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Bristol Bay is one of Alaska’s few healthy salmon habitats. Can it survive the twin threats of a rapidly changing climate and a massive Trump-backed mine?

JULIA O’MALLEY
Unrecognized Labor

Many thanks for Melissa Range’s fine poem “The Grimké Sisters at Work on Theodore Dwight Weld’s American Slavery as It Is (1838)” [September 30]. The powerful book that was born from the sisters’ work, American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses, was published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839.

Theodore Weld, Angelina Grimké’s husband, is generally credited as the author (though the book was published without any authors listed) because he was the head of publications at the society at the time. However, the book was really coedited by Angelina Grimké Weld, her sister Sarah Grimké, and Theodore Weld. While he shaped the structure of the book, internal evidence suggests that Grimké Weld wrote the introduction. And when the sisters clipped the articles, notices, and advertisements out of the Southern newspapers that, along with personal testimonies, became the heart of the book, they were serving as frontline editors. Furthermore, it is impossible to imagine that there were not plenty of lively discussions at the dinner table (Grimké lived with the Welds) about issues arising from work on the book. It will take a long time, but I hope someday the book’s coeditors will be correctly identified. In my forthcoming book on the Grimké sisters, I will make that case.

Taking Offense

The September 30 editorial “Operation Enduring War” concluded with a statement that there was “no purpose” to continuing the Afghanistan War other than to “avoid losing.” The Nation forgets or ignores that for 18 years, this “war of vengeance” successfully prevented further attacks on US soil. With the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban can be expected to take control of the Afghan government and impose strict Sharia, which will eliminate freedoms and oppress women. Furthermore, the Taliban and Al Qaeda could resume attacks on American interests within the United States and worldwide.

Donald Salberg, MD
Ann Arbor, Mich.

Hope Amid Troubles

Thank you for Adam McGibbon’s hopeful story “Leaps of Faiths” [September 23]. Having just returned from Belfast, I can report that people in the city seemed worried. With the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive more than two years ago and with the danger of Brexit, they fear the Troubles will start again. On the Nationalist (once called the Catholic) side, murals mostly blasted Trump or depicted leftist themes along with “No Brexit” signs. In the Protestant neighborhoods, there were many British flags, and the murals celebrated heroic Protestant militias. It will be up to the parents and children profiled in McGibbon’s story to spare Northern Ireland from this growing dread.

Mike Boland
Fishers, Ind.
The Climate Moment

In August 2018 a photographer snapped a shot of a girl sitting alone outside the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm. Next to her lay a sign in Swedish that said, “School strike for climate.” The girl skipped school for three weeks and each Friday after that, heading to Parliament and handing out leaflets that read, “I am doing this because you adults are shitting on my future.”

Greta Thunberg is no longer striking alone. The climate activist, now 16 years old, was joined on September 20 by millions of others in a wave of strikes that rippled through cities and towns around the world. Enormous crowds marched and sang and chanted through the streets of Jakarta and Johannesburg, Warsaw and Brisbane, Athens and San Salvador, led mostly by kids and teenagers. The grassroots group 350.org, which supported the strikes, estimated that more than 4 million people took part globally, in 5,800 actions across 163 countries.

Photos and videos from around the world captured a mix of euphoria and grim defiance. In Kabul, Afghanistan, a group of protesters led by young women marched under the protection of armed security forces. In the Solomon Islands students waded into the rising ocean, which has already caused entire communities to relocate. In Houston hundreds of young people gathered in a torrential downpour, their city still awash in floodwater from Tropical Storm Imelda. “Our community does not have to look far to see the extent to which the climate crisis has affected and will affect our lives,” one of the teenage speakers said. “Just yesterday, we had to endure water rushing into our school through our windows.”

Nobody articulates existential dread as well as teens, or withering scorn for their elders. Both responses are fitting for the crisis. “You’ll die of old age, we’ll die of climate change,” was a common slogan at the strikes. There was plenty of Gen Z humor on display: “We took hot girl summer too far,” read one sign. Elsewhere, three punk kids in black and plaid stood with a placard reading, “I want to die but the planet doesn’t.”

The strikes were several times larger than any previous climate action—one signal among many of the growing sense of urgency around the climate crisis. Translating urgency into political action is the next task and a more difficult one. Three days after the strikes, Thunberg chanted representatives gathered for a climate action summit at the UN General Assembly in New York for leaving it to children to lead this effort. “I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean,” Thunberg said. “Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing.”

