most frequently delivered lecture was titled "Self-Made Men"). Like all autobiographies, however, Douglass's were simultaneously historical narratives and works of the imagination. As David Blight notes in his new book, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, some passages in them—especially those relating to Douglass's childhood—are "almost pure invention," which means the biographer must resist the temptation to take these books entirely at face value.

There are other challenges as well. Douglass was born in 1818, and his life spanned almost the entire 19th century. He experienced both rural and urban slavery and played a crucial role in the abolitionist movement and the Civil War. He became a leading proponent of Reconstruction, when the Constitution was amended to create, for the first time in this country, an interracial democracy, and he lived to witness the imposition of a new system of racial inequality in the South. He edited newspapers and delivered thousands of speeches. He also went to great lengths to control his visual image. The most photographed American of the 19th century, Douglass was fully aware of the widespread circulation of demeaning caricatures of black Americans. His own portraits, dignified and arresting, unadorned with background accoutrements, embodied the claim of African Americans to freedom and equality.

To tell Douglass's story, then, one must possess excellent research skills, a full command of the voluminous literature on his era, and a humane appreciation of the issues central to his career, which reverberate down to the present. Fortunately, Blight, who teaches American history at Yale, has all of these qualities. He has long been drawn to the study of Douglass: His first book, published 30 years ago, examined Douglass's career during the Civil War. Douglass was also a key protagonist in Blight's best-known work, *Race and Reunion* (2001), a prizewinning study of the battle over the memory of the Civil War. In it, Blight argued that Douglass advanced an "emancipationist" vision of the war that stressed the centrality of abolition and the promise of equal citizenship to the conflict's meaning. But as wartime passions faded and the nation retreated from the promise of equality, Douglass saw this vision eclipsed by a "reconciliationist" memory in which the war was depicted as a family quarrel between white Americans that had little to do with slavery.

More recently, Blight became aware of a set of scrapbooks compiled by Douglass's son that contain thousands of newspaper clippings chronicling the last three decades of his father's life. With these, Blight has been able to delve more deeply than previous scholars into a period that many have depicted as an anticlimax, when the fiery moral crusader became a Republican Party functionary and government bureaucrat. Overall, the result is a consistently engrossing book that is likely to remain the definitive account of Douglass's life for many years to come.

In an age known for political oratory, Douglass was one of America's greatest public speakers. Even as an enslaved child, Blight relates, Douglass came to grasp the power of words and secretly learned to read and write. After his escape from slavery at the age of 20, language became his weapon. Blight quotes extensively from and offers astute analyses of Douglass's remarkable speeches, including great set pieces such as his oration on the Fourth of July and its meaning to slaves—a devastating condemnation of the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaimed its devotion to freedom but held millions in bondage—and his speech at the unveiling of a statue of Lincoln in the nation's capital, a penetrating exploration of the extent and limits of the Great Emancipator's policies regarding slavery and black citizenship.

Over six feet tall, with a powerful baritone voice, Douglass made an indelible impression as a lecturer. "He was the insurgent slave," wrote one listener, "taking hold of the right of speech, and charging on his tyrants the bondage of his race." Like any accomplished orator, Douglass was also a performer. He would point out that according to Southern law he was a "thing," not a man, and then, drawing himself up to his full height, proclaim: "Behold the thing."

Before the Civil War, to travel as an abolitionist speaker required courage, and this was especially true for Douglass, since until British admirers arranged to purchase his freedom in 1846, he ran the risk of being apprehended and returned to slavery. More than once, mobs broke up his lectures. But Douglass did not flinch from confrontation. In one incident related by Blight, Isaiah Rynders, the leader of a New York City street gang, brought his followers to disrupt one of Douglass's speeches. Rynders climbed onto the stage and began spewing racist remarks. Rather than fleeing, Douglass engaged him in an impromptu debate about slavery and race, until Rynders and his gang retreated from the hall.

At the outset of his career as an abolitionist, Douglass adhered to the outlook of William Lloyd Garrison, who insisted that because the Constitution protected slavery, abolitionists could not in good conscience vote, and that the Union itself should be dissolved. But in the 1850s, Douglass changed his mind, aligning himself with Gerrit Smith, who had developed an antislavery interpretation of the Constitution and favored political action against slavery. Douglass also rejected Garrison's pacifism, advocating violent resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act. During the prewar decade, he also came within the orbit of John Brown, although he declined Brown's invitation to join the ill-fated assault on Harpers
Ferry. (Five black men did join Brown’s private army; their story is compellingly told in a new book, *Five for Freedom*, by Eugene L. Meyer.)

Returning from a speaking tour of the British Isles in the late 1840s, Douglass declared: “I have no patriotism, I have no country.” But with the outbreak of the Civil War, he wholeheartedly embraced the Union cause. Douglass became, in Blight’s words, a “war propagandist,” whose speeches whipped up hatred of the Confederacy and called for a “merciless crusade against it, while insisting that only a policy of emancipation could subdue the South. Anticipating the “Double V” campaign of World War II, which called on black Americans to fight racism at home as well as fascism abroad, Douglass spoke of a “double battle” against Southern slavery and against racial prejudice throughout the country. The “mission of the war” (the title of his best-known wartime oration) could not be fulfilled until a new republic, based on universal freedom and civil and political equality, arose from the ashes of the old one. Douglass minced no words in condemning what he saw as Lincoln’s delay in moving toward emancipation; but after twice meeting with the president in the White House, he came to admire him, seeing this self-made son of Kentucky who had risen to prominence through powerful oratory as a kindred spirit.

When the government opened the army to black men, Douglass urged them to enlist. One of the most memorable moments in his autobiographies is his confrontation with Edward Covey, the slave-breaker whom the teenage Douglass physically overpowered rather than allowing himself to be whipped. This altercation, Douglass wrote, made him a man. Now, he proclaimed that military service would not only demonstrate black Americans’ manhood but also stake their service would not only demonstrate black Americans’ manhood but also stake their claim to citizenship in the reunited nation. Two of his sons joined the famed 54th Massachusetts Regiment; one was seriously injured. Two of his sons joined the famed 54th Massachusetts Regiment; one was seriously injured. One of the most memorable moments in his autobiographies is his confrontation with Edward Covey, the slave-breaker whom the teenage Douglass physically overpowered rather than allowing himself to be whipped. This altercation, Douglass wrote, made him a man. Now, he proclaimed that military service would not only demonstrate black Americans’ manhood but also stake their claim to citizenship in the reunited nation. Two of his sons joined the famed 54th Massachusetts Regiment; one was seriously wounded in the assault on Fort Wagner, when nearly half the unit lost their lives.

After the war, Douglass found a new role as a “proudly loyal” Republican. President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed him marshal of the District of Columbia—making Douglass the first African American named to a position that required Senate confirmation. Later, Benjamin Harrison dispatched him to Haiti as the American ambassador. In what Blight calls his “almost superhuman” speaking tours, which involved innumerable exhausting rail journeys, Douglass struggled to keep alive the abolitionist interpretation of the war’s meaning. In his remarkable “Composite Nation” speech, he outlined a vision of a new America that would transcend race by welcoming liberty-loving people from all corners of the globe—including the widely despised Chinese, the prejudice against whom he condemned.

At the Republican National Convention of 1876, as Republicans appeared to be abandoning the egalitarian impulse of Reconstruction, Douglass courageously confronted his party, asking, “Do you mean to make good the promises of your Constitution?” His plea was largely ignored. By the 1880s, a new generation of black leaders were urging black voters to declare their independence from the party of Lincoln by allying with dissident white Democrats in the South who were challenging the region’s elite. They saw Douglass as having abandoned his principles in exchange for political appointments.

Douglass resented their criticism. In 1888, he opposed the candidacy of John Mercer Langston, former dean of the Howard University School of Law, for a congressional seat from Virginia on the grounds that he was not loyal enough to the Republican Party.

Unlike Martin Luther King Jr. and many other black leaders, Douglass did not find the institutional springboard for his activism in the black church. But Blight places more emphasis than previous biographers on the importance of the Bible to Douglass’s rhetorical style and political outlook. The book’s subtitle, “Prophet of Freedom,” is meant to be taken literally. Douglass, Blight writes, saw himself as a “black Jeremiah,” akin to the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament. From this vantage point, the Civil War emerged as God’s judgment on a sinning nation, its carnage a divinely ordained punishment that made possible redemption and a better future based on equality for all.

Blight frequently invokes the analogy between Douglass and the “old prophets”—perhaps too frequently, as this leads to a relative neglect of the secular foundations of Douglass’s vision: the egalitarian promise of the Declaration of Independence, an inclusive understanding of political democracy (Douglass was one of the few men to attend the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, which demanded the right to vote for women), and the broad commitment to human rights that Douglass imbibed in the abolitionist crusade. Blight describes him as a believer in “nineteenth-century political liberalism,” without really elaborating on what that ideology meant in Douglass’s time, or explaining whether his secular and religious modes of thought reinforced or contradicted each other.

