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THE OUTSIDER’S INSIDER

PRAMILA JAYAPAL

is a lifelong organizer. What will she do now that she’s one of the key players in Congress?

JOAN WALSH
Military-Industrial Complexity

In his fine editorial comment “Democratizing Foreign Policy” [Jan. 14/21], Evan Hill has daringly suggested that informed progressive public opinion might have a significant role to play in shifting the focus of US policy away from one of “endless, costly, worldwide conflict.” Unmentioned, though, in this tidy description of the possibility of actual peacemaking by our government is any discussion of the elephant in the room: the immense leverage of the Department of Defense and associated lobbyists in maintaining the perpetual war economy for the sake of their own power and existence.

It seems obvious that any realistic discussion of reaching for the tantalizing lure of a world at peace would need to include conversations about how to deal with the elephant. So let’s talk about it!

Carl Thatcher
Portland, Ore.

Worth 1,000 Words

I have enjoyed Tim Robinson’s collages in the Books and the Arts section for so long that I feel I ought to write in their praise. As well as being visually arresting, these collages also seem to be in illuminating dialogue with the reviews they accompany. I have gotten into the habit of scrutinizing them not only before I read the review, to get a kind of insight into what to look for, but also afterward, to see what I missed. I hope we’ll be seeing Robinson’s work in The Nation for a long time to come.

Paul Scott Stanfield
Lincoln, Neb.

Parsing the New NAFTA

Re Lori Wallach’s “The Battle Over NAFTA 2.0 Has Just Begun” [Jan. 14/21]: This is a clear and thorough explication of what is at stake in NAFTA 2.0, the best I’ve seen anywhere. Wallach should be congratulated for clearing up so many of the foggy, politicized issues and outlining a concrete program for dealing with them. I hope the progressives in the Democratic Party will take good note of this.

Dwight Peck

Greenspan’s Historical Amnesia

Thanks to Kim Phillips-Fein for her critical review of Alan Greenspan and Adrian Wooldridge’s recent book, Capitalism in America [Jan. 7]. However, she leaves out Greenspan’s most ironic historical error. If Greenspan loves James J. Hill and the other railroad robber barons for their independent, entrepreneurial spirit, he simply does not know economic history. The railroads received massive subsidies in the form of land and bond guarantees, and even with those government-granted advantages, most never made any real money. Had the federal government stayed out of the 19th-century market, those Randian “captains of industry” would either have lost their shirts or never have built a mile of line.

Terence Thatcher
Portland, Ore.

Thank you, Kim Phillips-Fein, for reading Greenspan’s self-congratulatory garbage. Her critique, in the first half of the essay, so nicely captures the phrases and structure of his and Wooldridge’s own vision that I grew queasy and grumpy just reading it (even though I knew she wasn’t advocating that vision). The second half is a finely shot arrow piercing the ballooned egoism of the authors and bringing them back to earth. Again, thank you for sparing me the agony of slogging through this mire myself!

Robert Borneman

Comments drawn from our website
letters@thenation.com
As the second anniversary of Donald Trump’s inauguration approached, this is what happened over the course of just one 72-hour period: The damage done by the longest government shutdown in the history of the republic deepened, as 800,000 federal workers went without pay, with many lining up at soup kitchens or registering their children for free or low-cost school meals; the new speaker of the House proposed delaying the State of the Union address until the crisis that Trump said he was proud to provoke could be resolved; the president responded not by negotiating, but by effectively canceling a visit to US troops in Afghanistan by the speaker and members of Congress; Trump’s nominee for attorney general said he couldn’t rule out jailing reporters for doing their jobs; senators raced to enact bipartisan legislation to prevent Trump from unilaterally pulling the United States out of NATO; Trump’s current lawyer abandoned 18 months of claims that there was “no collusion” between his client’s 2016 campaign and the Russians, unleashing a new wave of what Politico referred to as “Team Trump infighting”; and the president’s former lawyer acknowledged that “at the direction of and for the sole benefit of @realDonaldTrump,” he had conspired to rig online poll numbers in Trump’s favor.

The first two years of Trump’s tenure in the White House have upended all the norms of American politics and governing, creating not only chaos but a sense of foreboding about the stability of the country. Beyond the arbitrary “halfway point” measure of the nightmare that is this particular presidency, however, is the reality of what Trump has revealed to us. Ever since he stepped onto the presidential stage in 2015, as an unlikely and unprepared contender for the Republican nomination, Trump has been confirming the deep vulnerabilities of the American experiment as it is currently constructed. He has outed the Republican Party as an unprincipled cabal that craves power at any cost. He has proved that our diminished media system, in which civic and democratic values have been replaced by the pursuit of clicks and ratings, is more easily manipulated by charlatans than the free press ever has been since the founders recognized it as a vital underpinning of popular government. He has reminded us that the Electoral College—which in 2016 handed the presidency to the loser of the popular vote for the second time in two decades—thwarts rather than confirms the will of the people. He has shown us that, in an age of hyper-partisanship reinforced by gerrymandering and the influence of money in politics, our system of checks and balances can fail to function when one party controls the executive and legislative branches. He has confirmed that we have an imperial presidency that can make a mockery of cabinet governance, pack the courts with ideological automatons, undermine the rule of law, obstruct justice, and skirt accountability for extended periods of time.

It may be that Trump’s accountability moment will come this year, when special counsel Robert Mueller’s report is completed, or with further revelations that the president has engaged in actions echoing those that led to articles of impeachment against Richard Nixon. But if it doesn’t come this year, it must come at the close of the 2020 election season, which needs to address not just the man but the crisis he has precipitated.

Trump’s presidency reminds us that, for too long, this country has relied on the false promise of a “gentleman’s agreement” to maintain some semblance of civil society. We were told that our debates would invariably involve reasonable men and women from the two major parties, who accepted and respected certain standards—not least an oath of office that was supposed to bind them to support and defend the Constitution. Trump and his Republican allies have not merely abandoned these commitments; they have exploited every opening to take advantage of the power that ill-defined processes and porous systems
allow them to accumulate. The situation they have created exposes just how vulnerable we have always been as Americans, and it points to structural flaws that cannot go unaddressed any longer.

The Republicans may be dragged, kicking and screaming, to the point where they reject Trump. But they cannot be counted on to address the vulnerabilities that have made Trump possible. The question of whether the Democrats who are now preparing their presidential bids are ready to propose democracy-enhancing reforms—how Congress operates, how our elections are organized and financed, how our system of checks and balances works—has yet to be answered. The response to this political crisis cannot be left to chance, however. Citizens must give no quarter in demanding ironclad proposals for a reconstruction of our politics and our governance that truly ends the Trump era. No halfway measures will suffice, and no cautious contenders need apply.

JOHN NICHOLS

The Brexit Crack-Up
Nobody has the faintest idea what happens next.

Prime Minister Theresa May’s Brexit deal has been defeated in Parliament by a devastating majority of 230; Labour’s vote of no confidence in the government has predictably failed; and the Brexit project has run aground on its own contradictions, leaving the country hurtling without a plan toward March 29—at which point, deal or no deal, Britain will leave the European Union unless an extension is requested and granted. May’s Plan B merely offers tweaks to appease the right wing of her own party, as well as vague promises regarding workers’ rights and the environment to entice Labour. For its part, the Labour Party has proposed an amendment that would give Parliament a vote on whether to negotiate a much softer Brexit with a permanent customs union, as well as a vote on whether to hold a second referendum “on a deal or a proposition that has commanded the support” of the House of Commons.

Neither May’s nor Labour’s plan is likely to be passed. Nobody has the faintest idea what happens next, and nobody has come up with a convincing narrative that might start to heal the rifts. A recent poll showed more than 25 percent of men (but only 16 percent of women) in favor of a no-deal Brexit, despite countless warnings from trade unions, businesses, farmers, universities, the Bank of England, and the National Health Service that it would be catastrophic. No deal is the political equivalent of the yellow vests now spreading from the streets of France to London and Berlin: an empty signifier of anger and discontent worn by the populist right, but also by some ideologically purist sections of the left.

The referendum on Brexit was called by then—Prime Minister David Cameron to scotch right-wing Tory rebels, but the EU project divides both of Britain’s main parties. From the start, Labour radicals saw it as a rich man’s club enforcing free-market capitalism; Labour reformers welcomed, among other things, the rights that the EU enshrined and the checks it imposed on Britain’s recalcitrant bosses (though the Working Time Directive, which caps the length of the working week and mandates paid vacations, was challenged by Tony Blair’s government in the European Court of Justice in 1998). It was Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson who held the first stay-or-go referendum, in 1975, to keep his split party together; unlike David Cameron, he read the runes right and won.

Forty years later, the European Union is more powerful and pervasive, but not more democratic. Its destruction of countless lives in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal in the name of fiscal discipline is unforgivable. It has fostered rather than contained the rise of the far right, while failing to meet even its legal obligations to the refugees at its gates. Authority trumps cooperation and solidarity. But the debate (such as it was) before the Brexit referendum was not about those things. It was mostly about the principle enshrined in the single market: that if capital can move freely, labor must have the same right.

The Leave campaign—a torrent of lies and online propaganda funded by friends of Trump, twice ruled in breach of campaign-spending laws—weaponized England’s xenophobic, postimperial malaise in order to blame “free movement” for all the ills that globalization, deregulation, austerity, and regional neglect have visited on the country’s citizens: hollowed-out towns with boarded-up shops and homeless people in the doorways; failing schools and hospitals; no work and nothing to do. The story will be familiar to Americans.

For the hard-right Brexiteers of the secretive European Research Group (and those hoping to ride their coattails to the heart of power), Brexit is the wedge that will open the door to unfettered privatization, the weakening of government, and the final destruction of the postwar welfare state. Along with the Ulster Unionists who prop up May’s minority government, these are the people dictating her “red lines,” blocking the chance of a deal to which Parliament might agree, and holding the country hostage. Barring a general election—off the table for now—and a Labour victory, any Brexit we get will lead us right, not left: Welcome to tax-haven Britain.

Why, then, has the Labour Party, with its vaunted commitment to democracy, listened so late and so half-heartedly to the majority of its members who support the call for a People’s Vote, along with the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Nationalists? While most Labour members voted Remain—especially the young, who joined in droves to support Jeremy Corbyn—the party’s northern heartlands leaned Leave. In the end, it’s the voters, not the members, who pay the piper and call the tune.

Just like May’s Plan B, Corbyn’s amendment is care-
Q&A

ROBIN MARTY

Forty-six years after the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion nationwide, Robin Marty, a writer and reproductive-rights activist, has published a book helping readers plan for its demise. *Handbook for a Post-Roe America* emerged from a Twitter thread that Marty wrote after the retirement of Justice Anthony Kennedy, who was long seen as the fifth vote on the Court protecting *Roe*. Now that Trump appointee Brett Kavanaugh has replaced Kennedy, *Roe* is more vulnerable than ever. If—or, as Marty argues, when—the Court overturns the ruling, some 22 states will almost instantly criminalize abortion, forcing countless pregnant women to travel hundreds of miles to receive care or face prosecution in their home state.

—Glyn Peterson

**GP:** Now that the Supreme Court no longer has the votes to uphold *Roe*, which bans and restrictions are you watching closely?

**RM:** There are a number of D&E [dilation and evacuation] bans. D&E is the way that abortions are done, usually after the first trimester, and the anti-abortion movement has proposed that the process is cruel to the fetus. We’ve already had a federal court say that this ban is not constitutional, but there’s a very strong possibility that the Fifth Circuit will say that it is, in which case we have conflicting cases that will go up to the Supreme Court for review.

Another likely way that abortion will get limited is that the Supreme Court will essentially decide to ignore anti-abortion laws that are unconstitutional, allowing them to go into effect in their states. By doing that, the Court could almost completely outlaw abortion without actually having to directly overturn *Roe*.

**GP:** What do you recommend for women in states where abortion will likely be further restricted?

**RM:** If you are a person who’s capable of becoming pregnant, you should blueprint what you would need to do in a worst-case scenario. It’s not that different from coming up with a plan for an earthquake. If you can, put aside money, because an abortion is a pretty expensive procedure. It’s usually around $500, and if you add travel, it’s going to be more. You should figure out which state is nearest where you would be able to access care. It sounds ludicrous, but that’s the kind of future we have to plan for now.

**GP:** You write that after *Roe* is overturned and people see “the actual impact of no longer having legal abortion available, there is a strong possibility that voters and legislators will realize that total bans do far more harm than good.” What aspects of a total ban will be jarring enough to change minds?

**RM:** Once abortion is illegal, all miscarriages are going to be suspect. We’re going to see a lot more instances where people find themselves facing jail over ending a pregnancy themselves—or accidentally ending a pregnancy. They are going to garner sympathy in the way that people did in the 1960s and ’70s.

**GP:** In your book, you refer to the Internet as a “double-edged sword,” in that it can be useful but can also make it easier to prosecute people.

**RM:** This should be made extremely clear. Getting information on abortion is legal. But if you send an e-mail to somebody saying, “Here are the World Health Organization protocols for ending a pregnancy with medication,” and that person ends up having a miscarriage, then you can start getting into trouble. If somebody investigates your e-mails, you could be found to be an accessory, depending on what sort of laws have been passed. A person can make sure that they clear their browsers; that when they’re talking and texting, they’re doing it over encrypted programs like Signal and WhatsApp; and that when they’re making phone calls to clinics, they erase the call data. We’re all going to have to put our money where our mouths are.

**GP:** In this case, more than money.

**RM:** Yes, our money, our pills, our bodies, our legal freedom. That’s why [the book includes] a checklist of the things you need to think about before you do something that could put you in jail. You need to make sure that you take care of your family—and then you can put yourself on the line.