The strikes marked the beginning of a series of actions that climate activists aim to continue through 2020, with an eye not only on the US presidential election but also on the UN climate meeting in Glasgow later next year, the most crucial round of talks since the Paris Agreement was negotiated in 2015. The movement plans to target the political leaders it sees as primary barriers to change. This week the youth-led Sunrise Movement announced its first primary target in the 2020 cycle, eight-term Texas Representative Henry Cuellar, who has been called Big Oil’s favorite Democrat. Thanks to pressure from activists, nearly all of the Democratic presidential hopefuls are trying to lay claim to the title of climate candidate.

The picture of Thunberg, alone, at her first school strike is a reminder of how quickly momentum can shift. The climate movement is hardly new, yet there is something palpably different now—not optimism but a kind of resolve. Thunberg does not want credit for this. What she wants is not optimism but a kind of resolve. Thunberg said to members of Congress on September 17. “Don’t invite us here to tell us how inspiring we are without doing anything about it.”

ZOE CARPENTER FOR THE NATION
Bernie and Liz
Together, they’re widening the lane.

For the past several months—and the past three Democratic presidential debates—the party’s two progressive standard-bearers, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, have been making love, not war. As Warren told Anderson Cooper in the first debate, “Bernie and I have been friends forever.” During the second debate, with both of them on the stage the same night, Warren made a point about the disastrous effects of US trade policy—and Sanders chimed in, saying, “Elizabeth is absolutely right.” When Wyoming Representative Liz Cheney attacked Warren on security policy, Sanders tweeted in the Massachusetts senator’s defense, while Warren has resolutely refused repeated media entreaties to disavow her support for Medicare for All, the Vermont senator’s signature initiative.

This absence of infighting on the left—or at least between these two left candidates, since elsewhere on the left the narcissism of small differences rages unabated—has long troubled the centrist press. *New York* magazine’s “Intelligencer” reported the truce between Sanders and Warren was breaking down in June; *Politico* speculated the two were drifting apart in July; *The Hill* posted a hopeful report of imminent hostilities in August. In September, only a few hours after the Working Families Party announced it was endorsing Warren, she spoke in front of more than 20,000 people in New York’s Washington Square Park—the very spot where Sanders, backed by Vampire Weekend, drew a huge crowd in April 2016. Of course, that was also the year Sanders described the WFP as “the closest thing there is to a political partnership that believes in my vision of democratic socialism.”

Does the WFP endorsement mean the cool kids have abandoned Sanders for Warren? Has the American left’s long-awaited—by our enemies—internecine bloodletting finally begun? Is the WFP endorsement evidence of that organization’s decline? Or the abandonment by the WFP leadership of any claim to democracy or socialism? Is a partnership that *Elle* once called “the Jim and Pam of the Democratic race” irretrievably on the rocks?

Some people seem to think so. Our comrades at *Jacobin* were quick to hurl anathemas at the WFP and Warren, dismissing her as the “darling of a particular strata of more affluent liberal progressives.” Online, predictably, the pileup soon turned ugly, with WFP leaders Maurice Mitchell and Nelini Stamp becoming the targets of racist abuse, according to an open letter posted on Medium by Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza and signed by over 100 other black leaders.

Sanders immediately condemned any attempt to harass or bully the WFP leaders. In the immediate aftermath of the endorsement—which must have come as a disappointment to Sanders—his campaign manager, Faiz Shakir, declared, “We look forward to working with the Working Families Party and other allies to defeat Donald Trump. Together, we’ll build a movement across the country to transform our economy to finally work for the working class of this country.”

Surely that must be right. However much some on Team Sanders or Team Warren might be spoiling for a fight, their two principals have shown little inclination to turn on each other. Not while Trump is still in the White House. Or while Joe Biden—whose record on issues ranging from bankruptcy to busing to the invasion of Iraq to trade policy makes him a uniquely weak challenger to Trump, even without his unfortunate habit of tripping over his own tongue—remains the Democratic front-runner.

Because the truth is that plenty of progressives like both candidates. Politics may indeed, as *Nation* contributor Jeffrey C. Isaac recently argued, be “all about choice.” Certainly the WFP has every right to make its preference clear—or at least the preference of a majority under a ranked-choice vote that also gave the party’s national leadership equal weight with members and supporters. And Sanders supporters have every right to highlight that mechanism (though their criticism would have more heft if they held groups that endorsed Sanders, like the Democratic Socialists of America and the electrical workers’ union, to the same standard).