One aspect of Douglass’s politics that Blight does analyze at length is his belief in self-reliance as a key to black progress. It is hardly surprising that the emblematic self-made man declared that black Americans should be “let alone” after the end of slavery. This statement, Blight notes, has been wrenchen out of context by today’s black conservatives, who claim Douglass as a forebear of their own hostility to affirmative action and other efforts to assist the less fortunate.

As Blight makes clear, Douglass’s economic outlook cannot be reduced to simple laissez-faire. To be sure, he was not an economic radical. Throughout his career, Douglass retained his faith that in a society resting on “free labor,” any man could make something of himself by following the path of self-improvement. This applied to all oppressed groups, in his view, not only African Americans. Shocked by the “human misery” he encountered in Ireland, Douglass attributed much of it to the abuse of alcohol, not centuries of oppressive British rule.

Douglass fully understood that pervasive racism and violence, often directed at black Americans who managed to get ahead, posed formidable obstacles to black economic advancement. He was less attuned to other impediments, including his own party’s advocacy of high tariffs and deflationary monetary policies, which disadvantaged farmers of both races. In addition, he feared that special efforts on behalf of African Americans would promote an image of them as privileged wards of the state. (Lincoln’s successor as president, the deeply racist Andrew Johnson, made this claim when he vetoed the Civil Rights Bill of 1866.)

Some admirers chastised Douglass for his emphasis on self-reliance. O.O. Howard, former head of the Freedmen’s Bureau, warned that many impoverished black Southerners would “perish if let alone.” But for Douglass, self-reliance assumed the existence of a level playing field that offered equal prospects of success in what Lincoln called the “race of life.” To create such conditions in the
aftermath of slavery, Douglass knew, would require massive political intervention: laws and constitutional amendments guaranteeing civil and political equality; the creation of school systems in the South, where they barely existed before the war; the encouragement of black land ownership; and national protection of former slaves against terrorist violence. This was hardly a formula for a “let alone” approach to race relations.

One of the more startling themes of Blight’s book is the candid portrait he offers of Douglass’s “dysfunctional” family life. No doubt, it was difficult to be the child of the great Frederick Douglass. His three sons not only failed to find secure employment but feuded incessantly with their sister Rosetta and her husband, Nathan Sprague. The latter, in turn, dragged his father-in-law into court after the Civil War, charging that Sprague’s sister had been employed to work in the Douglass household and never paid. (They settled out of court.) “Jealousy,” Rosetta wrote in a letter to her father, “is one of the leading traits in our family.”

One of the reasons that Douglass continued his demanding lecture tours after the war was that he had to support a large extended family, including his wife, children, grandchildren, and even long-lost siblings whom he had not seen since childhood and who suddenly made an appearance. Tragedy also stalked the household. Over a two-week period in 1888, Douglass saw five of his grandchildren perish in a typhoid epidemic.

Douglass left behind an enormous public record, but as Blight readily acknowledges, the private man remains frustratingly elusive. Most enigmatic is his relationship with his first wife, Anna, a free black woman whom Douglass fell in love with as a slave in Baltimore. She helped plan his escape and quickly joined him in New York City, where they were married. Anna Douglass prided herself on her genuine skill at managing their household (and, early on, helping to support it by taking on sewing and shoe binding) and on raising their children while her husband traveled the lecture circuit. But Douglass never spoke publicly or wrote about her. In his final autobiography, Anna receives just one mention—and not by name, but as “my intended wife” who helped him escape. Married to one of the country’s foremost men of words, Anna Douglass never became literate herself. This seems to have been a conscious decision, as people tried to teach her. Rosetta wrote touchingly about her desire to make her parents happy, noting that this would be easier “if both were interested in the same pursuits.”

As if all this weren’t trying enough, Anna had to deal with her husband’s close companionship with two remarkable women. Julia Griffiths came from Britain to help manage his first newspaper. Leaving the Douglasses’ home in Rochester, New York, in 1855, she was succeeded by Ottilie Assing, a radical journalist from Germany who translated Douglass’s autobiography and, like Griffiths, offered indispensable help in keeping his newspaper afloat. Each spent months at a time living in the Douglass household. Anna Douglass’s reactions to this situation do not exist in the historical record, although there are hints that she found the presence of these women upsetting. For insight into her state of mind, Blight turns to modern novels and poetry that include Anna as a character—not always convincingly, as these tend to reflect the sensibilities of our own time rather than those of the 19th century.

Griffiths and Assing were both talented women on whom Douglass depended for intellectual companionship, emotional support, and practical assistance. Without their editorial skills and financial acumen, his newspapers could not have survived. Assing belonged to a circle of German exiles from the failed Revolution of 1848 with whom Douglass enjoyed discussing politics on visits to her home in New Jersey (one of which took place on New Year’s Eve, 1870, while Anna remained at home). The modern reader, Blight notes, will want to know if these relationships were “ever sexual.” His answer is judicious: “We do not know for sure, and perhaps it does not matter,” although he does later suggest that Assing and Douglass “were probably lovers.”

Certainly, Assing adored Douglass and despised his wife. For years, she implored him to join her on a romantic holiday in France, although he never did so. After Anna’s death in 1882, Douglass married Helen Pitts, a considerably younger white woman who had been active in the abolitionist and feminist movements. As Blight notes, this was probably the most prominent interracial marriage of the 19th century. Many members of her family ostracized her, but Douglass’s children welcomed Pitts, insisting that it was no one’s business whom their father chose to wed. Soon afterward, Assing, now living in Paris and diagnosed with breast cancer, took her own life. In her will, she left Douglass a considerable sum of money and directed that all of the letters in her possession be burned. With their destruction, any hope of solving the mystery of what Blight calls their “intellectual affair of the heart” also disappeared.

Frederick Douglass died in February 1895. Seven months later, Booker T. Washington gained national applause for a speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta that counseled black Americans to concentrate on economic advancement and forswore political activism against the tightening web of disfranchisement and segregation in the South. Douglass would have strongly disagreed. He believed in self-reliance, but not accommodation to injustice. He spent his final years, as always, writing and lecturing, this time as part of a campaign to expose and condemn the epidemic of lynching in the South.

Virginia Woolf once wrote of the 18th-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft: “We hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living.” How true, also, of Frederick Douglass. We find ourselves today in a political moment that Douglass in his later years would have recognized. “Principles which we all thought to have been firmly and permanently settled,” he wrote, “have been boldly assaulted and overturned.” His response was not to despair, but to continue the fight. Douglass’s words from 1857 continue to reverberate and inspire: “If there is no struggle there is no progress.”

The Nation.
Baudelaire, in a late poem, pictures justice as a daybreak under dire circumstances—“the terrifying dawn,” he writes, “Of strict justice.” To God, described only as “the judge” in the poem, and to his jury of angels, humankind must present proof of its worth. There is no way around the situation: We are expected to meet the judge and jury’s strict demands of justice.

Sergio de la Pava’s new novel is animated by a similar spirit: confident in the inevitability of justice, yet quizzical and equivocal regarding the fairness of its conditions. Unfurling over New Jersey gridirons and descending into crammed Rikers Island jail cells, Lost Empress interrogates its central subjects—justice, art, poverty—with great urgency. It also does so with a certain amount of complexity; few would characterize the novel as anything but difficult. As in his prior works, de la Pava shows himself prepared to risk confusion as he pens reality in all its coiled and thrashing complication.

In this way, de la Pava is among the last of a vanishing breed: a society-spanning novelist of ideas in an era dominated by inert lyrical realism or narratives about authorial selfhood. Breaking from the assumption of a limited upper-middle-class audience, de la Pava holds to a more capacious view of art, seeking entry into a timeless pantheon of great artists on behalf of the less-privileged social strata.

Lost Empress
A Novel
By Sergio de la Pava
Pantheon. 640 pp. $29.95

Lost Empress marks an ambitious attempt to produce literature that seeks to resolve the tensions between a grandiose vision of art and a notion that it should advocate for and represent the experiences of the disadvantaged classes. The results are uneven, but they still deserve close attention. Readers and authors eager to escape the claustrophobic confines of contemporary literary culture—or wanting to view the dismal chaos of the present moment in its full variety—can learn much from the bold shortcomings and quiet triumphs of his ambitious experiment.

Frank Guan is a critic whose work has appeared in n+1, New York, The Point, Bookforum, and Dissent.
D e la Pava’s status in American letters has been anomalous from the beginning. *A Naked Singularity*, his superb first novel, dealt directly, as the work of no contemporary novelist has, with America’s criminal-justice system. Narrated from the first-person perspective of Casi, a young Colombian-American public defender barraged by the voices of indigent clients, conniving colleagues, warm-hearted relatives, slothful roommates, and power-tripping judges, the novel was rejected by dozens of agents before being self-published in 2008. Only a combination of luck and the assiduous publicity efforts of the author’s wife, Susanna, rescued the book from oblivion. A handful of glowing recommendations from literary bloggers eventually carried *A Naked Singularity* to the attention of editors at the University of Chicago Press, which republished the novel in 2012; it would go on to win that year’s prestigious PEN/Bingham Prize for best debut novel.