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Once abortion is illegal, all miscarriages are going to be suspect.
INEQUALITY

Make ’em Pay

In 2018, Portland, Oregon, made history by levying the world’s first tax penalty on companies that pay their CEOs more than 100 times their median wage. The city now imposes a 10 percent surtax on firms that surpass that level; the tax rises to 25 percent on firms with pay gaps exceeding 250 to 1.

Portland officials have shared the preliminary results for 2018. Out of 337 corporate returns processed, 153 companies had to pony up. Abercrombie & Fitch had the widest gap between the CEO and median worker pay, at 3,431 to 1.

The initiative has raised $2.4 million, with another $1 million so expected once the remaining returns are processed. The city plans to spend the money on affordable housing and other pressing local needs.

A few million might seem like small potatoes, but the potential is huge: Imagine if governments across the United States—the federal government included—applied the Portland model to their own corporate-tax systems.

At the Institute for Policy Studies, we analyzed the pay-ratio proposal by Representative Mark DeSaulnier (D-CA), which seeks to increase tax rates up to 3 percent on firms that pay their CEO more than 400 times the median wage. By these rules, S&P 500 companies alone would have to pay an estimated $8 billion per year in additional corporate taxes—unless, of course, they responded by narrowing their pay gaps. That, too, would be a welcome move, since it would start to minimize our dangerous concentrations of income, wealth, and power.

—Sarah Anderson and Sam Pizzigati
Institute for Policy Studies

Counting Backward

Let’s tally the damage of just the past six months.

It’s tough to keep up with the daily barrage of atrocities at our southern border. That’s on purpose. We’re not meant to absorb the details, as though we’re tracking some benign policy debate. We’re meant to experience the feeling of crisis, driven by a vaguely defined threat that requires extreme action by an unchecked power.

So let’s just pause, here at the midway point of Donald Trump’s administration, and tally a portion of the damage done, just over the past six months, in the name of the supposed crisis at our southern border.

At this writing, we are four weeks into the longest shutdown of the federal government in our history. Hundreds of thousands of civil servants and their families are facing life-altering ordeals as they go without a paycheck. Basic functions ranging from airport security to small-business lending have been upended. Trash and human waste are piling up inside our national parks, to say nothing of the potentially irreversible damage being done by poachers and others roaming unmonitored in protected lands. But that’s just the past few weeks.

In December, 8-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonso and 7-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquín died while in the custody of the US Border Patrol. (Imagine if we all repeated their names as often as we chant Donald Trump’s.) Their deaths revealed just how brutally our government greets migrants who come to us seeking the barest of help. Felipe had bounced between four holding facilities in six days. Migrants sleep on mats with foil Mylar blankets, in conditions that echo prison camps; some have called the holding facilities bieras (“iceboxes”). People arriving to these conditions, after completing dangerous, months-long journeys, receive only cursory health screenings.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen responded to the news that little kids are dying in this kind of custody by declaring, “Our system has been pushed to a breaking point by those who seek open borders.” Let this grotesquely cynical statement sink in. The unnecessary deaths of two children in American custody are being used as evidence of a border crisis—one that our government actually manufactured itself by making the process of claiming asylum impossibly difficult. Apparently, whatever depravity the Trump administration dreams up is itself proof of the need for more depravity. It’s enough to leave Kafka tongue-tied.

But that gets us only as far back as the holidays. The fall of 2018 was peppered with militaristic pageantry. Border Patrol agents rained tear gas down on hundreds of protesters in Tijuana after a group of frustrated migrants scaled the border fence from the Mexican side (which suggests the futility of a wall, but anyway...). Nearly 6,000 active-duty troops were forced to spend Thanksgiving camped out in the desert, part of a months-long deployment with no meaningful mission beyond creating B-roll for Fox News programming. The White House also made a show of authorizing the troops to use lethal force—presumably because, after blowing an estimated $483 million in various military deployments to the border this fiscal year, it’s hoping for better footage than a bunch of bored, homesick soldiers stringing concertina wire. A good crisis does demand strong images, after all; this administration learned at least that much from George W. Bush.

But still, we’re only as far back as late summer. In June, a federal judge ordered the administration to reunite the thousands of migrant families it had ripped apart—again, in the name of a supposed crisis at the border. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which took custody of the migrant children as the Department of Homeland Security prosecuted their parents and guardians, identified 2,737 kids—including infants and toddlers—who had been separated from their families.

That alarming number is actually a vast undercount, however. Homeland Security had been separating families for a full year before the court order came down, according to a new federal audit, meaning that “thousands” more kids were sent to HHS than previously reported. “The total number is unknown,” an official from the HHS inspector
Riding a bike has to be one of life’s most enjoyable activities. Too bad so many of us stop riding as we grow older or don’t ride as much once it becomes more difficult. Now you can enjoy a bike again, especially if you need a little help getting up those hills or an extra burst of energy on the last mile home. This power-assist electric bike enables you to choose between pedaling or letting the bike do it for you. It’s like you always have the wind at your back!

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fully framed to hold his own party together. While some Labour MPs are passionately for a second referendum, many are just as passionately against it; some front-benchers have threatened to quit if the party backs such a thing. Corbyn himself has been an ardent, if now closeted, left Brexiteer, arguing that the EU would block state aid to industry and a socialist economic recovery.

Experts on EU law have argued that only two of the 26 economic proposals in Labour’s last manifesto could fall afoul of EU regulations; besides, no Labour Remainer wants to keep the European Union unchanged. Meanwhile, the potential for harm from Brexit—to jobs, wages, rights, the environment, food supplies, health care, you name it—is immeasurable. Without that gravitational relationship to Europe, Britain becomes a tiny, distant moon of Trump’s America or Xi’s China. For all its flaws, the EU’s capitalist club is our only available forum for addressing the intractable issues facing us: climate catastrophe, right-wing populism, disenfranchisement, displacement. To ditch it rather than reform it is to buy into a right-or left-wing isolationist fantasy.

And yet, deal or no deal, that’s almost certainly what Britain is about to do—not because Brexit will reduce the suffering that led Labour supporters to vote for it, but because of a gamble by a weak Tory prime minister to hold his party together. The tragedy is that Labour, equally divided, failed to point out his sleight of hand, or to put forward the argument that the EU has little to do with the real issues facing the country, or to make an impassioned case for staying in and working with Europe’s socialist parties to change the status quo.

**COMIX NATION**

Maria Margaronis writes from The Nation’s London bureau.
Chicago Doctor Shakes Up Hearing Aid Industry

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The doctor knew that many of his patients would benefit but couldn’t afford the expense for these new hearing aids. Generally they are not covered by Medicare and most private health insurance plans.

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Beware of Vultures

The Gannett Company, owner of USA Today, the Detroit Free Press, and more than 100 other newspapers, is seeking to purchase Gizmodo Media Group, a network of sites that includes The Onion and former Gawker Media mainstays Deadspin and Jezebel. Over the decades, Gannett has earned a reputation for buying up media outlets, cutting their staffs, and liquidating some of their assets.

But now, as Bloomberg’s Brooke Sutherland put it, “the hunter has become the hunted.” Digital First Media, the news appendage of Alden Global Capital, is attempting a hostile takeover of Gannett to the tune of $1.4 billion. While Gannett may emphasize profits over Pulitzers, Digital First’s reputation is much, much worse. Its acquisition of Gannett would be “a waking nightmare for anyone who cares about newspapers,” proclaimed The Week.

Digital First guts every newsroom it can sink its vulture-capital talons into. In 2006, it purchased San Jose’s Mercury News for $1 billion and swiftly fired the paper’s staff, sold off its real estate, and carted away the printing presses, gobbling up management fees, tax breaks, and dividends in the process. Only a skeleton of the Merc remains today.

Tim Grobaty, of California’s Long Beach Post, writes that President Trump “may be at least partially correct” in his opinion of the media when it comes to Digital First, which “could, with only a pinch of hyperbole, be termed the enemy of the American people.”

—Edwin Aponte

Fiction Trumps Chaos

Making sense of the presidency, one novel at a time.

I can’t keep up,” a friend complained to me recently, when the news broke that the FBI had opened an inquiry into whether Donald Trump was an agent of Russia. Who could blame her? As the Mueller investigation slowly unfolds, each day brings a fresh scandal for the president. It’s impossible to keep track. The frustration is exacerbated by social media, where snippets of information, devoid of history or context, contribute to the chaos. How can anyone maintain sanity?

The answer, I think, lies in reading fiction. Stories help us see the world through the eyes of others: We see what they see; we’re provoked or inspired or amused; we take sides or withhold judgment—but in the end, we find order in disorder. We make sense of the world around us through the language of stories. When we follow a narrative thread, we experience, at least for a while, a feeling of control. Reading fiction also allows us to expand the limits of our imagination and helps us develop empathy—qualities that seem to be in short supply at the moment.

Take immigration, an issue that the president has almost single-handedly turned into a “crisis.” On his Twitter account, Trump regularly rants about drugs and criminals streaming across the southern border, enabled at every step by the “Obstructionist Democrats” who refuse to fund his wall. He speaks in clichés and slogans, which are dutifully parroted by people across the political spectrum. Meanwhile, journalists who cover this beat struggle to keep up. They refer to obscure legislation, include graphics, or cite numbers. We get data and sound bites, but rarely do we get a story.

To really understand how immigration affects people on either side of the border, we have to turn to fiction. In The Leavers, for example, Lisa Ko writes powerfully about a Chinese-American boy who returns home from school one day to find that his mother, an undocumented worker, has disappeared. Ko explores the trauma of family separation through the perspective of this child, showing us the additional damage done to him by the well-meaning white family that later raises him in upstate New York. Chang-rae Lee’s Native Speaker explores migration from a different angle altogether. Here, we meet a Korean American who works as an industrial spy and has been hired to collect information about a politician, also a Korean American. In quiet, precise language, Lee examines the challenges of assimilation in America, as well as the lengths to which someone will go in order to truly feel at home.

Of course, not every story of migration is tragic. There is joy and humor, too, as in Luis Alberto Urrea’s road-trip novel Into the Beautiful North. In this rollicking book, a taco-shop worker from a small village in Mexico gathers her own posse of women to travel north, where she hopes to recruit seven men—los siete magníficos—who will return home with them to protect the town from bandidos.

The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are another area where the president’s policies (not to mention those of his vice president) are dismal. Like many people of my generation, I grew up in a time and place where casual homophobia was widely accepted, but reading novels like James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room changed the way I related to people who were different from me. In the book, an American expat slowly comes to terms with his identity following his encounters with an Italian bartender in Paris. Baldwin explores the many pressures, both personal and societal, that push people to deny their true selves and spend their lives trying to please others.

A more recent favorite of mine is Sarah Waters’s The Paying Guests. Set in 1920s London, the story follows a mother and daughter who are forced to take in lodgers in order to make ends meet. Their quiet lives are upended when a married couple moves in and the daughter begins an affair with the wife.

These novels showed me what life does to all of us, how it tests and humbles and reveals us, regardless of our private history or public iden-
tity. And fiction does so much else, too: It gives us the infinite pleasures of prose, the surprise of encountering something unexpected on the page, and an escape from the tedium and stress of our daily routines.

“Now, wait a minute,” I hear you say. “Turning to fiction at this moment in time means turning away from a reality where awful things are happening. The president is a racist, for God’s sake. Civil rights are being violated every day. The forever wars are raging. An alleged rapist has just been seated on the highest court in the land.”

All of this is true. But we also have a president who manipulates social media to keep the attention on himself at all times: He announces major policy shifts on Twitter, then leaves everyone guessing about their meaning. Instead of spending my time reading the tea leaves of his pronouncements, I choose to spend it on novels. Making time for fiction helps me to stay out of the news bubble and ultimately enables me to be more engaged as a citizen.

During the midterms, for example, I used the hours that I would ordinarily have spent keeping up with this or that wrinkle in the Mueller investigation to volunteer. The group I worked with was focused on flipping congressional seats in California, and over the course of several weeks, I managed to donate, raise funds, work the phone bank, and write postcards to voters. As Election Day approached and we became better trained, we expanded our efforts to races in other states. As I watched the results roll in, the helplessness I had felt so often over the past couple of years disappeared, replaced by a feeling of pride that I had contributed, in my own small way, to making change happen.

The reality-show presidency of Donald Trump is designed to keep us glued to our devices, all the while complaining, “I can’t keep up!” Maybe we can’t. It’s time to put down that phone and read a book.
is a lifelong organizer. What will she do now that she’s one of the key players in Congress?

JOAN WALSH
Ramila Jayapal was speed-walking through the Longworth House Office Building early on January 3, aiming to visit as many of the Democratic women newly elected to the House of Representatives as possible before the end of the day. It wasn’t going to be easy, since there were 35 of them—and even more progressive activists lining the hallways hoping for a chance to talk with her.

“I love your new bill!” one young man called out to Jayapal, referring to the Medicare for All legislation she’s still drafting. Five minutes later, two California Indivisible activists flagged her down, promising to keep their new representatives on board the Medicare for All train. Jayapal, the representative for the Seventh District in Washington State and the new co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), stopped for a quick huddle with them and shared a secret: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was supporting holding hearings on the bill, which was first proposed by former Michigan congressman John Conyers back in 2003.

In the offices of New Mexico Representative Deb Haaland, one of two Native American women elected to the House in November, Jayapal was whisked past the well-wishers to hug the new congresswoman, whom she had endorsed early in the campaign. Haaland’s family members, dressed in Pueblo of Laguna traditional clothing, posed for pictures with Jayapal, an Indian-American activist and organizer who was elected to Congress just two years earlier. It was only the first of the many times that I found myself (unprofessionally) teary-eyed at the history being made around me that day.