But do the rest of us really have to choose? Already? Working together, Sanders and Warren have been incredibly effective not just in making the case for Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, and all the other issues that are common ground for them but also in dramatically widening the entire left lane of American politics. Thanks to Sanders’s political courage and consistency and Warren’s skillful, steady push at the boundaries of political possibility, ideas once dismissed as radical now dominate the Democratic debates. Sure, Warren calls herself a “capitalist to my bones.” And after deluding ourselves over Barack Obama’s supposed secret radicalism, we’d better believe her. Her supporters wonder, “Is America ready to elect a socialist?” There’s only one way to find out.

Nearly a year ago, *The Nation* argued for the importance of the “ideas primary,” which would offer “reformers, activists, and grassroots groups their best opportunity to have an impact on the political debate.” And so it has.

At some point, we probably will have to choose. The Iowa caucuses in early February should help clarify matters, and the New Hampshire primary the following week is a test of strength both Sanders and Warren need to win. Until then, though, we hope the two candidates maintain their truce, competing to outdo each other in the boldness of their ideas and the breadth and passion of their support—but also continuing to have each other’s backs.

This country has never been in greater need of bold progressive leadership. Or, arguably, been more open to radical solutions to the problems we face. Warren and Sanders show every sign of knowing that. And of knowing something else their supporters might bear in mind: Solidarity begins at home.

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**Fishing, Gone?**

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**Comment**

This country has never been more open to radical solutions to the problems we face.

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October 14, 2019
October 14, 2019

The Nation.

Dear Liza,

I am the editor of an alumni magazine that is sent to a diverse alumni population. I strive to be inclusive in my coverage and usually succeed. A recent issue did not contain any African Americans except in the athletics section, and an African American faculty member complained to me about it, ignoring the many editions that show excellent diversity. I feel it is my job to go where the story is first and worry about diversity second. To me, her criticism that the African American athletes we featured were stereotypical discounts the very real accomplishments of these students. She believes in representation in every issue in what she considers an acceptable way. How would you respond to this complaint and this instruction? —Flummoxed

Dear Flummoxed,

I t is so frustrating to receive criticism that feels unfair. However, we as media producers always have to remember that no one else reads our work as closely as we do. Your colleague may not be a regular reader of the magazine. But that doesn’t make her criticism wrong. We can’t expect anyone to read all of our work in full, as galling as that may be. You say you worry about where the story is first and diversity second, but you would be critical of an editor who never thought black scholars, authors, or scientists were the story. For a reader who sees only this issue of the magazine, alas, the effect is the same. While I agree with you that athletes are worthy of recognition, alumni magazines send important messages about the institution’s values, and to portray black students or graduates only as athletes, even in one issue, sends (unintentionally, of course!) the wrong message about how the school views its black students, their potential, and their achievements.

When it comes to something of this importance, Flummoxed, you have to treat each issue of your magazine as if it’s the only one a reader will ever see, because in many cases it will be. Respond by thanking your colleague for bringing the matter to your attention, acknowledging that she’s right about this particular issue of the magazine, and saying that you understand why, given all the stellar accomplishments of black graduates, she’d find it jarring. Emphasize that you are sorry that this issue of the magazine did not reflect the school. You can add—but not too defensively—that previous issues have been much better in this regard. Tell her you won’t let this happen again. Then don’t let it happen again.

Dear Aspiring Feminist,

F irst of all, Aspiring, it’s perfectly normal, especially at your age, to think about sex a lot. And there’s nothing morally wrong with being superattracted to someone, even someone you don’t know. In fact, this happens to many people (and not only to men) every day.

“Objectification” means viewing someone as a thing rather than a person. The word is usually meant as a feminist critique of the way women are seen in a male-dominated society, as objects for men’s pleasure, without desires, ideas, and achievements of their own. Objectification can be enraging—for example, a man complimenting our ass when we’re giving a serious presen-
AWARDS SEASON

Nation Nominees

This year three people on The Nation’s masthead have been long-listed for a National Book Award. Columnist Laila Lalami has been nominated in the fiction category for The Other Americans, her novel about the mysterious death of a Moroccan immigrant in a small suburb in Southern California. The Guardian wrote that her book “accumulates a kind of revelatory power.” One of our two poetry editors, Carmen Giménez Smith, was nominated in poetry for Be Recorder, an urgent poetics of queerness, immigration, and motherhood. Booklist said that the “collection is everything poetry needs to be in our age of hateful, anti-intellectual race-baiting: deeply thoughtful, urgently provocative, and endlessly imaginative.” And finally, frequent contributor and editorial board member Greg Grandin was long-listed for nonfiction for The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America, a critically acclaimed exploration of how America’s dream of ever-expanding borders has calcified into a border wall. The Nation published an adapted excerpt of the book in February. Congrats and good luck to all!