With its heft, range, and focus on individuals defined by their entanglement within the logic of larger social structures, *Singularity* was identified, with reasonable accuracy, as a “systems novel” along the lines of *Gravity’s Rainbow* or *Infinite Jest*. Yet the system at the heart of de la Pava’s compendium is not, as in the cases of these antecedents, military-scientific or commercial-cultural. Having worked full-time since the turn of the millennium as a public defender in New York City, de la Pava possessed a front-row view of the police-imposed and court-approved immiseration of poor people of color within the system of criminal justice. In life and in fiction, he devoted himself to representing “bodies” (in the system parlance for human beings) locked out of public sight, and the gross inequities they were compelled to endure.

Yet these brutal conditions—the arbitrary seizures and interminable detentions, the inadequate care and insufferable heat, the torturous solitude, the exorbitant bail, the inflated sentences, the endemic sadism and corruption of officials—are delivered to the reader less through treatises or sermons than as incidentals hitched smoothly to a driving narrative line. The central plot in *A Naked Singularity* twines around the plan, set up by a fellow lawyer, to rob millions from an upper-echelon drug dealer; though the novel weighs in at over 600 pages, its mass, thanks to the heist narrative at its core, impedes its motion only slightly.

The same can be said of *Lost Empress*, another titanic novel building up to another expensive theft. There are some differences: Instead of cracking open a cartel’s safe house, *Empress* sets its sought-after treasure—a Salvador Dalí painting titled * Adolescence*—deep within the bowels of the state. Donated to Rikers Island by its creator, the painting is coveted by Nina Gill, whose father is the owner of the Dallas Cowboys. Employing a shadowy figure known only as the Absence as an intermediary, Gill contracts Nuno DeAngelo, a young Colombian-American hoodlum, to steal * Adolescence* for a seven-figure sum. To make his way into Rikers, Nuno commits what at first appears to be a heinous, headline-grabbing murder.

Having entered the facility as planned, Nuno soon discovers that he cannot stay there long enough to seize the painting. After savaging a crooked guard, he is hurled into solitary confinement, where he lapses into a catatonic state. Unfit to appear in court, he is shipped to the mental ward for inmates at Bellevue Hospital, where, though he eventually regains consciousness, he finds his route back to prison barred. Much like the airman Yossarian in *Catch-22*, whose attempts to abstain from bombing campaigns on the grounds of insanity is taken as proof that he is sane enough to execute bombings, Nuno’s eagerness to return to the war zone of Rikers is interpreted by ward authorities as proof that he is still insane.

As Nuno slowly witchers toward his objective, his employer is engaged in a prolonged campaign of her own. Despite being a strong-willed oligarch, Nina faces long odds. Bilked by her brother out of inheriting a Cowboys franchise that owed its success to her superior management, she receives control, as spiteful consolation, of a run-down arena-football franchise, the Indoor Football League, and one of its teams, the Paterson Pork. Bent on revenge, Nina takes advantage of a season-canceling player lockout by National Football League owners and determines to raise the IFL to national prominence. Moving and shaking, she scoops up an alcoholic but talented coach and several brilliant players thrown to the roadside by the NFL in former years. Teasing a famous retired Cowboys quarterback with the prospect of his first championship ring, she convinces him to lead the Pork’s offense, then leverages his signing into a deal with television networks to broadcast IFL games nationally.

While Nuno’s scheme is frustrated, Nina’s is carried off without a hitch. The Pork have a flawless record; the popularity and revenues of the IFL skyrocket. Faced with the collapse of its monopoly, the NFL comes to Nina with a sweetheart offer. In exchange for an ungodly sum, the IFL will become a subsidiary of the NFL, a minor league feeding the existing behemoth. Nina accepts the offer, or at least claims to. At the press conference held to publicize the accord, she announces that the NFL has agreed to a championship match with the IFL between their best teams: The Dallas Cowboys will face off against the Paterson Pork in the first-ever Global Bowl.

At this point, the ambition behind de la Pava’s looping set of narratives grows clearer. His intersecting plotlines double as a schematic of American class relations: the slum-born prisoner of color on the one hand, the freewheeling white capitalist on the other, and between them the world—a powerful Absence, a valuable work of art, millions of dollars, and various classes of human beings.

The secondary cast of *Lost Empress* spans the intervening rungs on this social ladder. Travis Mena, a small-time landlord and inept Bellevue surgeon who owes both of these positions to nepotism, stands in for the feckless upper-upper-middle class. Living directly beneath him in New York is his tenant, Dia Nouveau. A recent Brown graduate neck-deep in student debt, chipper Dia is dragooned into service by Nina as an assistant and IFL commissioner: She’s an image of the lower-upper-middle-class millennial, flailing and game for anything. Below them are the state and church employees—the core of the middle class—all living in Paterson. Their characters reflect, as if in Chaucer, their respective occupations: Sharon Seaborg, a 911 dispatcher, is resigned to disaster; Simon Ventimiglia, a parish priest and Rikers chaplain, is conscientious; Hugh Seaborg, Sharon’s ex-husband, ex-EMT, and current Rikers guard, is fearful and officious; Larry Brown, a skilled EMT, is dutiful and puppylike.

As though tracking so many characters with so many trajectories were not enough, de la Pava introduces yet another set and binds them into an ever-larger plot, even as he shatters them with tragedy. One night, Jorge de Cervantes, a Colombian immigrant whose backbreaking labors have elevated his family to the cusp of middle-class sta-
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tus—they are about to move into a small house—is struck and killed by a drug-addled driver. Travis, Sharon, and Larry respond to the accident in their respective functions, but all are helpless to save him. Jorge's son Nelson, a prize-winning middle-school student, finds himself stricken by a numb fury, but his spirits are revived once he happens on a book of Emily Dickinson's poems in his father's belongings; he ends up titling his high-school application essay “Emily Dickinson Is Saving My Life and I Can’t Even Thank Her.” (We never learn if Nelson's equally bereaved mother and sister manage a similar redemption; they vanish from the novel almost as soon as they enter it.) Meanwhile, since Jorge's killer is housed in Rikers while awaiting trial, the task of vengeance falls on Nuno, a relation of the de Cervantes clan.

This secondary plotline highlights many of the links between death, life, art, and justice in Lost Empress. Art returns to life the meaning that death removes; as opposed to the justice of the state of things, where death is arbitrary and inevitable (“everything's already a mass grave with some of the corpses dreaming of life,” de la Pava writes), art is a form of justice that helps people find a way to restore some measure of an absent life. Jorge de Cervantes perishes meaninglessly and unaccountably; his son revivifies under the influence of a great canonical poet. The same is true of Nuno: He writes poems and requests great novels to read to keep from succumbing to the death-in-life of jail; later on, he will produce a work of art that saves him.

The redemptive vision of art that runs through Lost Empress underlines how it strives to advance on the model of A Naked Singularity. De la Pava’s debut owed its success to his fusion of naturalism, rooted in his experiences in the courts and prisons, and a comic postmodernism in the line of Pynchon and Wallace. The diction of the earlier book was demotic and procedural, its voice focused on material facts; the diction of his new one bristles with Latinate polysyllables. What A Naked Singularity did not do was foreground its artistry: Its allusions to Moby-Dick and Cymbeline were buried in the mix, not blared. It was a work of art, but it did not engage with questions about art. It did not represent, as Lost Empress does, an ambitious attempt to hybridize the classic systems novel with works centered on art formation and the artist's displacement in society, such as Rilke’s The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge or Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

In this endeavor, de la Pava’s greatest success takes the form of a comic set piece situated halfway through the novel. It is discovered within the district attorney's office that one of the DA's interns, Sylvester Scarpetti, possesses an uncanny natural talent for transcribing 911 calls in all their horrified humanity. The precision and emotive force of Scarpetti's transcripts are such that they transcend the category of valuable legal documents. They come to be seen by his colleagues and superiors as sublime and beautiful—literal artworks. Scarpetti's own awareness of his genius swells: To forestall plagiarism, he begins personally signing all of his transcripts. In demand for his transcription services, lines “form outside his office as if to a nightclub. DAs holding CDs in those formfitting plain white envelopes with the plastic windows in the middle. See, you couldn't just drop off the CD with the expected instructions. No, you had to convince Scarpetti to take on the project, and you did this by, in essence, pitching its desirability. Remember, this is an artist and you are asking him to produce art, he needs to be treated as such.” Yet the resentment inspired by his vainglorious posturing—coupled with his growing willingness to depart from verbatim transcripts in the name of higher human truth—eventually do Scarpetti in, and he is fired.

The Scarpetti episode serves as more than just a sparkling divagation satirizing the tendency of successful artists toward bombastic self-valorization. Through it, de la Pava gestures at the broader aesthetic project of his own novel. He aims to generate and sustain a form of literary expression with three distinct elements: naturalistic reproductions of reality verging on the lurid (the 911 incidents); a self-reflexive narrative defined by the improbability of postmodernism and systems novels (the 911 transcripts, which can never actually rise to the level of great art); and a transcendent conception and celebration of the power of great art.