It was a glorious morning, but there was already trouble in paradise: Two members of Jayapal’s caucus—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the newly elected insurgent representing parts of Queens and the Bronx, and the San Francisco Bay Area’s Ro Khanna, had come out against a new House rules package because it included a provision known as “pay-go,” which requires the House to cut spending or hike taxes to “pay” for any new programs. Pay-go has become a powerful symbol of the hold that austerity politics has on both parties, though it ultimately has no force; the House can waive the provision at any time, and has in the past. Jayapal and her staff assistant, besieged by people angry at the Seattle progressive’s compromise, moment, because no one can question her activist credentials.”

Representative Ro Khanna

The rising class: Jayapal (right) welcomes Sharice Davids (left) and Deb Haaland (second from left) to Congress.

The congressional progressive caucus is now in a strong position, having scored important new committee assignments in its high-stakes negotiations with Pelosi. (After Pelosi’s concessions, Jayapal and Pocan endorsed her return to
the speakership.) Pocan credits Jayapal with leveraging their political capital to win CPC members more seats on the most important House committees, including Appropriations, Ways and Means, Intelligence, Energy, Commerce, and Financial Services.

As Pocan observes, “She’s always willing to push harder—to say to the speaker, ‘Hey, we’re 40 percent of the [Democratic] Caucus; we deserve 40 percent of the seats on the powerful committees.’” Pocan has been raising money for the CPC’s policy center, and he jokes, “I’m a lower-income guy from Kenosha; I’d never ask for the kind of money Pramila would ask for. But she’s always able to close the deal and get it done.” MoveOn’s Washington director, Ben Wikler, says Jayapal’s negotiation with Pelosi “was a brilliant demonstration of her inside/outside game,” noting that MoveOn, Indivisible, and activist Ady Barkan had likewise withheld their endorsements of Pelosi until Jayapal and Pocan announced their deal.

“We don’t want a Freedom Caucus of the left,” says Robert Cruickshank, campaign director for the activist group Demand Progress, referring to the nihilistic GOP wingnuts who formerly supported speaker Paul Ryan’s House majority dysfunctional. “We want a caucus that can go to leadership and say, ‘We have 98 votes. If you want to get something done, you need our support; here’s what we need in exchange, and let’s get it done.’ The deals Pramila negotiated during the transition in the House put the CPC on the path toward being the power brokers—and using that power to advance a progressive agenda without grinding everything to a halt.”

It’s remarkable that Jayapal, who came to the United States from India at 16, was able to grab a leadership spot in her first term in Congress. But she never really thought of herself as a “freshman,” having spent almost 15 years as an organizer, mainly on immigrant rights, after a brief stint in the private sector and a partial term in the Washington state senate. (She left to run for Congress.) Jayapal was an early Bernie Sanders supporter, but she endorsed Hillary Clinton after the primaries and worked hard for her election. She expected to go to Congress and be a force pulling President Clinton to the left. Instead, she became one of only seven House members to object to certifying the Electoral College results that gave us President Trump.

“People told me, ‘That was the stupidest thing you could have done! You’ve ruined your whole time in Congress!’” Jayapal recalls. “I still think I did the right thing.” She won national attention for her work fighting Trump’s travel ban and by visiting asylum seekers who had had their children taken from them under the administration’s family-separation policy. Jayapal also helped organize the massive protests that played a role in ending the policy last summer. In November, she won re-election with more votes—329,800—than any other member of the House. “That’s a pretty good stat, huh?” she says with a smile. Khanna, her CPC colleague, notes: “She’s the ideal leader for the moment, because no one can question her activist credentials.”

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The Nation.
immigration reform, criminal-justice reform, and a national $15-an-hour minimum wage. (One sign of the progressive times: Among the first bills introduced by Democratic House and Senate leaders in January was one to raise the national minimum wage, gradually, to $15 an hour.) As CPCC co-chair, Jayapal is mindful of the many liberal and progressive think tanks already operating, and she recruited Thea Lee of the Economic Policy Institute and John Cavanagh of the Institute for Policy Studies to convene a group of advisers. “I thought [coordinating] like this was already happening,” says Lee. But in a city where many groups are fighting over the same funders, there’s less “generosity” than one might expect.

The CPCC will no doubt play a big role in building support for Jayapal’s forthcoming Medicare for All legislation, which she says will be more “detailed” than the bill that Bernie Sanders introduced last session. She is working closely with the Vermont senator, but she is uncommonly tight-lipped about what the bill will look like, because she doesn’t want it covered by the media until the “stakeholders” learn what’s in it first. Working with two dozen groups, from Physicians for a National Health Program and National Nurses United to the Democratic Socialists of America and Public Citizen, as well as at least nine unions, Jayapal wants to hammer out the details and get the bill into hearings sometime this year. Last session’s House version of the bill had 124 co-sponsors (impressive, given that there were only 78 CPC members); Jayapal expects even more support this time around.

“We’re widely seeking input from members—when people are part of the process, obviously, they’re much more likely to sign on,” she says. After Jayapal met with Massachusetts Representative Joe Kennedy III, who hadn’t signed on to the last version, and explained why her new bill would be different from the last, Kennedy told The Hill, “I would hope I would be able to support that.”

Of course, as Jayapal ventures beyond the CPC’s membership to build support for Medicare for All, she runs the risk of watering down the bill and losing support from the left. That dynamic is at play more broadly, too: Some progressives have expressed concern that the label “progressive” has become so popular that it might be co-opted. There is currently, for example, a 12-member overlap between the centrist New Democrat Coalition and the CPC. After her primary win last summer, Ocasio-Cortez floated the idea of creating a “sub-caucus” of truly progressive members who vote as a bloc. Jayapal didn’t comment on that idea directly, but she is having conversations about whether it makes sense to create an agenda that members must explicitly support in order to join the CPC.

“In the minority, it didn’t really matter—it’s easy to vote no on everything!” Jayapal says. But the situation has changed. “We are now talking about what it means to be a member. And we will be trying to hold people together on key votes, in a way we didn’t have the strength to do before.” The question quickly became more than theoretical when Pelosi’s team released the committee assignments. CPC leaders got the 40 percent of seats they’d asked for—but that included some representatives who hold joint membership in the CPC and the New Dems. Waleed Shahid of Justice Democrats, the Ocasio-Cortez-affiliated group that backs primary challenges by more progressive Democrats, criticized Jayapal and Pocan for making deals with Pelosi without having first organized their caucus. “If everyone has their own definition and now has increased personal power through a seat on an executive committee, accountability to the progressive movement will be more difficult,” Shahid told The Intercept. But Khanna, who was endorsed by Justice Democrats, disagrees. “If they’d waited until the caucus was seated, we’d have missed the boat,” he says, noting that the CPC has never been so well represented on the top committees before.

Jayapal pronounced herself satisfied with the outcome: “I think we did extremely well,” she told me. She pointed to the appointments of Ocasio-Cortez, Tlaib, Pressley, and Porter to the House Financial Services Committee as a sign of real progress. Still, she acknowledged that the CPC has to respond to the unprecedented interest in membership by making it clear what membership actually means. “We need to define some critical issues—I don’t know exactly what they’re going to end up being—but then maybe you get a pass on x number of top votes, depending on your district.” Jayapal is mindful that what counts as “progressive” in Seattle or the Bronx is different in red or purple states. “I talked to one member like that—very progressive, but because of her state, she can’t be with us on ‘abolish ICE.’” She was very concerned about that. And I said, ‘Look, are you for comprehensive immigration reform?’ And she said yes. She’s a progressive.”

Nor does Jayapal understand the knee-jerk hostility toward every member of the New Democrat Coalition. “A lot of us are thinking, ‘What about the New Dems who really are progressive, but their districts are less progressive?’ I think we’d rather have them hearing our arguments in the CPC, instead of just meeting with the New Dems.” Even so, the debate over committee assignments “makes me want to speed up the process” of defining what membership in the Congressional Progressive Caucus means, she acknowledged.

Similarly, Jayapal sees a role for the CPC in vetting the many Democrats who will compete for the party’s presidential nomination in 2020. “We might have our version of a questionnaire, or conversations with candidates that the caucus hosts. We will certainly have some kind of platform,” she adds, “and we will expect candidates to endorse that platform. We will definitely play a big role.”

I ask if she’s planning to endorse someone personally this time around. “I haven’t endorsed anybody, and there’s
no presumption that I would endorse Bernie again. The ideas he ran on are important, but I’m also interested to see what the whole field looks like. I continue to believe that diverse candidates are really important. I’m very grateful to Bernie, and I have no regrets about my endorsement. But we are in a different moment, and I want to look at the whole field. Plus, I’ve been working with most of the people who are running!” She ticks off legislation that she’s collaborated on with Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Kirsten Gillibrand, Jeff Merkley, and Cory Booker; only the day before, her home-state governor, Jay Inslee, announced that he’s jumping into the race as well.

To Jayapal, that crowded field is an asset. “I think if we can hold ourselves in this place of multiple possibilities, where each person animates a slightly different audience, brings a different conversation to the table… Part of the problem is that the Democratic Party is always looking for a savior: ‘Let’s move to the person who is the most dynamic and the most charismatic and sign on with them now and be done!’ I’m like, ‘No! We have people! We have to allow that leadership to emerge.’ And it’s emerging!”

Progressive leadership is indeed emerging, from many places, and Jayapal finds herself in the position of having to navigate the differences in style and substance. Just as the pay-go battle was fading, Rashida Tlaib delivered a rousing rebuke to Donald Trump at a MoveOn party on the night of her swearing-in—one that ended with the words “We’re gonna go in and impeach the motherfucker!” Mandatory pearl-clutching ensued, and virtually every Democrat in DC was hounded to criticize the Michigan congresswoman.

“I got asked about it by reporters today,” Jayapal admitted, rolling her eyes. “I was the first member to endorse Rashida. I’ve known her for 20 years. And I said, ‘Look, everyone says things, and sometimes later they’re really glad they said it. And sometimes they say, “If I were to do that again, I’d do that differently.”’ And I’m not saying Rashida’s gonna think it was a bad thing to say!” she adds quickly. “But somebody asked me: ‘Well, are you gonna have a talk with her, to tell her not to do that?’ And I said, ‘Absolutely not!’” She chuckles at the notion. “We’re not mothers here.”

I ask her whether she’s noticed any kind of “gendered” response to the brand-new dynamic: female House leaders engaging with a record number of female House members. “Oh, it’s so gendered!” Jayapal replies. When Ocasio-Cortez joined the members of the Sunrise Movement in Pelosi’s office last November to demand support for a Green New Deal, “I must have had a dozen reporters saying to me, ‘So do you think this is a bad idea, for her to be protesting in the speaker’s office?’ I said, ‘No! This is her strategy. I respect her. I think she should do what she needs to do.’ And I gave the example of my protesting the Electoral College vote when I got here. But people keep trying to get me on the record saying Alexandria or Rashida did something wrong.” And she refuses to take the bait.

“As somebody who cares deeply about organizing—not just on the outside, but on the inside, as Progressive Caucus co-chair—my (continued on page 26)
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John Longan was an agent with the US Border Patrol in the 1940s and '50s, working near the Mexican border, where two Guatemalan migrant children fell mortally ill in the custody of border agents last month: 7-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquín, who died on December 8, and 8-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo, who died on Christmas Eve.

Longan had a reputation for violence, as did many of his fellow patrollers. Since its founding in the early 1900s, the Border Patrol has operated with near impunity, becoming arguably the most politicized branch of federal law enforcement—even more so than J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

As the Cold War heated up in Latin America following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Longan, who'd started his career as a police officer in Oklahoma, moved on to work for the CIA, providing security assistance—under the cover of the State Department—to allied anticommunist nations. Put simply, Longan taught local intelligence and police agencies how to create death squads to target political activists, deploying tactics that he'd used earlier to capture migrants on the border. He arrived in Guatemala in late 1965 and put into place a paramilitary unit that, early the next year, would execute what he called Operación Limpieza, or Operation Cleanup. Within three months, this unit conducted over 80 raids and multiple assassinations, including an action that, over the course of four days, led to the capture, torture, and execution of more than 30 prominent left-wing opposition leaders. The military dumped their bodies into the sea, while the government denied any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Longan’s Operación Limpieza was a decisive step in the unraveling of Guatemala, empowering an intelligence system that over the course of the country’s civil war would be responsible for tens of thousands of disappearances, 200,000 deaths, and countless tortures. (Greg Grandin describes Longan’s work in his book *The Last Colonial Massacre*.)

Of course, the US role in that civil war wasn’t limited to the covert operations of one former Border Patrol agent. Throughout the Cold War, Washington intervened multiple times in Guatemala, funded a rampaging army, ran cover for the death squads that its own security agents—like Longan—helped create, and signaled that it would turn a blind eye to genocide. Even before Ronald Reagan’s 1980 election, two retired generals with prominent roles in his campaign traveled to Central America and told Guatemalan officials that “Mr. Reagan recognizes that a good deal of dirty work has to be done” (for this quote, see Allan Nairn’s report “Controversial Rea-
gan Campaign Links With Guatemalan Government and Private Sector Leaders,” published by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs on October 30, 1980). Once in office, Reagan supplied munitions and training to the Guatemalan Army to carry out that dirty work (despite a ban on military aid imposed during the Carter administration, since existing contracts were exempt from that ban). Reagan was steadfast in his moral backing for Guatemala’s génocidaires, calling de facto head of state Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, who seized power in a coup in the spring of 1982, “a man of great personal integrity” and “totally dedicated to democracy.”

The civil war that the United States drove forward in Guatemala hit the home regions of Jakelin Caal Maquín and Felipe Gómez Alonzo—the two children who died recently in US custody—hard.