—Alice Markham-Cantor


Eric Alterman

Vicious Cycle

Three new books try to make sense of Trump’s rise to power.

The most basic question that the Trump presidency raises is: How the hell did this happen?

There is, obviously, no single answer for why this particular miscreant became president of the United States. Were it not for the Russians or WikiLeaks or James Comey, etc., etc., we might still resemble a normal nation. But these isolated explanations do not speak to the larger question of how this jerk got anywhere near the White House in the first place. In the past few months, three authors have sought to address that larger question, and with them, we can begin to see an outline of how the GOP allowed itself to be taken over by people with only a tenuous grasp of reality.

In his book American Carnage, Tim Alberta, a former reporter for National Review now with Politico, tells a straightforward tale, albeit one that whitewashes the dishonesty and extremism of the pre-Trump Republican Party. His well-researched thesis is that GOP leaders remained “blissfully ignorant of the discontent simmering below the surface.” Even so, they unintentionally stoked this anger by condescending to rather than challenging the increasingly demagogic representatives the grass roots were sending to Washington.

Brian Rosenwald, a coeditor of The Washington Post’s “Made by History” section, tells a complementary story in Talk Radio’s America. He argues that the profit motive radicalized talk radio and with it the Republican Party. Rosenwald describes a negative feedback loop in which any attempt by a Republican to compromise would “inflame conservative airwaves” and prompt hosts to call for “more combative Republicans willing to fight for listeners’ values at any cost.”

Given the devotion of talk radio’s increasingly ill-informed audience, no elected Republican was sufficiently powerful to survive accusations of apostasy. This was also in part because talk radio merged with the party; its leading voices became the GOP’s leading voices. The way Rosenwald puts it, as the business grew more competitive, “many conservative figures guarded their flanks by lacerating Republicans. Hosts demanded from elected Republicans a level of ideological purity—and warfare mentality—that made it far more difficult...to advance an agenda that would attract broad support.” A vicious cycle developed. Because conflict and scaremongering drove ratings and ratings drove profits, the more extreme the hosts became, the more listeners they gained, and the more money they made. As they amassed power and influence, the hosts could demand fealty from the politicians they were discussing every day.

Rush Limbaugh blazed this trail, but virtually every other conservative host followed his path. They exhorted “Republicans to sound more like them—standing up to Democrats, drawing lines in the sand and going to war...and excoriated politicians when they didn’t,” Rosenwald writes.

In order to bring his thesis into the current era, Rosenwald convincingly argues that Fox News constitutes a kind of talk radio on television. Its most popular hosts over the years—Bill O’Reilly, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, among others—were and are reproducing right-wing radio on TV at night. They glommed on to Trump because their only genuine principle, aside from maximizing profits, is owning the libs. By 2016, Rosenwald notes, “Republican voters yearned for pugnacious, fire-breathing politicians who sounded like their favorite conservative media personalities and openly expressed what they themselves thought but felt unable to say.”

He is too high-minded to point out that this often translates into unapologetic racism, xenocentrism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism.

In Audience of One, James Poniewozik, the chief TV critic for The New York Times, has another angle on Trump’s rise to power, arguing that the only way to understand him is as a television character. To do this, Poniewozik largely ignores politics and tells the story of the development of America’s TV tastes over the past half-century before getting to The Apprentice, launched in January 2004 by Jeff Zucker at NBC before he became president of CNN.

Although The Apprentice is discussed as reality TV, there was nothing real about the show. As
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WITH BILL MILLER

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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues. He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.

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with almost everything that Trump has been involved in, the show was a lie from start to finish. The truth was that his office at the Trump Organization was filled with “chipped furniture” and that he oversaw a “crumbling empire.” A producer told *The New Yorker*, “Our job was to make it seem otherwise.” The priority on every episode “was to reverse-engineer the show to make it look like his judgment had some basis in reality,” a supervising editor explained to *CineMontage*. “Sometimes it would be very hard to do.”

At first *The Apprentice* was a hit, but as Poniewozik writes, “after the first season, the ratings dropped; by season four they were nearly half what they were in season one. Trump reacted to his declining numbers by ratcheting up what worked before: becoming a louder, more extreme, more abrasive version of himself.” Later ensconced at CNN, Zucker remained all in on Trump, this time giving the now–presidential candidate millions of dollars’ worth of free airtime in which to spread his lies, racism, and general malevolence with impunity.