As expected from any ambitious effort to fuse these competing elements, the results are mixed. If the Scarpetti interlude marks a moment when all cylinders are firing, there are times when de la Pava’s merging of these registers works at cross-purposes. In this regard, one character truly jars. The problem is that he also happens to be Nuno, the closest thing Lost Empress has to a main protagonist. Not only does Nuno write poetry; he also pens Rage Against the Machine–style raps. And not only is he capable of a passionate, singular love for Dia (who, in a fortuitous plot twist, turns out to have been his high-school sweetheart), but he is also a world-class street fighter as well. In one chapter, he withstands a marathon session of kicking and stomping by Rikers guards, then immediately picks open his handcuffs with a palmed hairpin and caves the head correctional officer's face in with a single punch. Nuno also, incidentally, possesses a gift for criminal law that far exceeds that of the hapless public defender assigned to his case, and his expertise in theology is such that he can trounce Father Ventimiglia, the Rikers chaplain, in a debate over the Gospels.

With this impossible concatenation of interests and skills, Nuno is a superhuman. Such a characterization is, of course, intentional: Like some latter-day Colombian-American Paul Bunyan or John Henry, Nuno embodies the different registers de la Pava aspires to work in. Yet even in a fictional space, with its high tolerance for the unlikely, Paul Bunyan and John Henry never became literary intellectuals and legal geniuses. Nuno’s chimeric combination of muscles, brains, and good intentions is so overwhelming that the reader has great difficulty taking him as human.

Thus, in a work that seeks to be grounded to the world as it is as much as it is a break from it, these contortions of the plausible sometimes devolve into the sheer escapism that they seek to parody. Excessive duties are imposed on the reader, who must reconcile fundamentally contradictory impulses: de la Pava’s attempt to take flight from a grinding social reality; his desire to chronicle that reality in intimate detail; and his ambition to ennoble both of these endeavors with masterpiece status.

It’s a risk worth taking, but ultimately the art suffers. It is quite possible to simultaneously revel in the fun-house reflections of actually existing capitalism and grieve for whole abandoned classes of the human race. But doing so while being compelled to hear out frequent, implicitly author-directed disquisitions on artistic greatness (“Joni Mitchell was an artistic genius and on the rare occasions when that occurs it is always a fact well understood by the actual genius”) might strain...
even the most generous reader’s tolerance. The contrast between *Lost Empress* and *A Naked Singularity*, which dissembled its titanic ambitions while firmly, calmly, quietly numbering itself among the greats, is telling, and it is also unfavorable.

Though there are points where de la Pava’s novel exceeds the plausibility of the real world and even the fictional one he’s imagined, one never doubts that the drive behind such excess is a yearning for freedom. Who wouldn’t want to overrule the justice system as it currently exists by sheer artistic will? But even though de la Pava often tries to transcend the systems he so acutely describes, his novel also recognizes the ultimate limits of such an ambition. Death and prison may prove so powerful that human beings and their art can never hope to fully overcome them; the best they can do is report the situation lucidly and hope they find an audience.

Even de la Pava’s superhuman protagonist, by the end of the novel, cannot escape these forces. At Bellevue, he meets a character known only as the Theorist. The Theorist helps to catalyze Nuno’s mental recovery but also, Nuno discovers, wants to destroy the world we live in—a deed which, for convenient reasons of plot, can only take place in Paterson on the night of the Global Bowl, at the base of Paterson’s Great Falls. Though it’s never really clear why, Nuno takes the Theorist’s plans seriously and vows to thwart them; he escapes from Rikers with the Dalí painting intact and confronts the Theorist at the last minute, only to learn that nothing can be done: Nuno’s universe will come to an end just as the Paterson Pork win and Nina’s own plans are realized. The last-second victories and fabulous jailbreaks that human beings can contrive are one thing, but preventing the apocalypse is another—only the author, de la Pava, can stop such an event from occurring, and ultimately, in his universe, no crime—and Nuno has committed many—can go unpunished.

Despite the sheer expanse of his novels, de la Pava resembles no American writer so much as Bernard Malamud, who in his short fiction and quiet novels paired a staunch, yet non-chauvinist, assertion of his ethnic identity with a rigorous and passionate desire to see right rewarded and wrong punished. Similar, too, is de la Pava and Malamud’s affinity for tracing the limitations of humble lives.

One stands out especially in the midst of all of *Lost Empress’s* action heroes and screwball heroines: Feniz Heredia, a working-class Puerto Rican Patersonian in his 60s. At first he seems marginal, a faint, plaintive echo of the novel’s more consequential figures. Like Nuno, he was once a mental patient in Bellevue and, like Nuno, he also will eventually journey to Paterson’s Great Falls. But Feniz is in many ways also Nuno’s opposite: Reclusive and largely living in the past, his inner depths are unknown to anyone but the reader. He lacks a job to mold his attitude, and the austere dignity of his mind, narrated in free indirect style, is a clear reflection of his straitened material circumstances.

Yet de la Pava makes Feniz his most realized character. Insofar as the novel has any politics, it is in conversation with Feniz that Sharon, channeling the author, expresses it: “The only thing the broke have going for them is there’s so many of us...the only way we’re going to be heard is if we speak with one voice.” And it is through the rich texture of Feniz’s being that de la Pava carefully reveals to us Feniz’s supreme worth. Feniz was never a great artist; it’s just that, in a better world, he likely would have been. How much wasted brilliance has flowered in the minds of people as poor as Feniz, living in towns as run-down as Paterson, and what kind of social system might correct for this injustice and welcome their presence as friends?
I met Naguib Mahfouz once. It was in the winter of 2006, and I’d been living in Cairo for three and a half years. The writer Gamal Al-Ghitani, an old friend of Mahfouz’s, provided me with an introduction to one of his weekly gatherings. I went to a Holiday Inn in the suburb of Maadi. The hotel faced the Nile across four lanes of traffic. There was a metal detector at the front door. Ever since he was nearly killed by a young fundamentalist in 1994, Mahfouz no longer frequented the downtown cafés where he had met friends and fellow writers for half a century.

It was a small group; I can’t remember any names. There must have been a few of Mahfouz’s old friends and a few new admirers such as myself. Also in attendance was a well-known Cairo character, a middle-aged American who favored white suits and who claimed, for decades now, to be writing Mahfouz’s biography.

Mahfouz was 94 then. He was enveloped in an overcoat that was too big for him and made him look like a small, wizened, sympa-
and the art of chatting with friends—one is unsure if that is because he had such a hand in defining this quintessence. It has been said that Mahfouz produced so many works and was a pioneer in so many genres of literature that he gave Egyptian writers the gift of an entire modern literary legacy, ranging from social realism to existentialism, stream of consciousness, allegory, and noir. Yet despite all his experiments in form, Mahfouz was consistent in his themes: He was concerned with Egypt’s national identity and development, with social change and power, and with what Egypt was and might have been and could still be. In Children of the Alley (as in most of his work), a few geographical and psychic spaces appear again and again: the desert, where crimes and revelations take place, where those who have been ostracized or expelled—a terrible fate—must bide their time. The coffeehouse, an all-male space where stories are told, gossip and jokes shared, egos ruffled and smoothed. And above all else, the alley, a place he knew from his childhood, his preferred stage, and a political allegory—would in Mahfouz’s writing and life, the seeming contradiction between his everyday caution and reticence and his daring literary ambition.

Mahfouz skillfully navigated censorship throughout his career, and even worked as a censor himself, yet he managed to write about Egypt in ways that were bold and true. He was a lifelong government employee, a national icon whose work was serialized in the state press, and yet he took as one his great theme the repeated dashing of his country’s hopes.

Mahfouz was born in 1911 and grew up in Al Gamaliya, a historic neighborhood in Cairo, home to thousand-year-old mosques, monumental gates, and tight alleyways. His family supported the Wafd, Egypt’s liberal nationalist party, which led an early struggle for independence from the British; the Wafd’s leader Saad Zaghloul was venerated in his home. His father, a government bureaucrat, spoke of family affairs and national affairs “as if they were the same thing,” and of Zaghloul, the Egyptian monarchy, and the British as if they were “his personal friends and enemies.”

In 1919, the British exiled Zaghloul, and the country erupted in months of prolonged protest. Mahfouz watched from the windows of his home as great demonstrations passed through the neighborhood—and were sometimes met with deadly force by British troops. Several years later, when Mahfouz was around 12, his family left Gamaliya, relocating to the up-and-coming Abbasiya district. But he returned to his childhood neighborhood, literally and figuratively, for the rest of his life. The world of the alley—as a social space, a human stage, and a political allegory—would inspire much of his writing.