Jakelin was Q’eqchi’-Maya, from the town of Raxruhá in northern Alta Verapaz. There, as in much of rural Guatemala, Maya communities have struggled for more than a century to remain on their lands. For much of that time, the US government intervened on the wrong side of those struggles. The result was a vortex of violent displacement that continues to this day.

At the beginning of the 1900s, the Q’eqchi’-Maya lived mostly in Guatemala’s lush, fertile northern highlands. But during the 20th century, many were pushed out. First, coffee planters, who were members of Guatemala’s colonial and military elite, as well as new European and North American investors, dispossessed them of their lands through legal chicanery and violence. When Q’eqchi’ villagers tried to fight back, they were killed or exiled.

The CIA-orchestrated 1954 coup against a democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, was a turning point in the Q’eqchi’ region. An ambitious land-reform program that had widespread beneficial effects in Alta Verapaz was reversed, and poor Q’eqchi’s began a great migration—fleeing political repression and hunger—to the lowlands, either east toward the Caribbean or north into the Petén rain forest. Raxruhá, Jakelin’s home town, was founded in the 1970s by these internal migrants.

Caal and Maquín are common surnames among the Q’eqchi’, with strong historical resonance. Adelina Caal Maquín, also known as Mama Maquín, is an icon of political struggle in Guatemala. Like Jakelin, Adelina was a refugee, having fled her mountain village after the 1954 coup for the lowland town of Panzós, where she became a leader in the fight against land evictions. On May 29,
1978, she was murdered, along with scores of other protesters, by the army. The Panzós massacre kicked off a brutal period of violence: Over the next few years, the US-backed Guatemalan military murdered more than 160,000 Maya. The army especially targeted Q’eqchi’ communities for slaughter, then rounded up the survivors in military-controlled model villages. A women’s-refugee organization honored Mamo Maquín by adopting her name.

The end of Guatemala’s civil war in the 1990s brought no peace to the Q’eqchi’. The policies pushed by Washington created new afflictions: The promotion of mining, hydroelectric production, hardwood timbering, and African-palm plantations for “clean” biofuels destroyed their subsistence economy and poisoned their water and corn land.

Meanwhile, Q’eqchi’ communities were caught in the crosshairs of an escalating international drug war. As Washington spent billions of dollars shutting down South American trafficking routes, Q’eqchi’ communities were turned into a transshipment corridor for cocaine moving into the United States. Throughout the 2010s, drug-related crime and violence that had previously been concentrated in Colombia engulfed Central America, including Jakelin’s birthplace, accelerating the migration north. In 2010, narcotics-related violence grew so bad, with the Mexican Zetas cartel effectively controlling large parts of Alta Verapaz, that the Guatemalan government placed the department under an extended state of siege.

Q’eqchi’ men and women fought back, organizing social movements to defend their communities. But the repression continued. In 2011, soldiers working with private paramilitary forces evicted hundreds of Q’eqchi’ families, turning their land over to agribusinesses financed by international development loans. One study estimates that between 2003 and 2012, 11 percent of Q’eqchi’ families lost their land to sugar and African-palm plantations. By 2018, the situation had grown even more dire, with a wave of murders of Q’eqchi’ peasant activists.

And so more and more Q’eqchi’ refugees have been forced to leave the communities founded by their parents and grandparents, taking their chances on migrating to the United States. Why would a father bring his young daughter on such a perilous trek? CNN Español interviewed Jakelin’s relatives in Guatemala, who said that her father, Nery Gilberto Caal, 29, did everything he could to “stay in his land, but necessity made him try to get to the US.” According to the World Bank, the Q’eqchi’ are among the poorest of the poor in Guatemala and suffer from chronic malnutrition.

The past two decades have brought changes in US border policy, with terrible consequences for Central Americans. The militarization of the border since the 1990s, especially the sealing off of urban entry points, has pushed migrants to cross in remote and treacherous desert areas, where thousands have died. Border militarization also helps explain why people would bring their children on such a dangerous journey. In the past, men usually migrated alone; they would work for a while in the United States and then return to visit their families. But now, border militarization has ratcheted up the cost of that trip. Where it used to cost around $1,000 to travel from Central America to the United States, it now costs up to $12,000, making shuttle migration impossible for many. Often the only way for families to stay together is for women and children to migrate as well. Yes, it’s dangerous, but so is staying in Guatemala.

Intending to request political asylum, Jakelin and her father were among a group of 163 Guatemalans who turned themselves in to the Border Patrol at a remote entry point in the New Mexico desert on the night of December 6. This is legal: US law says that people may make an affirmative claim of asylum no matter how or where they enter the country.

Felipe Gómez Alonzo, the other Guatemalan child who died in Border Patrol detention, was born in a different region of the country than Jakelin. But the history of his community is also one of land struggles and violent displacement, where Guatemala’s peace accords brought little respite.

Felipe was from the western highlands, in the department of Huehuetenango, in an isolated village called Yalambojoch, a 10-hour drive from Guatemala City and not far from the Mexican border. The village sits in a sunken valley surrounded by pine-tipped hills. In the middle of this valley is a knoll that looks like a baby in its mother’s womb. In Chuj, the Maya language of this region, this knoll is unun witz, the “child hill.”

Where Jakelin was Q’eqchi’, Felipe was Chuj, part of a community of former tenant farmers with a long history of fighting for their land. As in the Q’eqchi’ region, the US-orchestrated 1954 coup overturned agrarian reforms and kicked off decades of political strife in Huehuetenango, pitting local landowners allied with the military against impoverished Maya peasants desperate for land and a better future. Many communities in this region were influenced by the Catholic social-justice doctrines of liberation theology that swept through Central America in the 1960s and ‘70s. When the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor) entered Huehuetenango in the mid-1970s, large numbers of villagers greeted them as allies in the struggle against the “army of the rich,” and by 1980 the province was in open rebellion against Guatemala’s corrupt and violent military government.

On June 17, 1982, Guatemalan soldiers under the command of Ríos Montt entered the San Francisco cattle estate immediately adjacent to Yalambojoch. The estate’s owner, a military colonel, had fled because of guerrilla activity in the area. Soldiers went from house to house rounding up workers and their families, whom they accused of supporting the guerrillas. They separated children from their parents and killed them by slashing their stomachs or smashing their heads against poles. Women were raped and then burned alive. The soldiers killed the men with bullets or by beheading. After a day of slaughter, 350 people were dead. A lone survivor made his way into Mexico, where Guatemalan anthropologist and Jesuit priest Ricardo Falla inter-
viewed him. The San Francisco massacre was highlighted in Guatemala's 1999 Truth Commission report.

After the massacre, Yalambojoch residents fled along with thousands of others, leaving the border corridor between Guatemala and Mexico almost completely depopulated, as government troops razed their villages. Whereas villagers in the Q'eqchi' region were pushed by massacres into the rugged mountain and jungle terrain within Guatemala, people from Yalambojoch fled across the border into Mexico. Some were captured and killed by the army as they fled. Others ended up in refugee camps or dispersed throughout Mexico's southern states. Still others continued on to the United States, beginning the great movement of Guatemalans to el Norte. All told, 1.5 million people were displaced by the Guatemalan military's scorched-earth campaign in 1981 and '82. Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification called the violent displacement in the Maya-Chuj region an “act of genocide.” Young Felipe Gómez Alonzo’s father, Agustín Gómez Pérez, was just a child of 11 during that exodus. Yalambojoch's villagers stayed away for 14 years, returning only after the signing of the peace accords in 1996.

Huehuetenango had been one of Guatemala’s top migrant-sending regions. So why couldn’t these returnees survive in postwar Guatemala? One reason is the legacy of the genocide: The army’s broader purpose was not just to beat back the guerrillas but also to destroy any hope for a different future in Guatemala. Among the people from Yalambojoch who were scattered in Mexico after 1982, only half returned to Guatemala, and those who did were strangers to one another. Young adults who had fled as children didn’t know much about the land or how to farm it. When Mexican and US labor recruiters arrived in Huehuetenango to hire Maya youth for jobs in US agriculture and poultry plants—as Mexican workers unionized, the Guatemalan workers were seen as more pliable—these young people jumped at the chance to go. As Ricardo Falla and Élена Yojcom describe in El Sueño del Norte en Yalambojoch (The Dream of the North in Yalambojoch), remittances sent from the United States rebuilt these ravaged communities. With few exceptions, international migration was the only reparation these communities had, as Guatemalan anthropologist Ruth Piedrasanta shows.

Residents of Yalambojoch subsist on plots of only a few hectares of marginal land per family. The peace accords didn’t change the inequitable land-tenure structure or the concentration of political and economic power in the country. That chance had been lost with the 1954 coup and the counterinsurgency of the early 1980s, as time and time again the US government tipped the balance of power in favor of the Guatemalan ruling class. Elites in Guatemala are only too happy to see people emigrate, as the banks controlled by the oligarchy reap financial dividends from the transfer of remittances; and beginning in the 1990s, international development banks began to promote remittances as development.

Instead of pursuing a people-centered rural development, the Guatemalan government’s postwar strategy, backed by international development loans, has been to open up large swaths of the country to foreign investment in megaprojects like mining and hydroelectric dams. As Guatemalan economist Luis Solano notes, there is not a single Maya name among the list of investors in these projects, where the profits go to international conglomerates in association with elite family networks in Guatemala.

One such project is the Northern Transversal Highway, a project initiated by Guatemala’s military governments, in concert with foreign oil interests, to open up the northern reaches of the country to oil drilling and other forms of extraction. Guerrilla sabotage halted the project during the civil war, but since the peace accords were signed, it has returned with a vengeance. The Transversal now spans the entire region, from northern Huehuetenango, where Jakelin Caal Maquín’s grave is located. Much of the foreign mining activity in Guatemala is concentrated near the Transversal. Both Alta Verapaz and Huehuetenango form part of what the government calls the “hydro-electric ring,” where water rights are granted to corporate interests.

In Yalambojoch, people banded together to stop construction of the highway through their village—not because they didn’t want a road, but because the Israeli company contracted to build it threatened to cut down hundreds of trees in a protected forest reserve next to the community’s only supply of fresh drinking water. Not too far away, community and environmental activists opposing the megaprojects have been jailed, attacked, or killed, and Guatemalan security forces have militarized the zone once again. The most recent killings in this region occurred two days before Felipe and his father crossed the US border.

Finally, there is climate change. While it is too simplistic to claim that Central American migrants are “climate refugees” (the assertion is dangerous, too, since it ultimately justifies even more apocalyptic border-enforcement policies), there is evidence that in some regions, climate change may be eroding people’s ability to stay on their lands. In Huehuetenango, including in Yalambojoch, the potential to earn cash by growing coffee on small plots is being undermined by the spread of a plant-choking fungus called la roya, or coffee-leaf rust.
Why Does Trump Want to Terminate TPS?

He plans to expel hundreds of thousands of refugees who have become productive members of American society. But they’re fighting back.

by SASHA ABRAMSKY

HNAIDA ELARABI, A LONGTIME HEALTH EDUCATOR WITH A MASTER’S degree from Brandeis University, has lived and worked in the United States since 1997. For 16 of those years, she was with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, working with refugee and immigrant communities to help them successfully access and navigate the state’s health-care system. More recently, she’s been working as a member of the support staff for students at an online university.

In 2015, shortly after starting that job, Elarabi—who hails from the city of Wad Medani in southeast Sudan—decided to follow through on a longstanding dream of running a restaurant, so she took out loans and opened a chicken-wing joint in her hometown of Brighton, Massachusetts. When the New England Patriots were playing, she’d put the game on TV, and customers would flock in to buy wings and watch the home team.

Then, shortly after Donald Trump’s inauguration, the Sudanese immigrant’s American dream hit the skids. In her mid-50s, with a successful career and now a newly opened business, Elarabi suddenly faced the prospect of being deported back to the violent homeland she had fled decades earlier.

The public-health worker turned restaurateur lives in the United States under a federal initiative known as “temporary protected status,” or TPS, which was created as part of the Immigration Act of 1990. She is one of nearly half a million residents—people from Sudan, Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Nepal, and a handful of other countries—who arrived in the United States without documents, or who overstayed a tourist visa, at some point in the 1990s, and who were then allowed to live and work here because of catastrophically dangerous conditions in their home countries. In some instances, those conditions were linked to wars; in others, to natural disasters, economic collapse, or both.

Forcing these people to return was, the State Department and Congress agreed, too dangerous. Allowing them to work in the United States was seen as both the best humanitarian response and as a way of serving America’s own self-interest—drawing them out of the shadows, in which so many millions of undocumented people live, and into the taxable economy. It was a compromise similar to the one later put into effect by Barack Obama for a different group of immigrants with his executive order establishing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, from George H.W. Bush to Obama, TPS was renewed. It was a low-key program that never attracted the kind of lightning-rod furies that have accompanied DACA since its inception. What started as a short-term, temporary program grew into seeming permanence—albeit a tenuous one, in which TPS holders, unless they were sponsored by a spouse or adult child, generally lacked a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship. Every 18 months, they submitted a new application for temporary protected status along with a $495 fee, went through a background check, and, if everything panned out, were granted a continuation of their status.

As I wrote on TheNation.com last year (“Trump to 200,000 Salvadoran Immigrants: Drop Dead”), over the decades, many of the men and women living under TPS married and had US-born children. Some went to college, opened businesses, bought homes, and began to save for retirement. In short, even as they continued to live in a legal gray zone while Congress kicked the can regarding a permanent resolution of their status ever farther down the road, they became fully embedded in their local communities, as American as any of the other tens of millions of immigrants in this country.