Zucker even hired Trump’s ex–campaign manager Corey Lewandowski as a political commentator. This wouldn’t normally be considered unusual in the incestuous world of cable TV commentary except that in this case, Lewandowski had signed a nondisclosure agreement with a nondisparagement clause, meaning he was legally prevented from saying anything truthful that reflected badly on Trump.

Yet Zucker did not care: Trump drove the ratings, and ratings drove the profits. Recently, Lewandowski was back on CNN, fresh from his appearance before the House Judiciary Committee, during which he declared, “I have no obligation to be honest to the media.” So again, while there is no one answer for how we got here; all of them proceed from the same foundation: greed, cowardice, and most of all, lies.

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Fox News hosts glommed on to Trump because their only genuine principle, aside from maximizing profits, is owning the libs.

(continued from page 5)

Focusing on climate change. When women and girls are treated that way, it not only hurts our feelings but also obscures our humanity and inhibits our potential.

Of course, that’s horrible. But sometimes the phrase “sexual objectification” is too judgmental for my taste. It has a mor- alistic connotation, suggesting that whenever we sexualize people “too much,” we are failing to treat them as fully human. The concept of sexual objectification, after all, comes originally from Immanuel Kant, an 18th century philosopher who thought people should think about or partake of sex only within marriage—hardly a useful doctrine for you to follow as a teenager.

Kant’s view and that of some feminists has some downsides. It misses important distinctions between feelings and actions: Your private thoughts can’t hurt anyone. And, in fact, sometimes people want to be seen as sex objects. Perhaps you’ve experienced this. Isn’t it annoying when you want someone to notice how hot you are but the person wants to be just friends? Girls experience such aggravations, too.

Finding yourself attracted to your female friends doesn’t make you a sexist jerk. They might even like you back in that same way. The key here is communication. Ask questions of yourself and the girls you like: What do they want, and what do you want? Sometimes both of you might want something just physical—and that’s OK. Sometimes one person wants something only physical, while the other needs something more. That’s not likely to work well. That disparity doesn’t make anyone a creep, but the sooner you clear that up and get out of the situation, the better.

It is interesting that you worry about objectifying women more than men. If you do take men more seriously than women as humans, you have problems with women and should avoid romance with them for now. But I suspect that’s not the case. More likely, you’re labeling your strong sexual responses to women as objectification because you’re trying to make sense of your sexuality while coming to feminist consciousness. All of our desires take place in the context of a patriarchal society, but that’s no reason not to enjoy them, as long we keep talking with one another and making sure our actions are consensual and considerate.
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SEXUAL ASSAULT

Tip of the Iceberg

More than one in 16 women—or over 3 million women across the United States—were raped the first time they had sex, according to a new study in the Journal of the American Medical Association. That alone is upsetting, but it gets worse: Since the study surveyed only women 18 to 44 years old, the estimates are likely “just the tip of the iceberg,” said Laura Hawks, the main author. “You can imagine that if we asked this of women of all ages, the absolute number would be many millions higher.”

The average age these women were assaulted for the first time was 15, and the average age of their assailants was 27. These women were more likely to be immigrants and live below the poverty line. Regardless of how they were assaulted, the study found that, compared with women whose first sexual experience was voluntary, these women grew up with greater rates of endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, and problems with ovulation or menstruation.

The study ran from September 2011 to September 2017, about a month before stories about his son's wedding on a plantation in Charleston, South Carolina.

The man was discussing ordinary things—the weather, the bride, the wine served, what music they played. Everyone, he said, was dressed in antebellum clothing.

“So much fun!” is how he summed it up.

“Dancing on graves!” is what went through my mind.

Was I being uncharitable? I am the third generation in my family whose body is not legally owned by others—the carnal issue of a legal fiction and a political proof that reigned supreme in the not-so-distant past. My mind drags those details into the present involuntarily, for these feelings are deep in me. At the same time, this is the narrative by which I was protected, insulated, cautioned, and by some measures made paranoid: They might own your body, but they can never own you.

I am safest, I learned from my grandmother, when I discipline myself to leave the body behind. It is a mystery, a kind of magic, to be raised both within and without, to see and to see oneself seeing. Still, there is a certain traumatic remove in the distance required to surveil oneself from afar—the stress that W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness.”