In 1922, Egypt was granted nominal independence, and the next year Zaghloul was allowed to return; he briefly led two governments before his death in 1927. The British continued to rule the country behind the scenes, propping up Egypt’s increasingly weak and unpopular monarchy. Then, in 1952, frustrated by the ongoing English presence and the dissolute lifestyle of King Farouk, a group of young Egyptian officers overthrew the monarchy and declared Egypt a socialist republic. One of these officers, Gamal Abdel Nasser, soon became the country’s president. Two year later he nationalized the Suez Canal and became a standard-bearer for Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East. Nasser would also institute a single-party system, monopolize the media, and crack down on Islamist and Communist dissenters.
Mahfouz was 40 at the time of the coup and an established author. He supported many of the revolution’s socialist redistribution policies, but he was also suspicious of military rule and regretted that the liberal politics and democratic aspirations of the 1920s and the Wafd party had not been realized. In fact, he would always view the 1920s as the high point of Egypt’s struggle for independence, a time of feverish nationalism and romantic optimism. His famous family saga The Cairo Trilogy begins during this era and ends on the cusp of World War II. Palace Walk, the first book in the trilogy, concludes with Fahmy—the family’s golden boy, a promising young man of abilities and principle—cut down by British bullets while marching in a pro-independence protest. His death is a loss from which his family never recovers. The hope for an independent but democratic Egypt is cut down as well.

Mahfouz grew up in a home with no literary culture, and he borrowed his first book from a childhood friend. Like other boys his age, he loved crime and adventure stories, and he began “writing” by laboriously copying out his favorite paperbacks, inserting a few details from his own life and prominently appending his signature at the end.

In a sense, many of Mahfouz’s novels were a continuation of his childhood hobby of “writing” by copying. He admired the great thinkers of the 1920s and ’30s, intellectuals like Taha Hussein and Tawfiq Al-Hakim, and chose to study philosophy at Cairo University under Hussein. After graduating, however, he had a change of heart; he approached his decision to become a novelist with typical determination and discipline, reading nearly all of the West’s great novelists and playwrights. His favorites were Shakespeare, Proust, and Tolstoy; he also liked Ibsen, Chekhov, Thomas Mann, and Eugene O’Neill. Hemingway, he thought, was overrated, and Faulkner “more complicated than necessary.”

All art is imitation, but as Mahfouz later noted, the matter was fraught for an artist from a developing country intent on making a Western art form his own:

The European writer who started when I did, could search for himself from the first day…. [W]e writers who belong to the so-called developing or undeveloped world, we thought at that time that to establish a true literary self we had to erase that self. I mean the European novel form was sacred, to go against it was sacrilegious. That is why at one point I imagined that the role of our generation was to write novels properly, because I imagined there was a proper and improper way of writing a novel.

By the 1930s, Mahfouz began to publish stories in magazines and embarked upon an ambitious series of novels set in Egypt’s pharaonic times. These books were Mahfouz’s indirect way to write about British occupation, but he abandoned that project in the 1940s and turned to contemporary Egypt. It was the right decision. By 1947, when he published the novel Midaq Alley, the key elements of his fiction were all there, starting with the alley of the title. Much of the power of Mahfouz’s work—besides the beauty of his prose—comes from the multiple levels of his stories. The alley depicted in them is a dense, socially diverse microcosm in which personal destinies, political conflicts, and social transformations are played out. It is both a recognizable place whose residents strive, scheme, and suffer and an evocative stand-in for Egypt’s larger national arena.

Mahfouz believed that writers and intellectuals should confront and portray reality. In one of his newspaper columns, he observed:
“The delusion of a number of right-minded people is that portraying negative sides of life constitutes an offense against the reputation of society at home and abroad, and that it is our priority to portray what is beautiful or of value as a form of public relations for us and our country.” But expecting artists to turn away from the darker side of life was tantamount to asking “the police and prosecutor to ignore delinquents in order to avoid giving ourselves a bad reputation.”

_Midaq Alley_ ignores no one: Zaita, who gives would-be beggars the deformities they need to make a living; Kirsha the café owner, who refuses to be chastised for his trysts with young men; and above all the headstrong Hamida, a Cairene Moll Flanders, who runs away from home and becomes a prostitute. Mahfouz is also careful to tell their stories from their points of view. “Her nature craved something more,” he wrote of Hamida, “than waiting in humble silence.”

_Midaq Alley_ was an assured and vivid work, but it wasn’t until almost a decade later, with the publication of his _Cairo Trilogy_, that Mahfouz made his reputation. That work, which Mahfouz subdivided into volumes named after streets in his childhood neighborhood—_Palace Walk_, _Palace of Desire_, and _Sugar Street_—begins in 1917, as Amina, the mother of a middle-class Cairo family, wakes up at midnight. Awaiting her husband’s return, she “entered the closed cage formed by the wooden latticework and… peeked out through the tiny, round openings of the latticework panels that protected her from being seen from the street.” From this blinkered point of view, our vision of Cairo gradually expands until we can take in all of Mahfouz’s sweeping, intricately plotted panorama. Through hundreds of pages, we travel further and further afield, to new neighborhoods, new generations of Amina’s family, new ideas and expectations. Momentous historical, political, and social changes are all refracted through the lives of her children.

In _Palace Walk_’s opening, Amina’s husband, Al-Sayyid Ahmad, is returning home after carousing with his friends. He’s a successful merchant and a lover of drinking, women, and music. Yet he is terribly strict with his sons and has so thoroughly cowed his wife that she long ago “became convinced that true manliness, tyranny, and staying out till after midnight were common characteristics of a single entity.” Mahfouz’s portrait of patriarchy—in all its hypocrisy, cruelty, and charisma—is so vivid that to this day “Al-Sayyid” is shorthand in the Arab world for a ridiculously domineering man. And just as Mahfouz exposes the excesses of a previous generation, he deals with the agonies of his own. The youngest son of the family, Kamal, is the writer’s most autobiographical character. We see him as a browbeaten child in the first book, stifled by the fear of his father’s disapproval. By the end of the trilogy, he is a philosophy teacher haunted by an unrequited love. He is educated and free, yet unhappy—an atheist and an alienated intellectual who feels that his life hasn’t amounted to much. Mahfouz later told Al-Ghitani that “Kamal’s crisis was my crisis, and his suffering was my suffering.”

Kamal’s nephews, the youngest generation in the trilogy, are far more confident about what needs to be done in the country. One of them is a communist, in an equal marriage with a female comrade. The other is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Through them, Mahfouz anticipates the two strongest strands of political opposition that the country will witness in the decades to come. He also anticipates the way that the state will meet this opposition. The trilogy’s last novel, _Sugar Street_, concludes with both young men—“the one who worships God and the one who doesn’t”—under arrest in the last days of World War II. “You must worship the government first and foremost if you wish your life to be free of problems,” Kamal observes.
The Cairo Trilogy captures the startling pace and often steep price of the social change that consumed so much of the world in the mid-20th century, particularly in those countries undergoing decolonization. Children of the Alley, Mahfouz's next work, was an entirely different kind of novel: Instead of chronicling the great forces of historical change, it exists virtually outside of time and asks whether true change is possible at all.

The novel begins with the expulsion of first one brother and then another from their father's enchanted house and garden. (As usual, the bad brother is much more interesting than the good one.) Their multiplying descendants live in misery alongside the gated palace of their ancestor, Gabalawi, who dwells unseen behind the walls. He is beloved, awesome, terrifying, and inscrutable. His estate is monopolized by a greedy overseer; thugs rule and rob the people in his name. The inhabitants of the novel's alley follow different leaders who, over the years, claim to have met or heard from Gabalawi and who lead them to reclaim their inheritance. These leaders evoke Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (a final, fourth leader represents modern science).

Yet even when the uprisings are successful and establish a new, more just regime, by the beginning of the next chapter everything is back to the way it was: the overseer, the thugs, the misery.

Mahfouz has described the novel as “metaphysical.” It moves through cycles of revelation and rebellion, collapse and oppression. “Why is forgetfulness the plague of our alley?” the narrator asks. And although the story has a mythical quality to it, its characters are human. The most important moments of their lives—their loves, griefs, and deaths—are etched in sharp relief. Of a man who is being led to his death by his enemies, Mahfouz writes: “A profound and absolute sadness seized him, eclipsing even his fears. It seemed to him the darkness would prevail over the earth.” Another man, who is deeply in love with his wife, approaches her on their wedding night. “She seemed stately, deeply in love with his wife, approaches her with a pearly light.”

Yet while Mahfouz's narrator observes people sharply and sees how weak they can be, his sympathy for them is not undercut by it—in fact, it has almost the opposite effect.

This clear-eyed but forgiving vision can be found, at times, in Mahfouz's columns as well. To a young woman angry about the hypocrisy and mediocrity she sees everywhere, Mahfouz writes: “Miss, I hope that you abandon some of your idealism—and not a small part of it. What I want, sir, is action and conduct, not the quotation of sublime verses which we do not act in accordance with.”

Yet these glimpses of his personality are relatively rare. Most of the time, Mahfouz is obvious, simplistic, even callous. Sometimes he betrays his own liberal and democratic principles. In a column about corruption, he writes: “Our protector and we obey you,” shouted a man from the middle of the demonstration, emblazoned by the size of the crowd and his location in it. “But what has Rifaa done?”

Rifaa is innocent, and woe to anyone who harms him!” shouted a third man, at the rear of the crowd, reassured that he was invisible to the gangster’s eyes.