And then came Trump, who from day one had TPS and its often poor, nonwhite beneficiaries squarely in his sights. “What will happen next year if I’m not able to have a job, a driver’s license?” asks Wilna Destin, a Haitian-born mother of two who lives in Orlando, Florida, and is employed by the labor union Unite Here, helping to organize the hundreds of TPS holders who work at nearby Disney World. “Without TPS, what are we going to do? Haiti is not ready.”

Destin fears that if she and her family have to leave for Haiti, her children—15-year-old Hnaida and 11-year-old John—will not have access to school, and their lives will be devastated by extreme poverty. Hnaida “thinks about it all the time,” Destin continues. “She comes to me and says, ‘Mama, what am I going to do if they send us to Haiti?’ My son also; they’re very afraid. I’m not rich, but I’m here for them. They’ve got my love. My kids are my life—this is what I’ve got.”

Until Trump, TPS was an uncontroversial program, supported by both Republicans and Democrats. 

Sasha Abramsky’s latest book is Jumping at Shadows: The Triumph of Fear and the End of the American Dream.
Shortly after Trump took office, the Department of Homeland Security, then run by John Kelly—a retired Marine Corps general and anti-immigrant hawk who once said that he would admit between zero and one refugee into the United States if he had his druthers—began rolling back TPS designations for one country after another. Haitians, a group that Trump has repeatedly expressed something bordering on visceral disgust toward, were among the first to be challenged. “I felt devastated,” Destin says. “I’m nothing, after being in this country all these years. I follow the law. It hurts from the bottom of my heart. My family feels it. It hurts.”

When Kelly moved on to a new role as White House chief of staff in 2017, his successors at the Department of Homeland Security, Elaine Duke and Kirstjen Nielsen, continued his anti-TPS policy. Within months, well over 90 percent of recipients were facing the prospect that, when their renewal for TPS was due, they would be told to pack their bags, leave their US-born children behind, and return to their home countries.

Fearing that she would need cash in a hurry, Elarabi “sold my restaurant,” she recalls sadly. “I’m still working with the university. But it’s nerve-wracking.” She knows that if her TPS is revoked, she will lose her work permit, and then the university will be unable to continue employing her. “I’m not about to go back to Sudan,” Elarabi says. “And I don’t see myself living here without status. My life is in limbo. I am 55 years old. I am not a person who can live in the shadows—I don’t have the energy to live in the shadows. I built a life here. I’m here 21 years. It will be very hard to start all over.”

In 2017, career officials at the State Department and US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) began writing a series of recommendations on the TPS program and whether it should be continued. As those documents clearly show, the officials started out by acknowledging the persistence of conditions in the various TPS-designated countries that, under federal law, would mandate continuation of the program.

One such document, a set of private notes written by Duke as the acting secretary of homeland security, noted that conditions in the Central American countries included in the TPS program remained dangerous, and that ending it would likely lead to a surge in illegal immigration as frantic deportees tried to rejoin their families stateside.

Even so, internal White House memos show that the Trump administration was hellbent on ending TPS, whatever the advice from the relevant agencies. One of these detailed a meeting among the policy principals convened specifically to coordinate the conditions and process for terminating TPS for people from El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Haiti. The clear implication of the memo is that a political decision had already been made, regardless of conditions on the ground, and that justifications were to be conjured up merely to provide cover for that decision.

In early 2018, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, and several private California law firms filed suit to block the ending of TPS for people from Nicaragua, Haiti, El Salvador, and Sudan—the first set of countries to be excluded from the TPS umbrella. As the plaintiffs found out during the legal proceedings, documents pertaining to the program were politically massaged at the urging of extremist appointees like Robert Law (who moved from the anti-immigration think tank Federation for American Immigration Reform to USCIS early in the Trump administration) to recommend that TPS be terminated for certain countries, contradicting earlier findings.

In fact, behind the scenes, Law was urging the administration to end TPS designations for any country whose former residents had been protected by it for more than three years, regardless of the current conditions. In an October 22, 2017, e-mail regarding Haiti sent to Kathy Kovarik, chief of the Office of Policy and Strategy at USCIS, Law wrote: “The draft is overwhelming [sic] weighted for extension which I do not think is the conclusion we are looking for.” Some documents noted that the conditions in Sudan remained too dangerous to terminate temporary protected status for Sudanese recipients—but concluded that the Department of Homeland Security would be recommending termination nonetheless.

Within months, it became clear that the aggressive rollback of TPS would affect hundreds of thousands of people, both the recipients themselves and their children. One such person is Elsy Flores de Ayala, a Washington, DC, resident originally from El Salvador. She has three children: The oldest came with her to the United States as an infant; the other two are US citizens. Facing the prospect of deportation, Flores de Ayala began planning for the worst. She strategized how she would leave her two younger children—one of whom, Joanna, is currently preparing to attend university and aspires to be a doctor or an engineer—in the United States with some elderly relatives. She and her husband briefly considered moving to Canada or perhaps even Spain.

Her daughter Joanna worries that her life could be upended by a double whammy. She’s not only terrified that her parents could be deported; she also fears that, if they are, she will have to defer her college dreams to support her younger
brother. “We are fighting for our rights—my parents’ rights and the families going through this,” she tells me.

The plaintiffs in the aclu lawsuit argued that the Trump administration’s action violated the Administrative Procedure Act, which since 1946 has governed how federal regulations can be proposed and executed, and also that, since Trump had singled out places like Haiti as “shithole countries,” the action was capricious and clearly in violation of the equal-protection clause of the US Constitution. The plaintiffs included in their filing TPS holders as well as a number of their children. Hiwaida Elarabi was among them. So were Wilna Destin and her daughter Hnaida. So, too, was Flores de Ayala.

“The adoption of the [proposed] new rule” limiting temporary protected status to just three years per country “was a tactic employed to justify what were otherwise completely unacceptable positions,” argues Ahilan Arulanantham, the ACLU’s lead attorney on the case.

Last October, California District Court Judge Edward Chen sided with the plaintiffs and issued a temporary injunction blocking the termination of the program for the four countries named in the suit. That same month, the Trump administration filed an appeal with the Ninth Circuit. If, as is widely expected, the administration loses that appeal, it will take the case to the Supreme Court. If it ultimately wins—a distinct possibility, given the conservative bent of the high court today and its previous ruling upholding Trump’s travel ban—the administration has promised to hold off on initiating deportations for six months after the end of legal proceedings. In practice, this means TPS holders covered by the ruling are likely to be able to stay in this country for the next year or so, at the very least. It is also conceivable that the legal proceedings will extend beyond the life of the current administration.

Meanwhile, attorneys in Boston have filed a similar suit seeking to prevent the imminent termination of TPS for several threatened groups. In courts around the country, lawsuits are in the works to protect people from Nepal and others now facing deportation. Given the similarity of the reasoning between these lawsuits and the one filed by the ACLU, Arulanantham believes that the California ruling is likely to be replicated in these cases as well.

All of this buys TPS holders some precious time to organize a grassroots movement in their support, and also to press Congress for badly overdue legislation to protect these half-billion people and their hundreds of thousands of US-born children. “My family wants to fight back,” says Orlando Zepeda, a soft-spoken Salvadoran TPS holder in Los Angeles, whom I first interviewed in late 2017, when the administration announced the initial rollbacks.

Sitting in the poster-filled ground-floor offices of CARECEN, an LA-based group that works with Central American immigrants, Zepeda, a middle-aged mainte-

The National TPS Alliance is building support around the country for those threatened with deportation.

nance worker who fled his country’s civil war as a teenager in the 1980s, recalls how that conflict broke apart families, and speaks of how ending TPS would once again separate parents from their children.

Like so many thousands of other TPS holders, Zepeda has made a life for himself in the United States. Largely unschooled in his home country, he learned English in Los Angeles and graduated from high school in 1993, at the age of 26. It was, he remembers, smiling broadly, one of his proudest and happiest moments. He got married, had children, worked for years in a car dealership, then began doing maintenance work at an assisted-living facility. For nearly 20 years, he also volunteered with a ministry run by his church, Sr. Thomas the Apostle, visiting jails and hospitals on a near-daily basis. It was in this ministry that he met the fellow volunteer who would later become his wife.

Now, Zepeda is in the fight of his life to preserve everything he has worked so hard for in the United States. He spends all of his free time organizing fellow TPS recipients. Last year, as one of the founding members of the National TPS Alliance, Zepeda was in a caravan that toured the country building support for protecting these families. The caravanners held meetings in churches, community centers, and union halls; they slept on floors, in basements, wherever room could be found to host them. “In every state, we had people there already organizing, welcoming the bus,” he recalls.

More than 80 members of Congress have now signed a letter, written by California Representative Jimmy Gomez, urging the administration not to terminate TPS. And a number of bills, written by both Democrats and Republicans, have begun circulating that would provide some residency protections for TPS holders.

“I’m optimistic,” Zepeda says cautiously, “but there’s a lot of work to do. The court ruling is important—it gives us space to breathe and to continue. We are preparing a meeting in Washington this February. We’re thinking of getting 5,000 people there, TPS holders. When lawmakers see a lot of people, they pay more attention to what we are doing.”

However, it’s hard to imagine Trump signing a bill that grants residency rights to people he so clearly loathes. And so, for now—like so much else when it comes to immigration policy in the Trump era—it is the courts, as well as the national organizing efforts by grassroots groups, that are standing between Trump’s cruel aspirations and the devastating, family-destroying wholesale deportations.

It is, at best, a precarious state of affairs. While the District Court ruling in California grants a short-term reprieve, it hasn’t ended the corrosive, omnipresent fear of the future that TPS families are now living through. “I have nightmares about my parents dying,” confides Joanna, Elsy Flores de Ayala’s daughter. “These are the dreams I remember. They feel so real. I wake up crying. I tell my family about the dreams. They tell me to have hope.”

“There’s no security” back in Haiti, Wilna Destin frets as she contemplates the possibility that, one day in the not so distant future, the US government will tell her to pull up stakes and leave. “We don’t have hospitals, anything—just trouble all the time,” she adds. “I came to America because everybody is looking to come to the US for the safety of their life.”

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Ro Khanna insists that Jayapal is the ideal bridge to that younger generation of activists, both inside and outside of Congress. “Prama probably has the best chance of any progressive to wind up in at least the top three in leadership” as Pelosi and her team transition out, he adds. “I’d like to see the caucus rally around her to make that possible.”

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which some scientists attribute to climate change.

There are circles within circles in the tortured history of Guatemala, all spinning forward to this dismal moment. A Border Patrol agent began working with the CIA and helped put into place a death-squad regime that accelerated a civil war, which in turn produced biblical levels of displacement. When the refugees from that civil war, including families from Yalambojoch, tried to return home, many found that they couldn’t survive in the society the war had created (according to news reports, Felipe’s father was drowned in debt). Suffering yet more violence, more displacement, and more dispossession, and doing their best to fend off the worst social and environmental effects of resource extraction and grinding poverty, many tried to escape, with the only viable route being north, to the militarized border where, in a way, it all began. According to Stuart Schrader in his forthcoming book Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing, it was common practice during the Cold War to send former Border Patrol agents to train foreign police through CIA-linked “public safety” programs. Men like Longan helped speed up the pace with which local security forces could target and kill political reformers, thus accelerating political polarization and social misery.

As the Drive-By Truckers wrote in a 2016 song—about a murderous teen who became a Border Patrol agent and who went on to lead the NRA into its current militant right-wing phase—“It all started with the border. And that’s still where it is today.”

Greg Grandin, a Nation editorial-board member and New York University history professor, is the author of The Blood of Guatemala, The Last Colonial Massacre, and, forthcoming this spring, The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America.

Elizabeth Oglesby, an associate professor of Latin American studies and geography at the University of Arizona, is co-editor, with Grandin and Deborah T. Levenson, of The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics.
One of the stranger rituals performed by the media in the Trump era has been to keep an obsessive count of the president’s lies since he took office. By September 2018, The Washington Post reported, he had already passed the 5,000 mark, including a new one-day record of 125 on September 7. The Poynter Institute’s nonpartisan fact-checking project PolitiFact keeps a running list, and The New York Times did likewise throughout 2017.

There is a certain pointlessness to these exercises. Anyone who has paid even the slightest attention to Donald Trump should recognize that, since long before his presidential campaign, he lies as easily as he breathes. He says whatever he thinks will get him what he wants, and whatever he thinks he can get away with.

David A. Bell is the Lapidus professor in the department of history at Princeton and the author of Shadows of Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present, among other books.

But if there is nothing truly revelatory about the number of Trump’s lies, keeping track of them still serves a variety of symbolic purposes for the commentators who repeat the steadily mounting figures with gleeful outrage. One is simply to underline the extent to which this is not
a normal presidency. Another, far more debatable, is to hold up Trump as a symptom and symbol of what is often called the “post-truth era.”

Take, for example, Michiko Kakutani’s recent book The Death of Truth, which cites a figure for Trump’s lies (2,140 in his first year in office) on its third page. His questionable attitudes toward truth are, Kakutani tells us, “emblematic of dynamics that have been churning beneath the surface of daily life for years.” The goddess of truth has fallen mortally ill, her book charges, and a dizzying list of perpetrators are responsible for poisoning her: Fox News; social media; the New Left; “academics promoting the gospel of postmodernism”; the narcissism of the baby boomers; and “the selfie age of self-esteem.”

Kakutani and the many pundits and critics who have offered up a similarly broad cultural diagnosis have obvious incentives for doing so. It lets them pose as serious public intellectuals who can see beyond the froth of the current news cycle. It gives them the chance to display their wide-ranging and eclectic reading (in a single paragraph, Kakutani name-checks Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Thomas Pynchon, David Bowie, Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, and Frank Gehry). And, not least, it exonerates them from the charge that they are nothing but liberal ideologues by allowing them to assign blame to both sides in the ongoing American culture wars. Yes, the responsibility for the death of truth may lie, in part, with hostile newspapers and the GOP, but it also lies with the New Left and those dreadful postmodernist academics. “Postmodernist arguments,” Kakutani explains, “deny an objective reality existing independently from human perception.” And since one perception is as good as another, anything goes. Michel Foucault and Donald Trump: brothers-in-arms.