But back to the “American side” of the Canadian airport. The man and his companion seemed like good people—happy and racially innocent, swaddled in a kind of bubble of bliss, however radioactive it might have seemed to me. I wondered again if I was being uncharitable. This kind of self-consciousness is ingrained by now; more than one white friend has called me “too politically correct” to ever relax. It is not the man’s fault, I am made to understand. After all, it is not a mortal sin to marry one’s child off in the magnolia-scented bosom of a Confederate mansion built and serviced by the invisible slaves. How could they know? Is it really their responsibility?

Recently, The Washington Post published a story about the discomfort some white people experience during tours of antebellum mansions in the Deep South. “My husband and I were extremely disappointed in this tour,” wrote one online reviewer, noting that her family had never owned slaves. “We didn’t come to hear a lecture on how the white people treated slaves…. The tour guide was so radical about slave treatment we felt we were being lectured and bashed about the slavery…. I’ll go back to Louisiana and see some real plantations that are so much more enjoyable to tour.”

These thoughts upset me. I set aside the vexed question of “real plantations” for the moment, gently, so that I could better digest my soup. My friends are right: I don’t relax. This history is too resonant in my body. It’s not easy for me to work up any kind of nostalgia for a style of life that depended on slaves, hierarchy, imperiousness, and pomp. And I frankly despise how the tourism industry has underwritten childish rituals of antebellum dress-up in crinoline and whalebone and marketed them as romantic, swoony, and gossamer.

I am no fun at all, I know.

But I continue to explore this affective power as worthy of serious thought. I try to acknowledge the deep pleasure of that parent at his child’s wedding and to place it in a different part of my heart from the resentment I feel about the choice of venue. I try to winnow the anger I feel about how much of that cruel history has been steam-rollered into oblivion by deep-fried, honey-suckled symbolism. The winnowing is hard work. And I sometimes feel another kind of resentment about how the burden of such emotional assortment falls disproportionately on black people.

Some time ago, the artist Kevin Beasley was interviewed for a short film titled Kevin Beasley’s Raw Materials. In the film, produced by the Whitney Museum in New York City, he reflected on the legacy of the cotton industry in

Patricia J. Williams

Plantage Blues

What justifies the enduring appeal of our monuments to slavery?

It was not a kind thought that flitted across my mind while I was waiting in the airport in Montreal. The weather was bad, my flight was late, and I was having lunch on the “American side” of the terminal, listening to a big, jovial man talking about his son’s wedding on a plantation in Charleston, South Carolina.

The man was discussing ordinary things—the weather, the bride, the wine served, what music they played. Everyone, he said, was dressed in antebellum clothing.

“So much fun!” is how he summed it up.

“Dancing on graves!” is what went through my mind.

Was I being uncharitable? I am the third generation in my family whose body is not legally owned by others—the carnal issue of a legal fiction and a political proof that reigned supreme in the not-so-distant past. My mind drags those details into the present involuntarily, for these feelings are deep in me. At the same time, this is the narrative by which I was protected, insulated, cautioned, and by some measures made paranoid: They might own your body, but they can never own you.

I am safest, I learned from my grandmother, when I discipline myself to leave the body behind. It is a mystery, a kind of magic, to be raised both within and without, to see and to see oneself seeing. Still, there is a certain traumatic remove in the distance required to surveil oneself from afar—the stress that W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness.”

But back to the “American side” of the Canadian airport. The man and his companion seemed like good people—happy and racially innocent, swaddled in a kind of bubble of bliss, however radioactive it might have seemed to me. I won-dered again if I was being uncharitable. This kind of self-consciousness is ingrained by now; more than one white friend has called me “too politically correct” to ever relax. It is not the man’s fault, I am made to understand. After all, it is not a mortal sin to marry one’s child off in the magnolia-scented bosom of a Confederate mansion built and serviced by the invisible slaves. How could they know? Is it really their responsibility?

Recently, The Washington Post published a story about the discomfort some white people experience during tours of antebellum mansions in the Deep South. “My husband and I were extremely disappointed in this tour,” wrote one online reviewer, noting that her family had never owned slaves. “We didn’t come to hear a lecture on how the white people treated slaves…. The tour guide was so radical about slave treatment we felt we were being lectured and bashed about the slavery…. I’ll go back to Louisiana and see some real plantations that are so much more enjoyable to tour.”

These thoughts upset me. I set aside the vexed question of “real plantations” for the moment, gently, so that I could better digest my soup. My friends are right: I don’t relax. This history is too resonant in my body. It’s not easy for me to work up any kind of nostalgia for a style of life that depended on slaves, hierarchy, imperiousness, and pomp. And I frankly despise how the tourism industry has underwritten childish rituals of antebellum dress-up in crinoline and whalebone.