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The book raised a question that continues to hang over Arab and Muslim countries: What is, and should be, the relationship between religion and politics? In Children of the Alley, religion is both a rallying cry against injustice and a cover for it. Mahfouz’s impurity consisted of showing how every faith—he doesn’t only discuss Islam—is used to mask and further earthly interests. The novel is also particularly good at capturing how a group of people can tap into cruelty, fear, anger, or bravery. For example, when a crowd impulsively intercedes between a gangster and the young man he is intent on beating, their courage is inversely proportional to their chance of being identified:

“Our protector, the crown on our head,” said a man in the front row of the crowd, “we have come only to ask your pardon for this good man.”

“You are our protector and we obey you,” shouted a man from the middle of the demonstration, emblazoned by the size of the crowd and his location in it. “But what has Rifaa done?”

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And another letter writer, taking him to task for calling for religious reform, Mahfouz writes: “What I want, sir, is action and conduct, not the quotation of sublime verses which we do not act in accordance with.”

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This clear-eyed but forgiving vision can be found, at times, in Mahfouz's columns as well. To a young woman angry about the hypocrisy and mediocrity she sees everywhere, Mahfouz writes: “Miss, I hope that you abandon some of your idealism—and not a small part of it. The society which you look down upon is one that has suffered much from iniquity, war, poverty, and crises. Do not expect it to be a pretty picture of cleanliness, elegance, and good health. Know that the best of people—along with the rest—are made up of fierce impulses and that they contain a dreadful measure of selfishness, vanity, and greed.”

And another letter writer, taking him to task for calling for religious reform, Mahfouz writes: “What I want, sir, is action and conduct, not the quotation of sublime verses which we do not act in accordance with.”

Yet these glimpses of his personality are relatively rare. Most of the time, Mahfouz is obvious, simplistic, even callous. Sometimes he betrays his own liberal and democratic principles. In a column about corruption, he writes: “Our protector and we obey you,” shouted a man from the middle of the demonstration, emblazoned by the size of the crowd and his location in it. “But what has Rifaa done?”

Rifaa is innocent, and woe to anyone who harms him!” shouted a third man, at the rear of the crowd, reassured that he was invisible to the gangster’s eyes.

Yet while Mahfouz’s narrator observes people sharply and sees how weak they can be, his sympathy for them is not undercut by it—in fact, it has almost the opposite effect.
Mahfouz wrote more openly about the shortcomings of the previous regime. His 1974 novel *Karnak Café* was inspired by Mahfouz’s own experience of being spied on in cafés. “We were all living in an era of unseen powers—spies hovering in the very air we breathed, shadows in broad daylight,” says its narrator. The students in the novel who meet in its titular café have no subversive intent but are nonetheless imprisoned, tortured, and forced to inform on one another; they are children of the 1952 revolution, whose faith in it has been betrayed and broken. By the time one character emerges from his third stint in prison, only to learn of the Arab countries’ shattering loss to Israel, he is convinced that “we had been living through the biggest lie in our entire lives.”

Mahfouz, like all Egyptians, was deeply shocked by the unexpected outcome of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. But he came to argue that if Egypt did not have the capacity to beat Israel militarily, it should pursue a political settlement. He supported Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem and the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, in what was Sadat’s time in power was one of the most volatile eras in Egyptian history. There was great opposition to his peace treaty with Israel as well as to the liberalization of the economy and the unbridled corruption that followed. But one would hardly know any of this from Mahfouz’s columns. When Mahfouz did paint a scathing portrait of the Sadat era, it was again in a novel, *The Day the Leader Was Killed*, which he published after Sadat’s assassination in 1981. By contrast, the piece he wrote for the newspaper six days after Sadat died, “Eras and Leaders,” is bizarrely detached. He describes the achievements of Nasser, Sadat, and the new president, Hosni Mubarak, in terms suitable for a school textbook and suggests that each had stepped forward to lead Egypt at the moment he was most needed, including Mubarak, who would now conveniently usher in “an ethical revolution to inspire new hope.”

The column is the performance of a court scribe making the best he can of the new ruler. Mahfouz may have been self-interested, but he was also somewhat sincere. As was true of the vast majority of Egyptian intellectuals, Mahfouz’s nationalism meant that no matter how disillusioned he was, he could never set himself against the state—that would have meant leaving the alley and wandering in the wilderness of the desert. In fact, he felt justified in offering criticism, when he did, because of his loyalty and his personal identification with Egypt’s interests.

During the Mubarak years, Mahfouz’s engagement with politics in his fiction became increasingly muted. The already elderly writer looked mostly to the past, or inward. “I was the first of our alley to make a career out of writing, though it has brought me much contempt and mockery,” the narrator of *Children of the Alley* tells us. “It was my job to write the petitions and complaints of the oppressed and needy…. I am privy to so many of the people’s secrets and sorrows that I have become a sad and brokenhearted man.” Mahfouz himself was far from gloomy, but he once told Al-Ghitani that as far back as Egyptians can remember, they had been disappointed.

Moments of hope—the revolutions of 1919 and 1952—were invariably followed by concessions, failures, and repression: “The moment we breathe we find there is someone crouching over us, snatching our breath and ruining our lives.” Yet he maintained that all his writing had been “a struggle against futility”—a struggle that he never gave up.
The conventions that ground so much of contemporary fiction—setting, psychological depth, emotional grounding—don’t pertain to the work of Ottessa Moshfegh. Though her protagonists tend to be profoundly alienated, she seems uninterested in unspooling the reasons for their alienation. The specific cause of a character’s disaffection doesn’t matter, because Moshfegh is more interested in the compulsive obsessions that estrangement engenders. Upon seeing a photograph of a corpse, the eponymous protagonist of Moshfegh’s 2015 novel *Eileen* becomes convinced that “another kind of life lay behind the blank expression captured in that photo.” Eileen is willing to commit outlandishly cruel acts to learn whether what lies behind that death mask will lift her out of an intolerable life. In “Mr. Wu,” a story from Moshfegh’s 2017 collection *Homesick for Another World*, the narrative rises to a climax that is simultaneously ludicrous, unsettling, and affecting. Mr. Wu—who is comically averse to direct human contact—inserts a finger into a prostitute’s ass. Moshfegh’s prose invests the act with the power of a religious revelation: “He took his fingers out of her behind and put them in his mouth. He could not believe what joy he’d brought himself. His eyes filled with tears.”

Moshfegh’s talent is her ability to convey the foreboding and claustrophobic atmosphere that obsession creates: what it feels like to be irrationally fixated, to long for something that might lift you out of the quotidian. She thrusts readers into the deranged emotional and psychological rhythms of the zealous, the possessed, and the fanatical. Her stories are darkly funny glimpses into madness, and in that sense they resemble the gothic tales of Edgar Allen Poe or Charlotte Perkins Gilman. As with Gilman’s classic story “The Yellow

**SLEEPWALKING**

Ottessa Moshfegh’s contemporary gothic

by ISMAIL MUHAMMAD

Ismail Muhammad is a writer based in Oakland. His work has appeared in Slate and Bookforum.

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

By Ottessa Moshfegh

Penguin Press. 304 pp. $26

Moshfegh’s talent is her ability to convey the foreboding and claustrophobic atmosphere that obsession creates: what it feels like to be irrationally fixated, to long for something that might lift you out of the quotidian. She thrusts readers into the deranged emotional and psychological rhythms of the zealous, the possessed, and the fanatical. Her stories are darkly funny glimpses into madness, and in that sense they resemble the gothic tales of Edgar Allen Poe or Charlotte Perkins Gilman. As with Gilman’s classic story “The Yellow Sleepwalking.”
Wallpaper,” Moshfegh’s stories approach derangement as an opportunity to explore society’s effect on the individual mind. As in Gilman’s tale, the mad truths that Moshfegh’s characters seek become convincing through the sheer force of their lucidity; even a character’s most insane convictions are compelling, if not sensible.

The same lunatic lucidity animates Moshfegh’s latest novel, My Year of Rest and Relaxation. Set in a pre-9/11 New York City awash in wealth and privilege, it’s a caustically funny tale of a trust-fund baby’s attempt to escape family trauma. Along the way, we get send-ups of the art world, misogyny, American historical amnesia, contemporary culture’s vacuity, and the dubious advantages of the wealthy. While we laugh at our protagonist’s search for absolution from her past via drug-induced sleep, we get a prehistory to the overstimulated trance into which the United States is interminably stumbling. But with Moshfegh’s attention trained on history, culture, and gender, her trademarks—a willingness to linger in the minds of misanthropes, her relentless black humor, and her preoccupation with the human body’s grossest qualities—start to seem more facile than fierce, modes that are ill suited to tackling such weighty matters.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation’s narrator is an unnamed, disgruntled Columbia graduate, a patrician disenchanted by privilege’s spoils. The substantial inheritance, the luxury apartment, the posh wardrobe, the Ivy League education—none of it brings her pleasure. She’s blond, skinny, fashionable, and very attractive—a friend repeatedly compares her to Kate Moss—but she moves through pre-9/11 Manhattan like a double agent, her appearance disguising her simmering disgust with the world she’s inherited. She knows how to use this beauty to her advantage, but in the end she feels that her attractiveness is a trap that imprisons her in a culture she detests. “Since adolescence,” she confesses, “I’d vacillated between wanting to look like the spoiled WASP that I was and the bum that I felt I was and should have been if I’d had any courage.”