Mainstream writers like Kakutani have repeated this last argument so often that it is easy to forget how strange and unconvincing it actually is. First, it reflects a misunderstanding of the most prominent “postmodern” philosophers. The radicalism of an author like Foucault, for instance, lies not in any supposed denial of objective reality but in his insistence that the way we know, understand, and speak about reality is always a matter of power relations. Second, it also assumes, bizarrely, that an abstruse current of thought which has attracted few readers outside the academy, and which mainstream publications have roundly and repeatedly denounced, has somehow infected the entire culture and come to define our political moment. Has academic postmodernism really had an appreciable influence on the Trumpian right, whose ideologues rarely miss an opportunity to denounce academics in general and humanists in particular?

The real problem with these arguments, however, rests in the very notion of a “post-truth era,” which presumes the existence of a previous golden age in which self-evident, objectively verifiable truths were for the most part acknowledged. The history of ideas, in fact, suggests the opposite: that truth, and the authority to determine it, has always been deeply contested, and that philosophers from ancient Greece onward have wrestled in profound and troubling ways with how to distinguish objective reality from human perception. Nor have anything like clear and authoritative standards of truth prevailed in political life. The assumption that the last 50 years or so have marked some unprecedented break with a previous age of truth reflects both an inattention to history and an attitude that might be labeled “pessimistic narcissism,” since it yet again focuses attention on the generation that came of age in the 1960s and ’70s.

Against this backdrop, it is a relief to open Sophia Rosenfeld’s brilliantly lucid Democracy and Truth. Not only does she make short work of the “postmodernism is to blame” argument; she provides the historical background necessary to understand our current truth crisis. That a crisis does indeed exist, Rosenfeld has no doubt. But it is not one that came upon the Western world from nowhere, like a meteor strike vaporizing a peaceful pastoral landscape. Instead, it broke along an epistemological fault line that has existed in modern democratic regimes since their founding: Who has the authority, in a democracy, to determine what counts as truth—an elite of the supposedly best, most intellectually capable citizens, or the people as a whole?

As Rosenfeld shows us, conflicts along this fault line are nothing new. Elites and experts have long sought to impose their epistemological authority over a broader public, even at the risk of constraining democracy. And popular movements have long insisted on the people’s right to judge the world on their own terms, denigrating elite opinion in the process—and, sometimes, expertise and learning more broadly. The current crisis represents a drastic ratcheting up of these conflicts thanks to a host of factors—including, Rosenfeld suggests, some of the most dynamic forces in our rapidly changing capitalist economy, which have profited directly from such developments as the rise of social media and the flourishing of right-wing talk shows.

Few historians are better positioned to tell this story than Rosenfeld. A professor of intellectual history at the University of Pennsylvania, she has devoted her career to exploring the ways that philosophical conversations during the Enlightenment and the age of revolutions shaped basic modern political concepts and presuppositions. Her previous book, Common Sense, offered a scintillating account of how influential Western thinkers came to believe that ordinary people of limited or no education had the intellectual capacity to participate as equals in political life—a belief that provided crucial legitimacy for democratic regimes based on universal suffrage. While as a scholar Rosenfeld is most at home in the 18th century, she has never shied away from pointing out the contemporary implications of her work.

Like Kakutani, Rosenfeld cannot resist mentioning the Trump lie count at the start of her book. But rather than treat it as a shocking sign of the new “post-truth era,” she uses it to note the obvious fact that truth and democratic politics have “never been on very good terms.” If we are now living in an age of unprecedented mendacity, what was the Nixon administration? For that matter, no less an American icon than George Washington complained, at the end of his presidency, of the “ignorance of facts” and “malicious falsehoods” with which hostile newspapers had tried to destroy his reputation.

Rosenfeld also insists (borrowing, yes, from Foucault) that different societies exist under different “regimes of truth.” Not all truths are self-evident, and not all facts are easily verifiable, so societies need particular evidentiary standards and forms of authority to determine where truth lies. These can change from place to place and from era to era; they are rarely (if ever) stable or uncon-
tested, but continuities are still discernible.

Our own regime of truth dates back to the 18th century, when a host of Enlightenment thinkers challenged established churches and rulers. They insisted that no single individual or institution should “hold a monopoly…on determining what counts as truth in public life” and disputed the idea—long promoted by absolute monarchs—that good rulership involved keeping most information secret and lying when necessary to protect the state. They put a premium on the values of openness, transparency, sincerity, freedom of expression, and unfettered debate. In short, they created the “truth culture of the transatlantic Enlightenment.”

Even for revolutionaries who believed that all should enjoy equal rights, this truth culture was in no sense egalitarian. Many of the Enlightenment’s most influential thinkers had little but contempt for uneducated people and wanted to restrict the pursuit of truth to a learned elite. Rosenfeld quotes Voltaire’s shocking essay on “Man” from 1764, which derided the bulk of humanity as “two-footed animals who live…barely enjoying the gift of speech, barely aware that they are miserable.” For his part, Kant saw the “enlightenment” he championed as the province of men able to function as “scholars.”

Such beliefs, in turn, helped shape the outlook of the men who devised the first constitutions for the revolutionary governments that came to power at the end of the 18th century. The American founders deliberately designed our own government not as a democracy that gave an equal say to all, but as a republic that, in the words of James Madison, would be ruled by “men who possess [the] most wisdom to discern, and [the] most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society.” In creating the federal government, they allowed for direct election by the people for only one-half of one branch: the House of Representatives. (The Senate would eventually follow, more than 100 years later.) Many of the republic’s early leaders worried that the press could lead the people dangerously astray, and some of them advocated strong limits on free speech—including the repressive Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798.

Similar patterns could be observed elsewhere. The French Revolution may have turned in a genuinely inclusive, democratic direction between 1792 and 1794, but the promise of that moment dissolved amid the spectacular violence of war, civil war, and the Reign of Terror. After 1794, and still more after Napoleon Bonaparte took power in 1799, the suffrage won during the revolution became restricted to men of property, and much of the power once held by elected representatives was now handed off to unelected graduates of a small number of elite schools—whose successors continue to wield disproportionate influence in France to this day.

Over the last two centuries, even as this revolutionary brand of elitism ebbed, a different form has strengthened immeasurably: In nearly all democratic societies, we have witnessed the rise of the expert. As modern society has grown more complex, it has become far more dependent on people who possess specialized knowledge: economists, statisticians, engineers, architects, lawyers, scientists of every description. We do not defer to their truth judgments because of their wisdom or virtue; we defer because it is practical to do so—we need their expertise. And while they do not rule over us directly, the authority they exercise on the basis of their truth judgments can give them a power comparable to or greater than that of many elected officials.

This reign of experts, however, can threaten democratic governance just as much as restrictions on suffrage. The epistemological authority that experts enjoy can lead them to retreat into a bubble in which they are insulated from public judgment and criticism, and over time they can devolve into a privileged interest group as scornful and condescending toward ordinary people as the most snobby of the founders. Perhaps the most visible example of this has been the European Union, where regulation-generating technocrats have multiplied while remaining at a greater distance from the electorate than their counterparts in most democratic nation-states.

Worse, while experts base their authority to make truth judgments on their supposed objectivity, in practice this objectivity is easily compromised. Some think tanks that claim to conduct impartial research are in fact thoroughly partisan. Others, while pretending more convincingly to independence, still remain dependent on corporate sponsors. Experts routinely dance through the revolving door connecting government or think-tank positions to industry and associated lobbying groups. All of these practices undermine the Enlightenment culture of truth on which democracy rests. And the more that ordinary people become aware of these practices, the more likely they are to denounce expertise in general as a fraud, an ideological hoax, or fake news, undermining the culture of truth still further.

This brings us to the other side of the great fault line along which the relationship between modern democracy and truth can shudder and shake: populism. Drawing on her earlier work, Rosenfeld points out that populism also has roots that stretch back deep into the transatlantic Enlightenment. Even as thinkers like Voltaire scorned the common people and advocated government by highly educated elites, other thinkers were developing the idea that a “common sense” present in all people (or, at least, all adult white men) gave them the capacity to judge on matters of the common good, and therefore to participate equally in government.

The idea played a powerful role in legitimating the democratic movements that arose during the age of revolutions. But from the start, the valorization of ordinary people’s common sense often came bound up with a contempt for and suspicion of elites and their learning. Thomas Paine, in his great revolutionary pamphlet Common Sense, accused British elites of trying to hoodwink ordinary Americans, while Edmund Burke mocked the French revolutionary politicians whose attachment to “political metaphysics” and “abstract rule” led them to despise the sound experience of ordinary men.

This rebellion against expert opinion can threaten standards of truth in obvious ways. It can lead to a suspicion of and contempt for expertise in general, a dismissal of complexity and abstraction, and an assumption that the most apparently difficult or intractable problems are really very simple. My own favorite example comes from the 1993 film Dave, in which Kevin Kline, as an impersonator who has taken the place of the president, sits down for an evening with an accountant friend and a pocket calculator, and quickly solves all the problems of the federal budget. Alas, with Donald Trump, reality has edged all too close to the film, with the businessman president of the United States claiming that he understands everything from Middle Eastern politics to banking to the “horror of nuclear” better than the supposed “experts.”
A s a result, Rosenfeld argues, the fault line between faith in expertise and faith in popular common sense has left the relationship between democracy and truth precarious throughout all of modern history. It has been a powerful driver of the vulnerability that democracy has shown in the face of both oligarchic technocracy and populist tyranny. And even in less dire circumstances, it has made it much more difficult for consensual or authoritative standards of truth to hold back the floods of mendacity that naturally well up wherever ambitious people compete for political power. But if the connection has been so tenuous since the 18th century, are we really in a new sort of crisis? And if so, what caused it?

In her final chapter, Rosenfeld quickly and decisively refutes the idea that French philosophers somehow turned Americans into added relativists. Instead of belaboring the point, she concentrates on two other recent phenomena that have led conflicts over what counts as truth—not to mention the sheer amount of mendacity in public life—to increase exponentially in recent years: the rise of a news machine that thrives on outrage and the advent of social media. Both of these may be well-known suspects where the “death of truth” is concerned, but Rosenfeld has interesting points to make about them. In both cases, she argues, these developments are especially dangerous because they call into question the very idea of common standards and authorities for truth-telling. The power of conservative talk radio and Fox News does not only come from their relentless propagandizing for hard-line Republicans and their even more relentless demonizing of the left. It also comes from their ability to delegitimize, in the minds of their audience, mainstream sources of information who, despite the liberal bent of their personnel, generally make good faith efforts to report facts impartially and objectively. Rush Limbaugh rarely lets a faith effort to report facts impartially and objectively. Rush Limbaugh rarely lets a faith effort to report facts impartially and objectively. Right-wing hosts like Limbaugh and Sean Hannity are skilled entertainers (it is no easy feat to keep an audience engaged for hours a day, every weekday) who can generate large profits for the stations and networks on which they appear. Facebook and Twitter also profit from the business generated by rumor, innuendo, falsehood, and conspiracy theories, and as recent congressional hearings have shown in the case of Facebook, the companies have very little incentive to do anything about the problem.

Beyond the information industries, powerful business interests have also exploited populist resentment by depicting government regulations on everything from the environment to insider trading as “elitist” restraints on free enterprise and the wealth it generates. Figures like the Koch brothers have been all too happy to fund think tanks and media outlets that denigrate the scientific and economic expertise behind these regulations.

This correlation of populism and profit in fact marks a worrisome historical shift. At the end of the 19th century, when populism first emerged as a coherent political force in the United States, it acted in large part as a check on the dominant capitalist forces of the day. The People’s Party platform of 1892 attacked monopolies, championed workers’ rights, and declared that “the fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind.” Populists campaigned for government regulation, not against it. Today, populist furies constitute a direct source of profit for some of the most dynamic and economically important companies on the planet. The Koch brothers do not even bother to squirm away from this obvious fact. Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg do squirm, but it is becoming increasingly clear that they do not control the forces they have unleashed.

Faced with this very real crisis, what should we do? At the end of her book, Rosenfeld quickly runs through a number of worthwhile initiatives: working to preserve judicial independence and the integrity of elections, fostering and protecting investigative journalism and higher education, and so forth. She also argues that, to counter the unruely economic forces that have helped to generate the current crisis, the most important answer lies in political action and government regulation. “We in the United States and elsewhere need to think long and hard,” she writes, “about the pitfalls of allowing a fully free-market approach, where money is unlimited,” to dominate the mechanisms by which we arrive at political truths. “Enhanced rules and regulations for communication are required if truth is to be either the starting point of our political process or the aim.”

This is, admittedly, a project fraught with peril. The line between enhanced rules and regulations for communication and the repressive abridgment of free speech can all too easily be transgressed, especially when the power to regulate falls into the wrong hands. In addition, such projects can easily backfire, as increasing regulation feeds conspiracy theories about government control and makes it easier than ever for populist firebrands to depict mainstream reporting and opinion as “fake news.” In the end, the most effective way to address the problem is to restrain the economic power of the companies and interests that profit most directly from populist attacks on epistemological authority, as well as the underlying distributions of power that have led to the current populist discontent.