I despise how the tourism industry has underwritten childish rituals of antebellum dress-up in crinoline and whalebone.
his family’s history and in the American South, asking himself, “Why am I so mad at this plant? This plant is not doing anything except growing and being beautiful.” I completely understood the paradox: We hate the traces of slavery; no matter their innocence, the symbols summon pain. They pull a perfumed scrim over atrocity. It is the same reductive euphemism of those who refer to slaves as “African immigrants” or “indentured servants.”

In February 2019, the legendary sportscaster Warner Wolf was arrested in Naples, Florida, after defacing a sign at the entrance of the gated community where he lives, which reads “Classics Plantation Estates.” He allegedly tore off the word “Plantation.” Without condoning the vandalism, I was nonetheless heartened. It is too rare to hear of a white person so powerfully overcome by the same historical associations that occur to most African Americans. I felt as though “my” history might be more generously shared as comprehensively “ours,” as a panracial American history, with plantation life seen for all its complex and divisive repercussions.

Aesthetically, the antebellum plantations of the Old South are undeniably beautiful—flowering, gracefully constructed, with seemingly benevolent stretches of fields and lawns. But they’re built on human degradation, and so they live on as icons of romance premised on the fragile privilege of racial innocence, historical oblivion, and educational denialism. American schools do not teach our own history. We write much of it out of the grand narrative, gussying up the bad bits, playing down the sorrow. And then, in the spacious vacuity of mutual misapprehension, we butt heads, we bleed.

We stumble in circles, so close to one another and yet so far apart, locked out of the homes and neighborhoods that we forget we built together.

SNAPSHOT / BRETT COOMER

Deep Trouble

A man wades through floodwaters caused by Tropical Depression Imelda on September 19 in Patton Village, Texas. The storm dropped more than 40 inches of rain in the Houston area. Such levels are seven times as likely as they were 30 years ago, according to Kerry Emanuel, a professor of atmospheric science at MIT.

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Alaska’s Bristol Bay is a rare pristine salmon fishery, one of the few remaining in the world. Can it survive the twin threats of a rapidly changing climate and a massive open pit mine?

JULIA O’MALLEY

Red alert: Anna Hoover works alongside her small crew to haul nets filled with red salmon out of Bristol Bay and onto her boat.
Anna Hoover and I ease up and down in limestone-colored water on a warm, windless afternoon in early July, our backs to the mouth of the Egegik River. She's distracted, perched in the captain's seat of her 32-foot drift boat. She glances at her phone, checking the time. The state manages fishing on a tight schedule here, opening the waters to fishermen and then closing them every few hours to let some salmon travel to their spawning grounds. We've got five minutes until we unspool our nets.

We sit 300 miles west of Anchorage in Bristol Bay, home to the largest, healthiest red salmon run on earth, where most wild-grown grocery-store fillets caught in the United States come from. Hoover's parents and grandparents fished here, and she has been hauling reds from this fertile finger of saltwater for most of her 34 years.

This is her first summer as the captain of her own boat. She never doubted the decision to buy it. She's always seen herself here, her hair pulled back in a bandanna, rubber coveralls flecked with fish scales, eyes gritty from sleep deprivation, adrenaline rising and falling with the tides that carry salmon into the nets.

"We joke how there are two kinds of people—the ones who can't stand it out here and the ones who can't live without it," she says. "Fishing is in my blood."

Still, no matter how many years you fish, she says, you always get a crackle of anxiety as you slip your nets into the water. So much can go wrong—weather, gear tangling, mechanical problems, bad timing, the catastrophe of the fish failing to show up. The risk, though, is part of the draw. "Fishermen," she tells me, "have always been gamblers."

For her generation of fishermen, investing here is more of a gamble than ever. Twin threats hang over this place where many of America's salmon dinners come from: a rapidly warming climate, which has already scrambled the pattern of the seasons across vast swaths of Alaska, and Pebble Mine, a proposed open pit mine at the bay's headwaters, which has been given new life by Donald Trump's administration. Many who live and fish here, including Hoover, worry that once the mine is built, pollution is inevitable and that together these two forces could destroy this rare, pristine ecosystem, threatening salmon, communities, and whole ways of life.

"I think of generations. So many people in the fishery have learned it from their families and want to pass it on," Hoover says. "Around the world, people have disrespected salmon populations and their environments to the point where they are extinct or they are farmed. This place doesn't have that—yet."