When the novel opens, the narrator is convinced that “hibernation” will cure all of her ills. With the help of a criminally negligent doctor, she amasses a store of psychotropic drugs that she mixes with lazy abandon. There’s no specific trauma she’s running away from, just a diffuse sadness, a hatred of the world and everything in it. “Initially,” she observes, “I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything.” Rather than engage with her thoughts and feelings, she will smother them out of existence. Soon, she’s spending half her days asleep, waking up only to go to a local bodega and to watch VHS tapes. (She favors the films of Whoopi Goldberg.)

Placed in her position, many of us would hate everything too. The narrator’s life is abhorrent: She works at a gallery that pays her a pittance and peddles art that she considers “canned counterculture crap,” pieces that wear their politics like chic Opening Ceremony outfits. Ping Xi, the gallery’s star, sticks paint pellets into his penis and ejaculates onto canvases to create works with agitprop titles like Decapitated Palestinian Child. “[N]othing to inspire more than a trip around the corner to buy an unflattering outfit from Comme des Garçons,” our antiheroine concludes.

Thanks to her parents, now dead, the narrator has an inheritance; unlike many of her peers, if she doesn’t like a job, she can just quit it to pursue more hibernation. Before her tendency to sleep on the job gets her fired, in a typical Moshfegh flourish, she defecates on the gallery’s pristine white floors by way of resignation. Eileen and Mr. Wu would approve.

What has caused this privileged young woman so much despair? As the novel progresses, we learn that her parents practiced a policy of benign neglect: Her father was a dispassionate and feckless academic, her mother a self-absorbed addict. They were ashamed of their own senile inadequacies, afraid of their own dicks, afraid of themselves.

Scanning a newspaper during a run to the bodega, the narrator lets the headlines do the work of satirizing the mind-numbing inanity and depravity of the world: “The new president was going to be hard on terrorists. A Harlem teenager had thrown her newborn baby down a sewage drain. A mine caved somewhere in South America. A local councilman was caught having gay sex with an illegal immigrant. Someone who used to be fat was now exonerated. . . .” In moments like these, the narrator’s punch lines can seem like a howl against an America sleepwalking through history, ignorant of the forces gathering at its edges.

However, as hilarious and cutting as the protagonist is, her howl can sometimes sound a bit feeble. As the novel progresses, one gets the sense that for all her bluster, she might be the target of Moshfegh’s own scorn, an unwitting participant in her own roasting. Her insistence on turning “everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff [one]
could bat away” exemplifies her vacuity, but maybe that’s the point. The narrator’s hibernation is not just an escape from her present, but also from ours: It parodies our country’s own dormancy at the turn of the 21st century, before the War on Terror and the 2008 financial crash jolted us into consciousness. Moshfegh’s protagonist doesn’t want to rest; she wants to float off into the impossible bliss of “good strong American sleep.” Her withdrawal isn’t a quest for moral or intellectual clarity, but an ego-maniacal descent into a rapturously state of ignorance—even about herself.

By the time we reach the middle of the novel, it becomes clear that Moshfegh has deposited us into the insipid mind of America’s landed gentry. In one revealing moment, the protagonist stumbles home from the bodega, hoping that her life will be transformed by the superficial politics of Ping Xi’s art: Its critique feels more than perfunctory. The result is a bizarre fever dream in which the narrator’s narrator romanticizes the horror: “There is no need to sleep.” It’s an absurd peek into the nightmare that also entraps the reader.

Whatever insight into the narrator’s mind we get to that oppression, what’s at stake in the superficial politics of Ping Xi’s art: Its critique feel draped over the narrative like so much couture.

The novel’s suffocating narrative voice blunts the effect of Moshfegh’s gothic sensibility. The protagonist’s fixation is not only insane but also tedious, and the resulting atmosphere feels oppressive. It’s not clear why we should subject ourselves to that oppression, what’s at stake in the novel’s project, or why we should invest in it. It also doesn’t help that, while My Year of Rest and Relaxation does suggest that the narrator’s frostiness stems from a traumatic relationship with her parents, that relationship (like all the others in the novel) never feels more than perfunctory. The result is a protagonist who isn’t a character so much as a voice—a self-satisfied, grating one at that.

There are glimmers of a more interesting novel in My Year of Rest and Relaxation. Sometimes, as when the narrator reminisces about her father, an elegant quality emerges from the novel’s narcoleptic deadpan. “He was fairly nondescript—thinning brown hair, loosening jowls, a single wrinkle of worry etched deep into his brow,” she recalls. “That wrinkle made him look perpetually perplexed, yet passive, like a man trapped behind his own eyes.”

In these moments, the narrator reveals herself to be an aesthete struggling against her misanthropic tendencies, and Moshfegh’s more lyrical strain comes to the fore. Despite the author’s penchant for stomach-churning imagery, a desire for beauty operates at the novel’s lower frequencies. While drifting off to sleep on New Year’s Eve, the narrator feels herself “float up and away, higher and higher into the ether until my body was just an anecdote, a symbol, a portrait hanging in another world.”

This compulsion toward turning herself into art informs the book’s denouement, and one understands why our heroine would want such a thing, given her family history. In one appropriately gothic image, she imagines her mother “lying in a coffin, a shriveled skeleton,” still “up to something down there, bitter and suffering as the flesh on her body withered and sank away from her bones.” Viewed in this light, the hope to turn the body from an ugly, decaying thing—subject to all of the trauma and emotional pain to which a body is vulnerable—into a work of art becomes a heartbreaking gesture. One wishes that Moshfegh had decided to home in on that heartbreak rather than allow her protagonist’s misanthropy to run wild.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation ends with a bizarre fever dream in which the narrator’s wildest yearnings materialize—alongside the devastation of 9/11, which she views through the lens of her supposed rejuvenation. It’s an effective demonstration of our protagonist’s vapidity. Watching a woman leap to her death from the Twin Towers, the narrator romanticizes the horror: “There she is,” she rhapsodizes idiotically, “a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake.” It’s an absurd peek into the narrator’s deranged mind. Yet by giving her narrator’s myopic vision pride of place, Moshfegh extends that myopia and deprives readers of an outside vantage point, without which the irony is extinguished. The result is a novel that’s better at emulating, rather than skewering, its target.
New York City’s infamous explosion of misdemeanor arrests over the past 20 years can be traced back to a single eight-page document: “Police Strategy No. 5.” Developed in the summer of 1994 by then–Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, the strategy outlined how the theory of “broken windows” policing should be implemented in the city to “reclaim” its public spaces.

“New Yorkers have for years felt that the quality of life in their city has been in decline,” the document warned. The solution? “By working systematically and assertively to reduce the level of disorder in the city, the [New York Police Department] will act to undercut the ground on which more serious crimes seem possible and even permissible.” The idea, which was first proposed by social scientists George Kelling and James Wilson a decade earlier, was basically that “if you take care of the little things, then you can prevent a lot of the big things,” as Bratton summarized it when Mayor Bill de Blasio reappointed him to helm the NYPD in 2014.

Fixing the little things before they become big things may sound like common sense, but what Bratton’s program meant in practice was a sharp rise in misdemeanor arrests—from 65,000 in 1980 to a high of 251,000 in 2010—the majority of which have been for marijuana possession and other minor offenses like jumping a subway turnstile or selling water on the street without a license. Despite Bratton’s assertion that broken-windows policing would help reclaim the city, very little evidence suggests that it actually worked or had anything to do with the drop in New York’s violent-crime rate, which was part of a nationwide trend that began in 1991.

Even more troubling is what it clearly has done, which has been to target minority communities overwhelmingly. Perhaps the most emblematic example in recent memory of the racist consequences of such a policy occurred in 2014, when a black man named Eric Garner was killed in a choke hold by police after they approached him on suspicion he was selling loose cigarettes on the street. Garner’s death renewed calls to end the insidious practice of sweeping people up for low-level offenses.

While there has been much attention paid to the overt ways that our criminal-justice system has affected poor communities of color—both on the front end (policing) and on the back end (mass incarceration)—less attention has been directed toward what happens in the middle, when people are funneled through a confusing, bureaucratic court system that is designed to address minor crimes.

Issa Kohler-Hausmann, a professor of sociology and law, helps bring this middle zone into focus in her new book, *Misdemeanorland: Criminal Courts and Social Control in an Age of Broken Windows Policing*. As she compellingly demonstrates, just as the police and prisons play a central role in broken-windows policing, so, too, do the courts. “After a person is arrested as part of New York City’s famed Broken Windows enforcement, that person has to go somewhere,” Kohler-Hausmann writes. “And where that person goes is misdemeanorland.”

The picture of this “jurisdictional and physical space” that Kohler-Hausmann paints is as abhorrent as it is mundane. The churning of hundreds of thousands of mostly black and brown New Yorkers through the courts has created a system of
One of the most striking things that Kohler-Hausmann points out: While misdemeanor arrests rose nearly fourfold between 1980 and 2010, very few of those arrested were actually convicted of any crime. In fact, someone arrested for a misdemeanor in the era of broken-windows policing has been less likely to be convicted than someone arrested for a misdemeanor in the decade prior to its implementation. And less than 1 percent of misdemeanor cases go to trial. All of which raises the question: If fewer people are being formally punished in “misdemeanorland,” then what’s happening to them instead?