But even as progressive forces work toward this long-term goal, Rush Limbaugh and Fox News are not about to start moderating their opinions, and Facebook and Twitter are unlikely to do much to regulate themselves, no matter how much earnest criticism they receive in The New York Times. It is also time to start serious discussions about how to keep the immensely powerful communications forces unleashed in the past generation from immeasurably harming the public good. These are discussions to be entered into carefully, judiciously, moderately. But they are important to have. Far more important, it might be added, than placing bets on when Donald Trump hits the 10,000th lie of his presidency.
A Dance to the Music of Time is a series of novels, spanning some 1.1 million words, that describes close to six decades in the life of its narrator, Nick Jenkins. It took the English novelist Anthony Powell, who created the character as a fictional alter ego, a quarter of a century to write, and its 12 volumes trickled into print between 1951 and 1975, at the rate of roughly one every two years. Despite its intimidating length, there's something to be said for not reading Dance piecemeal but all at once, lest the more fleeting of Powell's 400-odd characters lose definition and one ends up, five volumes in, wondering who on earth Horace Isbister is. (You didn't know? He's a fashionable painter whose aggressively realistic portraits Jenkins must stoically endure seeing on the walls of the people he visits.) It takes several weeks of sustained and slightly deranged concentration to follow Jenkins, his friends, their lovers, and an ever-expanding group of comrades at arms as they engage, irk, possess, and lose one another in a chain of meetings, coupleings, and concatenations that is finally broken, in somewhat sinister fashion, in 1971.

Dance offers a wide view from a single life. We follow Jenkins from his school and university days in the 1920s, through the bohemian and gilded circles he inhabits as a young publisher and novelist, and into his World War II years as a junior officer posted to Northern Ireland—keeping England's extremities safe, as it were—and then as a liaison with various European governments-in-exile in London. The final volumes are set in Britain's postwar literary and artistic circles. Despite forays to Italy, the United States, and rural England, Dance is perhaps the supreme London novel of the 20th century, an examination of the human behavior that defines the upper echelons of this brash, resilient, often pitiless place. Powell deals at length with the characters who make it so—among them the impecunious egotist and literary impersonator X Trapnel, and Pamela Flitton, a woman of dark malignancy who devours Trapnel, among other lovers, and dies of an overdose in a hotel room. All the while, we advance toward the series' conclusion amid gongs of mortality and the savage rituals of a New Age cult. "Less original novelists tenaciously follow their protagonists," Evelyn Waugh wrote of the series in 1962. "In the Music of Time we watch through the glass of a tank; one after another various specimens swim towards us; we see them clearly, then with a barely perceptible flick of fin or tail, they are off into the murk."

Powell was inspired in his choice of title by the 17th-century French artist Nicolas Poussin. Over repeated visits to London's Wallace Collection, Powell would linger by Poussin's painting A Dance to the Music of Time, in which the seasons, represented by four classically draped figures, move to the music of a lyre being plucked by a naked, winged graybeard. Powell pictured Poussin's quartet as members of a modern society, "stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly," as he wrote in the series' opening volume, A Question of Upbringing, "while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance."

Movements, figures, and set pieces are the constituents of Powell's Dance. Its themes are power, ridicule, subterfuge, and sex. Jenkins's experiences are so close to those of Powell that Dance cannot be considered only a work of fiction, and yet it is too stylized a crossover to be called an autobiography, and many of its characters aren't neatly identifiable with a single real-life person. The last two books in the

THE NEAR-MISS GENERATION

Anthony Powell's England

by CHRISTOPHER DE BELLAIGUE

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Anthony Powell

Dancing to the Music of Time

By Hilary Spurling

Alfred A. Knopf. 480 pp. $35

Anthony Powell, dancing to the Music of Time, is aimed not only at explaining Powell, but also at laying the ground for Dance's rehabilitation.

The series, Temporary Kings and Hearing Secret Harmonies, are about voyeurism, and they recall Jenkins's uncanny focus as an observer and his reluctance to reveal his own intimate feelings. As Powell wrote in his actual memoirs, “not everyone can stand the strain of gazing down too long into the personal crater, with its scene of Hieronymus Bosch activities taking place in the depths.”

What's long been needed is a biographer to take a serious estimate of Powell's own depths—this man who, as one friend complained, could not be misunderstood because he didn't “give anything to go on.” Hilary Spurling, acclaimed biographer of Matisse and a trusted friend of Powell in his old age, has now taken on such a task. Powell's great series dominated his life; it exhausted and defined him. He lived to see it toppled from the acclaim it enjoyed in the early 1960s and dismissed as an irrelevant tale of class connections. Spurling's Anthony Powell: Dancing to the Music of Time is aimed not only at explaining Powell, but also at laying the ground for Dance's rehabilitation.

Powell was born in 1905 into a troubled household whose outward character was set by his father's military career. Philip Powell was a British Army officer who never achieved senior command and was prone to terrible rages. His wife, Maud, was 15 years older, mystically inclined, and shunned society rather than be mocked as a cradle-snatcher. An only daughter who never achieved senior command and was prone to terrible rages. His only daughter, whose eponymous founder was “close to detesting books with all his heart.” Powell's main job turned out to be rejecting manuscripts, but he found time to improve himself by reading Conrad and James. He also began to befriend some contemporary novelists, including a young Evelyn Waugh, who at the time was studying carpentry when he wasn't drunk.

While his publishing job kept him solvent, Powell started to write fiction in his spare time, hoarding characters and milieus for use on the page. Of the summer of 1931, which Powell spent in Toulon, a Mediterranean fleshpot seasonally infested by London bohemians, Spurling writes that it was a “prototype for the many hectic gatherings that would punctuate the Dance, where co-occurrence regularly assembles a disparate bunch of people, shakes them up together and deposits them.”

Powell was at this time feeling his way toward the literary style that would achieve maturity in Dance. He published his first novels, Afternoon Men (a love story with satirical overtones) and Venusberg (a slight tale set in a fictional Baltic capital based on Helsinki), in the early 1930s, and both captured what Spurling calls his “reluctance to ratify borders between the comic and the serious.”

A series of women were now teaching Powell love. They included Nina Hambro—16 years his senior, who picked him up after they met in Paris and gave him what Alec Waugh (Evelyn's older brother) called “a liberal education”—and the communist Marion Coates. Coates was the estranged wife of a fashionable Canadian architect; Powell was captivated by “her gravity and beauty, and deposits them.”

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A woman named Jean Templer darts in and out of Jenkins's life in the course of the third volume, The Acceptance World. She’s pale and a little mocking, with dark, luxurious lashes. Over dinner in a convivial group at the Ritz, while the snow falls outside, Jenkins convinces himself he's not interested. But after the Armagnac, he and Jean find themselves sharing the back seat of a car, which Jean's brother is driving at speed through the slushy London streets, past a billboard in which “the electrically illuminated young lady in a bathing dress dives eternally through the petrol-tainted air.” After registering this vision, Jenkins takes Jean in his arms:

Her response, so sudden and passionate, seemed surprising only a minute or two later. All at once everything was changed. Her body felt at the same time hard and yielding, giving a kind of glow as if live current issued from it. I used to wonder afterwards whether, in the last resort, of all the time we spent together, however ecstatic, those first moments on the Great West Road were not the best.

It has long been known that Coates was an inspiration for Jean. Spurling's new revelation—which seems to carry the authority of Powell's family—is that the fictional affair’s “painful aftermath,” in which Jenkins is horrified to discover that Jean hasn't been true to him, was inspired by the distress that Powell received at the hands of his own wife. In 1934, the author married a “sceptical…infinitely discreet and endlessly inquisitive” aristocrat named Violet Pakenham. She went on to have an affair with another man, whose identity she never divulged. When Powell found out after the event, probably in 1946, he “plunged into a black hole of depression, exhaustion and almost insane overwork.”

Despite several miscarriages, the wartime separations, and the distress caused by Violet's infidelity, the Powells' marriage, in Spurling's account, was full of resilience and humor. With time came a harmony of interests—from raising their two sons and improving the Chantry, the country house they bought in 1952, to the joint effort of sustaining Powell's literary output, which, besides his novels and memoirs, included hundreds of book reviews. As the Powells' elder son, Tristram, put it, Violet was the “right arm of my father's imagination.”

It was during Spurling's visits to the Chantry in the 1970s—when she was writing a handbook to Dance—that she and her husband got to know the Powells. “The pattern was always the same,” she later recalled.
“We arrived for lunch and then walked round the lake, returning around 4 o’clock to find Violet…on the sofa in the library with a tea-tray on the low table in front of her…here they capped and recapped each other’s stories, checked dates and sources, bounced ideas, jokes, and memories off each other. Their antiphonal exchange was…unlike I’d ever heard before.”

By the time Powell asked Spurling to be his biographer, “on the understanding that nothing whatever was to be done for as long as possible,” they were friends. The result is a perceptive and sensitive portrait that has benefited from Spurling’s access to Powell’s papers, but one that averts its gaze from the crater of “Hieronymus Bosch activities.”

Spurling herself hints at themes that a less tactful biographer might have developed. A lifelong insomniac, Powell suffered intermittently from depression, which he and Violet personified as an angry dwarf, complete with beard, boots, and bobble hat. Whether these bouts, which sometimes shaded into a death wish, amounted to a depressive personality isn’t clear, nor are the long-term psychological effects that the “abominable” Philip Powell had on his son. That Tony himself was capable of epic meltdowns was demonstrated when Evelyn Waugh’s son Auberon savaged a collection of his reviews, leaving him “unbalanced with grief and rage,” as his friend V.S. Naipaul wrote. For all her depiction of the marriage as essentially happy, Spurling allows that problems lurked “beneath the surface” when she visited the couple in their later years.

Powell’s psychological fragility evidently found an outlet in manicial activity, such as the time he “slashed, scythed and chopped” through the undergrowth at the Chantry, though this doesn’t compare to the monstrous collage of human figures cut out of magazines, catalogs, and Christmas cards that he created in the boiler room of the house. Spurling writes that “there is something elemental, even horrifying about the scale and impact of this torrential outpouring,” which seems to havefunctioned, “like gardening, as a means of disarming the conscious mind so as to gain access to the turbulent, unplumbed depths below.”

T here is another witness who can help us understand Powell, of course, and that is Jenkins. Over the years, he has been unjustly reduced to the status of a window onto events, his name often joined to the epithet “colorless.” While Jenkins rarely introduces new topics of conversation or takes decisive action, the analytical and profoundly humorous way he sees the world defines him as a believable, even attractive, character, albeit one whose facial expressions we don’t see, whose laugh we don’t hear, and whose feelings we are rarely trusted with.

But while Powell professed to dislike his alter ego—“I know Jenkins is awful,” he told Violet, “but he’s more to be pitied than blamed”—for the reader, the important thing is that he is trusted by so many of the other characters in Dance. People are constantly sharing confidences with him that he betrays to no one but us. He’s a good man to have around when it comes to putting drunks to bed or for calming the situation when an irate husband confronts his wife and her lover. To call Jenkins dull is to miss the point of his character; while he rarely judges the moral performance of others, he doesn’t seek the society of those he doesn’t like, and we enjoy the rakes and ne’er-do-wells he does know. Although his social set is rarefied, Jenkins isn’t a snob; nor is he a homophobe or a misogynist. He likes and is kind to foreigners. He gives absolutely nothing away of his relationship with his wife, a skeptical, discreet, inquisitive aristocrat named Isobel Tolland.

Jenkins is so alert to the doings of other people—whether it’s a flustered author entering a room with his hand extended “as if to grasp the handle of a railway carriage before the already moving train gathered speed,” or the glance of a woman “catching sight of another woman who reminds her of herself”—that he makes Nick Carraway seem unobservant. And given the prevalence of egotists in the series, it’s nice to be in the hands of someone who isn’t self-absorbed.

Jenkins provides peerless descriptions of the comic set-pieces that punctuate Dance. One of these is a lunch party given in the late 1920s by the industrialist Sir Magnus Donners. His castle, Stourwater, has been expunged of all suggestion of medieval horror, and Sir Magnus has blanketed his personality with conversation of such banality that Jenkins almost supposes him to be “teasing his guests by acting the part of a bore in a drawing-room comedy.” Only the vaguely disturbing set of his mouth suggests inner ferment—that, and hints that Sir Magnus’s sexual tastes involve domination.

Lunch in the great hall (where Jenkins is seated next to Jean Templer) is suddenly disturbed by the infiltration—to use a favorite Powell word—of Dance’s most-loathed character, Kenneth Widmerpool. Most of us know a Widmerpool, a person whose ruthlessness, self-centeredness, and hideously ingratiating manner prove—mystifyingly—to be no impediment to worldly success. The tax that Powell levies on Widmerpool is to humiliate him at regular intervals.

As an employee of Sir Magnus’s conglomerate, Widmerpool has drafted a speech that he has brought over for his boss’s approval. The necessary amendments are made; then it is time for everyone to go home. The castle’s perfectly manicured inner quadrangle is the setting for Widmerpool’s undoing in full view of the departing guests as he is betrayed by his little Morris motor car, which refuses to start while his face reddens behind the grimy windscreen.

Sir Magnus, the ground crunching under his tread, stepped heavily across towards the spot.

‘Is anything wrong?’ he asked, mildly.

The question was no doubt intended as purely rhetorical, because it must have been clear…that something was very wrong indeed. However, obeying that law that requires most people to minimise to a superior a misfortune which, to an inferior, they would magnify. Widmerpool thrust his head through the open window of the car, and, smiling reverentially, gave an assurance that all was well.