Kohler-Hausmann argues that these people are facing what she terms “managerial justice,” or a system that tracks and regulates them in order to determine whether or not they can act as “responsible” citizens—that is, whether they can comply with the various tasks that the courts set out for them. Much of this is born of necessity, with prosecutors who primarily handle misdemeanors dealing with hundreds of cases at a time. And less than 1 percent of misdemeanor cases go to trial. All of which raises the question: If fewer people are being formally punished in “misdemeanorland,” then what’s happening to them instead?

Kohler-Hausmann’s two other tenets of the managerial-justice model—“procedural hassle” and “performance”—then come into play. Depending on how defendants get past the various hurdles of the court system and how they perform when it comes to things like showing up for summonses and completing community service, they may be further marked and monitored. This, in turn, affects how they will be managed through the system and whether judges will treat them more harshly or leniently in the future.

One example of this process can be seen in a case which Kohler-Hausmann discusses in her book. When two women were arrested for assaulting each other, both asked for a mutual dismissal of the charges. Yet the assistant district attorney in charge of the case refused to drop it, even though everyone knew that it would eventually be dismissed, since neither woman would cooperate in prosecuting the other. One of the defense attorneys involved in the case asked, “You schlep them back here for three months of court appearances and then you dismiss it? What’s the point of that? Just to schlep them back here for months of court appearances?” To which the assistant district attorney replied: “Yup, that’s the point.”

Broken-windows policing may have been a purposeful political construction, a deliberate effort by police commissioners like Bratton to impose a zero-tolerance policy on communities of color. The managerial-justice model outlined by Kohler-Hausmann,
on the other hand, developed as courts worked to adapt to the huge influx of cases they suddenly had to deal with. On its face, this system is certainly preferable to one in which a commensurate number of people end up with convictions and permanent criminal records. But as Kohler-Hausmann points out, while what the courts are doing might represent a “just approach to low-level rule breaking in the abstract,” this doesn’t mean the system is “just in practice.” Given that racist police strategies have moved a disproportionate number of black and brown people through the courts, even the most impartial system will only replicate racism down the chain. In addition, the very fact that there is an imperative for prosecutors and judges to “do something” rests on the assumption that the people arrested for misdemeanors deserve to be controlled in some way.

Kohler-Hausmann is both a lawyer and an academic, and thus much of her book is wonky. The average reader can easily get bogged down in the whirlwind of ACDs, arraignments, dispositions, 30.30s, and other legal jargon. But part of experiencing misdemeanorland as an arrestee is to be faced with this jargon day in and day out, with few resources to draw on to better interpret what it means. In her interviews with people who have had to navigate this world, Kohler-Hausmann captures just how terrifying and complicated the legal system can be for those caught up in it.

The inherent degradation of misdemeanorland seeps into nearly every aspect of its apparatus. First, there’s the arrest. Jannelle, a young black college student, recounts how she was forcibly pulled off a bus after she didn’t pay the fare (she had just transferred from another bus and was rushing to get on). “They pushing me up against the bank and putting me on this wall, and if you don’t shut up we’re going to throw you on the floor. All of that for $2.25.”

Then there’s the experience of those who are driven to the police station. Destiny, who was arrested for sex work, recounts being detained in a police van for hours with five or six other women while the plainclothes officers drove around and made other arrests. “You don’t know if you’re being kidnapped or if these guys are in fact the law,” she tells Kohler-Hausmann.

Next is the precinct holding cell, where defendants wait anywhere from three to 10 hours for their paperwork to be processed; then they are forced to wait again in holding cells in the arraignment courtroom. Many of the people who spoke to Kohler-Hausmann described standing for hours in their cell because it was too filthy to sit down in. The only food provided was a plastic-wrapped cheese sandwich. And when defendants finally reach the courtroom, they are treated as second-class citizens. Kohler-Hausmann lists the restrictions put on defendants: “No cell phone use, including Internet use or texting. No talking. No standing. No sitting in the front row. No loud children. Some courtrooms impose a no reading requirement, or no reading of newspapers.” Attorneys and court officers, of course, can do all of these things.

There are also the hurdles purposely set out for defendants, which might seem relatively simple on their face—such as showing up to court or attending a weekly program—but which can end up being extremely burdensome for many New Yorkers. Finding someone to take care of your child or being able to miss a day of work just to be in court is no small thing, especially if you’re living paycheck to paycheck. The inability to pay court fees can also destroy your credit. For some misdemeanor arrests, your driver’s license can be suspended, severing a lifeline for anyone who depends on being able to drive to work. And an open police record—even it’s just for a few months—can mean losing out on a job or an apartment.

All of this raises bigger questions: Why should the system be set up so that people arrested for a misdemeanor, even though they never go to trial, are held accountable to prosecutors and judges and required to demonstrate that they are good citizens? Why should policing that targets the poor be the centerpiece of a broken-windows program, instead of policies that might fix those windows and help address the very conditions in which these low-level crimes occur? Even the hurdles that people are asked to jump over are specifically difficult because of the compounding variables of race and class.

These questions end Kohler-Hausmann’s book. “It seems that we, as a political community, are comfortable relying on the instrumentalities of criminal law as the primary social control mechanisms in urban spaces of concentrated poverty and insecurity,” she writes in her final paragraph. But she doesn’t quite reach the point of offering any answers. We have set up a system in which people who have committed misdemeanors must answer for their smallest moral transgressions, while our society’s biggest problems continue to go unaddressed by policy-makers, even though doing so could actually ameliorate the root issues that cause people to commit (and be arrested for) small crimes. Parallel to a critique of misdemeanorland, we also need the promulgation of policies that prevent people from ending up there—and that means not just rolling back broken-windows policing but also the criminalization of poverty itself.

It might be easy to write off many of these individual indignities—not being able to talk on your phone in court, waiting for a day in a holding cell—as small matters that could be individually fixed. But Misdemeanorland demonstrates the need to think more structurally about what has gone wrong in American criminal justice, in which “not only policing and imprisonment but also the courts play a role in upholding an oppressive system.” The injustices detailed in Kohler-Hausmann’s book stem from the political and moral decisions outlined in “Police Strategy No. 5” more than two decades ago. To overturn it, there will need to be a similar rethinking of our political and moral priorities—and much of that work is beginning to happen. The question, in the end, is not how courts should respond to a flood of misdemeanors; it’s whether misdemeanorland should be allowed to exist at all.
Puzzle No. 3481

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

8 Corporate practice I’d reflected about has an exciting quality (10)
9 A biblical brother nearly produces a faddish fruit (4)
10 Fur is, um, not yours (6)
11 Spice is crime-free after reversing habit (8)
12 Madly in love with contrarian view of T.S. Eliot, for instance (8)
15 Young woman conceals diamonds with a piece of expensive underwear (6)
16 Predicament of the author on Social Security (4)
18 Cow’s daughter (a female relative) (5)
19 Game played with balls and a body of water (4)
21 Makes a confession amidst maneuvers (6)
23 Beach city in South America entrusting orange to Jamaican, perhaps (8)
25 Apostate almost torn to pieces by Jove and Neptune, ultimately (8)

27 The latest information involving Asner recalled the item that completes a set together with a 1 found elsewhere in the grid (6)
28 Guarded finishers in break before jump shot (4)
29 Pinter skipping premiere after running to look at baby (3-4-3)

DOWN

1 The Beatles, for example, singing “Don’t Give ’Em a Choice” (8)
2 Urge is visible, audible (6)
3 Family brought up head of Egyptian goddess (4)
4 Fuzz from Michigan city taking the lead out (4)
5 A reptile ate actor Kinnear in summer? (10)
6 Casually mention famous acquaintances planting a drug in retro erotica (4-4)
7 Ellsberg nailed criminal with incoherent denial (6)
13 Astonishingly, find savior is not popular (2,8)
14 Support hiding in Soviet Russia (5)
16 Honestly moving around below the radar (2,3,3)
19 Tils toe uncomfortably! (8)
20 Casually mention famous acquaintances planting a drug in retro erotica (4-4)
26 Before removing both sides of artist’s hat (3)
27 Worry: start of tornadoes in three directions (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3480

ACROSS 1 AS + PI + RATIONAL 9 “I sup”
10 GA + THE RING 11 ang + 12 SCGUM
14 WS + EST 15 INCOM[e] + MON[y]
17 O + VERSE + W + 19 U + TOPA (anag.) 22 (g)EACH 23 ang.
26 FOR/TUNA/TIE 27 “peace”
28 PRE + POST + ERO/US

DOWN 1 AGILE 2 P + LEASES
3 letter bank 4 ang. 5 phonetic hidden
6 A HEM 7 ST + COM 8 EGOMANIA
13 BOX + TPEOPLE (anag.)
14 WRIOTE/OFF (two rev)
16 1 LOWSHPAR 10 ang.
20 PLACE + BO 21 ang.
24 EP + EES (rev.) 25 MUDIR (rev.)
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