But this manifestly isn’t the case, and the other guests give the Morris a push. Eventually it coughs into life, but Widmerpool has lost his composure and commits a final, catastrophic error of pilotage:

The Morris suddenly shot backward with terrific force…running precipitately into one of the stone urns where it stood, crowned with geraniums, at the corner of the sunken lawn. For a moment it looked as though Widmerpool and his car would follow the flower-pot and its heavy base, as they crashed down on to the grass, striking against each other with so much force that portions of decorative moulding
broke from off the urn…. The engine of the Morris stopped again, giving as it did so a kind of wail like the departure of an unhappy spirit…

By this time Jenkins is in another car, being driven away from the scene. He glances back and catches

a glimpse of the absolutely impassive face of Sir Magnus, as he strode with easy steps once more across the gravel to where Widmerpool was climbing out of his car. The sun was still hot, its rays caught the sweat glistening on Widmerpool’s features, and flashed on his spectacles, from which, as from a mirror, the light was reflected.

Farce as fluidly and cinematically written by Powell forces the reader to muse wonderingly, even with sympathy, on the victim and his mishap, and on the strange, unspoken power of the narrator. It is a surprisingly radical power that produces a different end result than the unalloyed pleasure delivered by P.G. Wodehouse’s scenes of spiteless anarchy. The difference between Jenkins and Bertie Wooster is the difference between the adult and the child. Jenkins is an educated voyeur, alive to the moral ambiguity of his position, and the praise that the British politician and writer Harold Nicolson heaped on “the bland compassion are close neighbors.

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by the late 1960s—before its final volumes were even written—the prestige of Dance was in decline, the archaic manners and Tory leanings of its creator seemingly irreconcilable with the left liberalism that dominated the literary avant-garde. It was almost a badge of honor to disparage the series, Spurling writes, as, for example, the Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin did when he came across it, pronouncing it “elitist, class-ridden, an English upper-class comedy of manners written by a snob.” One by one, Powell’s prominent allies turned against him: first Malcolm Muggeridge, the most famous broadcaster of his generation; then Philip Larkin, the poet of middle England; and finally—though Powell didn’t live to see it—V.S. Naipaul.

Though Rankin has since revised his opinion of Dance, there is now little general awareness of a novelist who never, even in his heyday, rivaled Waugh in the public affection. Politics hasn’t helped, for the unfortunate fact is that Powell distrusted liberal and loathed the European Community, positions that in our time of gathering insularity link him to a variety of unsavory types. For all Hilary Spurling’s success at presenting Powell in his milieu, the rehabilitation of Dance itself is a much greater challenge. The series is long. It is about an elite that no longer exists. For Dance to surmount accusations of irrelevance, attention must turn to the work’s essential qualities, which put it near the apex of modern literary achievement.

Powell succeeds in Dance because, over such a vast span, his characterizations remain his alone; he rarely falls back on an established or conventional type but treats his characters, especially those who conduct themselves most grotesquely, with the same essential seriousness. This, again, is a product of Powell’s exceptional powers of observation; every human is visibly unique and is treated on his or her own terms. More fundamentally, Dance succeeds because it transcends its origins—which are, like those of any work of art, inevitably parochial—and touches the reader by appealing to the values of human solidarity and wonder.

We are accustomed to thinking of Jenkins as the conduit of these values; very occasionally he is surprised by them, and we in turn are touched by his very human surprise. Toward the end of The Military Philosophers, the ninth book in the series, Jenkins escorts Allied military attachés through newly liberated France, when he spots an overturned staff car in the grass by the road:

The camouflage body-work was already eaten away by rust, giving an impression of abandonment decades before. High up in the branches of one of the poplars, positioned like a cunningly-contrived scarecrow, the tatters of a field-grey tunic, black-and-white collar patches just discernible, fluttered in the faint breeze and hard cold sunlight…. [An] old and bearded Frenchman appeared plodding along the road. He was wearing a beret, and, like many of the local population, cloaked in the olive green rubber of a British army anti-gas cape. As our convoy passed, he stopped and waved a greeting. He looked absolutely delighted, like a peasant in a fairy story who has found the treasure. For some reason it was all too much. A gigantic release seemed to have taken place. The surroundings had suddenly become overwhelming. I was briefly in tears.
In the first few seconds of her new album, the Washington, DC–bred, post-punk artist Sneaks makes it clear that she doesn’t really care about easing listeners into her world. She starts the opening song with distorted vocals which whisper the name of the album, *Highway Hypnosis*, over and over again like an eerie incantation. A shadowy bass kicks in, along with shards of noise and glitchy synth flourishes, and then a bloodcurdling screech of “Oh my gosh!” cuts through the arrangement. Another voice pipes in to declare that “*Highway Hypnosis* is out now.”

The introduction is jarring, even stifling, playing out like a demented advertisement while simultaneously poking fun at the fanfare that comes with promoting new music. It also reflects the quietly rebellious, somewhat sardonic spirit of Sneaks, a 23-year-old DIY maverick who doesn’t make things that are conventional or straightforward. She revels in rawness.

Sneaks, aka Eva Moolchan, was previously a member of Shitstains, a short-lived band that attracted the attention of Katie Alice Greer, a co-founder of the influential DC label Sister Polygon and a member of the city’s preeminent punk outfit, Priests. Sister Polygon has nurtured the careers of, among others, Baltimore indie darling Snail Mail and the defiant rockers Downtown Boys, and the label took Sneaks on as a solo artist. Her debut, *Gymnastics* (later reissued by Merge Records), featured 10 threadbare, post-punk songs driven only by a drum machine, bass, and her partsung, part-spoken-word vocals. In 2017, she released her second effort, *It’s a Myth*, another short and punchy compendium that proved her willingness to tinker with electronic production and faster tempos. *Highway Hypnosis* arrives nearly five years

*REBEL REBEL*

**DC’s post-punk maverick**

by JULYSSA LOPEZ

Julyssa Lopez is a writer based in Berlin who covers music, art, and culture. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post and The Fader, and on NPR.
after Sneaks began making music as a solo act, and the album finds her at her most freewheeling. She’s abandoned some of her minimalist tendencies and loaded up on textures and looped vocals, like a collage artist compiling assorted odds and ends to make a compelling, if somewhat disorganized, montage. The album, which Sneaks produced alongside her studio engineer, Carlos Hernandez, and the Brooklyn producer Tony Seltzer, boasts the acidity of Gymnastics and the strains of melody from It’s a Myth while expanding her range. After the dark, almost Lynch-like opener, Sneaks pumps up the bpm and bursts right into the art-house cut “The Way It Goes.” She positions the synth-pop haze of “Ecstasy” next, and revisits the punk edge of her first record with “Holy Cow Never Saw a Girl Like Her” toward the album’s end. The closer, “Hong Kong to Amsterdam,” flickers with kinetic club energy.

The songs cover a lot of ground, but they’re often jagged and capricious, either ending abruptly or dragging past their logical endpoint. That doesn’t seem to bother Sneaks; after all, her impulsiveness and need for variety fuel the album’s sudden turns. This eclecticism lets her change up her vocal delivery, which can shift from the Beat-like spoken-word chants of “Beliefs” to the gauzy vocalizations on “Cinnamon.” Her writing, she told the UK music magazine Load And Quiet, comes “from my environment, lyrically: words, some of what sticks out in a commercial, or what sticks out in an ad, what words grab my attention. And then reusing that with a different meaning. With my own meaning.” It’s a style that’s a little Dadaist at its core as Sneaks uses made-up mantras, random words, and childlike rhymes to reject traditional song forms and introduce a bout of absurdity into her work. On “Saiditioneza,” for example, she builds a rhythm by repeating an invented word with sing-song silliness. She’s smart about leveraging her ambiguous lyrics to bring out her production choices, too. Her plaintive call that “I think I need a little wiggle room” on “The Way It Goes” boosts the track’s intensity, and her dreamy line “running round the world with a planet of my own” reinforces the euphoric wooziness of “Ecstasy.”

In an interview with Paper magazine, Sneaks recalled that, when she was making Highway Hypnosis, she “was able to kind of just collect a bunch of things, and really reminisce on what I love about music.” The album courses with the kind of movement and dance energy that reflects the influences pushing Sneaks creatively: She spent time in Berlin as a participant in 2018’s Red Bull Music Academy, and some of the city’s live-wire electronic scene has certainly leaked into songs like “Hong Kong to Amsterdam.” But there’s little in the way of personal exposition, likely because narrative isn’t central to her mission of sonic nonconformity. Her messages are indirect, and the details require some digging. If a song titled “Addis” is about her Ethiopian heritage, she obscures any obvious readings with fuzzy percussion and faraway vocals. And when Paper wondered if “Money Don’t Grow on Trees” harbored an anti-capitalist message, Sneaks would only confirm that the song’s carefree abandon came out of the experience of living in Europe, away from the political turmoil in the United States.

Sneaks remains elusive. While artists like the Nuyorican rapper Princess Nokia—someone Sneaks calls an inspiration—push the boundaries with confessional lyrics and powerful declarations, Sneaks shows there are plenty of ways to break the rules and, in the words of her current label, Merge Records, join “the resistance forged by queer black feminists who create, explore, empower, conquer, and play bass.” Sneaks doesn’t try to guide her audience; she opens the door to her world and lets them interpret as they wish.

Even so, Sneaks doesn’t allow much time for exploration. No song on Highway Hypnosis makes it past the three-minute mark, which is pretty typical of the artist (her last two releases were 14 and 19 minutes long). Brevity carries an undeniable power; one of the best examples came last year when the Philadelphia rapper Tierra Whack dropped Whack World, an album that delivered entire narratives via 15 one-minute tracks. But where Whack jams big ideas into extremely small packages, Sneaks prefers to traffic in fragmented flashes—of what, it’s not always clear. The effect can sometimes feel unfinished and hurried, yet there’s an undeniable spontaneity that Sneaks creates as listeners attempt to keep up with her rapid-fire musings and motivations. She has so many ideas to get across, and her short, stripped-back experiments are one way to tackle them all.

If her latest album gets chaotic, it’s because Sneaks welcomes the messiness. She remains confidently punk in her ethos, more interested in spattering paint on a wall than delivering neat concepts to anyone. She’s on her own journey, and on Highway Hypnosis, she’s simply invited listeners along for the ride.
Puzzle No. 3488

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

1 Ford, say, to write and attempt a trade (9)
6 Picciotto? Picciotto comprehends what is being discussed (5)
9 Hiss and evil glare (5)
10 Carry on—I’m retreating to be protected by barber (9)
11 Best sellers crush 24 (3,6)
12 Debilitated after having finally spent small change (5)
13 Princess or fashion designer (4)
14 Multinational clothing retailer a pair of educators have inherited from older relatives, perhaps? (4-2-4)
18 Funnymen Charles is welcoming short visitors from outer space? (6,4)
19 Dance with terrible pest (4)
22 Like Yeats, Murdoch and Waugh, at last (5)
24 Segregation ruined 11 (9)
26 Don’t stop to look back at musical instrument capturing interest (4,5)
27 Knife a god (5)
28 North country on the Arabian Peninsula is an island? (2,3)

DOWN

1 Standing around, a tree fell to earth (7)
2 This rogue reformed to become honorable (9)
3 Eastern war damaged chopper—this could make it hard to perceive sounds (6)
4 Magnificent starter served in small dish in Southeastern city (5)
5 Definitely ate dry crackers in the recent past (9)
6 Gingrich backing accessories for the Jazz Age (8)
7 Identify piano string (5)
8 18D, i.e., switched register at front desk (5,2)
9 Definitely ate dry crackers in the recent past (9)
10 Identify piano string (5)
11 Best sellers crush 24 (3,6)
12 Debilitated after having finally spent small change (5)
13 Princess or fashion designer (4)
14 Multinational clothing retailer a pair of educators have inherited from older relatives, perhaps? (4-2-4)
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27 Knife a god (5)
28 North country on the Arabian Peninsula is an island? (2,3)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3487

ACROSS 1 Z = EROS + UM + GAME
2 29 B-OY (rev.) = I.E. 9 hidden
3 STEG O S (rev.) + AU + R = MOUNTS (norw. amag.) 5 SRC + A DIAN [anag.] 6 ERIN
4 BEE + FACIO (rev.) = WIN + TERTIME (anag.) 13 SM Am + ESECFCAT
5 SISKIN + RAFT = 17 FIGSROOT + H (norw. amag.) 19 practic amag.
6 TINOBORN = CROSS + OLDER

DOWN 1 Z INC. = 2 RER UKES
2 STEG OS (rev.) + AU + R = MOUNTS (norw. amag.) 5 SRC + A DIAN [anag.] 6 ERIN
3 BEE + FACIO (rev.) = WIN + TERTIME (anag.) 13 SM Am + ESECFCAT
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Morocco

APRIL 24–MAY 5, 2019 | Contemporary & Imperial Morocco

To travel in Morocco is to move from one era of history to another, experiencing a culture that fuses indigenous Berber traditions with Arab, Jewish, Andalusian, and European influences.

THE HIGHLIGHTS

- **Attend** a briefing with Spanish journalist David Alvarado, who has covered North Africa for more than a decade as a correspondent for Spanish-language CNN, about the role of democracy in Morocco.

- **Meet** with Asma Lamrabet, a feminist leader who is part of a school of thought often referred to as “Islamic feminism.”

- **Hear** from Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, a communications professor who will discuss the complex role of the media in Morocco, including the practice of self-censorship.

- **Stop in** at the offices of Centre des Droits des Gens (“Rights of the People”) and learn about its work as one of the biggest human-rights organizations in Morocco.

- **Depart** in a 4×4 for an overnight at a camp in the highest dunes of Morocco—the towering Erg Chebbi—and experience the magic of a night in the Sahara desert.

- **Join** activist Nadir Bouhmouch, who is working on a documentary about the six-year protest against the operator of a silver mine in a remote Moroccan village in the Sahara.

- **Visit** Meknes, a UNESCO World Heritage site and 17th-century capital; the vast ruins of Volubilis, Rome’s commercial capital for the region up to the third century; and Sefrou, home to celebrated artisans and once one of the African continent’s largest Jewish communities.

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