Hoover maneuvers us into position. Two crewmen stand ready on the deck. One is a high school English teacher with a toddler at home, the other a high school student—a good kid who never gets tired. There isn't room to mess this up. They have to make money this summer.

At 4:45 precisely, Hoover motors forward. Her net sails into the sea.
When the fish hit, you get an electric current in your heart. You marvel at your luck, at the abundance of the bay, fish thumping on the deck like coins pouring out of a slot machine.

M A K E  A  B A C K W A R D  “ l ”  W I T H  Y O U R  R I G H T  H A N D.
Now rotate your arm as if you’re looking at a wristwatch, so that the web between your thumb and index finger faces your body. Your hand will look like a rough map of Alaska, with your thumb as the southeastern panhandle and your index finger as the Alaska Peninsula, which stretches toward the Aleutian chain.

Bristol Bay is tucked between your index and middle fingers, a wide body of water fed by a network of rivers—among them the Cinder, Egegik, Igushik, Kvichak, Meshik, Nushagak, Naknek, Togiak, and Ugashik—and dozens of lakes, large and small.

For millennia, several Alaska Native groups—the Athabascans from the interior, the Yup’ik people from the southwest region, and the Aleuts from the southern coastal area—came here to fish. Commercial fishing began in the late 1800s, and the bay remains a rare jewel in a network of Alaska fisheries that are increasingly challenged by climate change. Roughly 38 million red salmon return to the bay every year, according to the Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association. When they do, small fishing operations like Hoover’s pop up to catch them over about six weeks of summer, a burst of industry that employs 14,000 people and generates $1.5 billion in revenue.

Fishing is always volatile. The annual earnings in Bristol Bay might increase or decrease by $100 million, says Garrett Evridge, a fishing economist in Anchorage. But recently, fishing in the bay has been more lucrative than ever, defying patterns elsewhere in the state. Earnings more than doubled from 2015 to 2018. Some science indicates that warmer water in lakes and rivers has sped up the life cycles of young salmon, sending them out into the sea sooner, increasing their abundance. Scientists aren’t sure what that might mean over time.

“There is anxiety that the seasons have been too good and that the bay is headed to a reset or just back to historical averages,” Evridge says. “This is tough if you’ve just sunk your life savings into a boat and permit.”

Hoover grew up fishing out of Egegik, a tiny village on the southern part of the bay. Her great-grandfather fished halibut in the Gulf of Alaska before he settled in the region. Her grandfather ran a cannery. In the off-season, she lives in Naknek, working as a filmmaker.

Hoover bases her fishing operation out of a camp in Coffee Point, which sits on land acquired by her husband’s father after World War II, just across the river from Egegik. The camp has a big kitchen and living hall with bunks for a crew of 16. A collection of wood-sided outbuildings rises from the dunes, among them a massive shed for working on machinery, a tidy fleet of cars and ATVs, and a small cabin where Hoover and her husband, Eddie Clark, stay with their daughter, Amlia, who is 3. The workdays run around the clock. Hoover fishes, sells her catch, rides home, eats, sleeps for a few hours, and then heads back out.

“At the beginning, it’s exciting because you know the fishing is picking up,” Hoover says. “Once you’re in it and doing two tides a day for two weeks, you’re wiped out. It’s a test.”

From her seat above the main cabin of the boat, Hoover eyes the arch of the net, white corks on the water like a string of pearls. Soon, splashes and flashes of silver scales churn along the line, just under the surface. There’s movement on all the boat decks around us.

When the fish hit, Hoover says, you get an electric current in your heart. You marvel at your luck, at the abundance of the bay, fish thumping on the deck like coins pouring out of a slot machine. There’s a boat somewhere out there called Little Casino, she says. Lots of boats have names like that.

“If you are lucky, $50,000 worth of salmon can be caught in a day,” Evridge says later. “And all fishermen think they are lucky.”
T
o get to Coffee Point, Hoover must fly an hour west of Anchorage to King Salmon and then drive 10 miles to the fishing hub of Naknek. From there, she flies her own plane to the camp.

Before she took a photographer and me on the boat, Hoover came to fetch us in a low-wing Piper Cherokee 140 with Amilia in a pink booster seat in the back. The plane is just large enough to seat four people and carry a few bags. It rattled down the rocky Naknek airstrip and lofted us into the air. We cruised low along the coast over the flat, green country, braided through with streams and rivers, stippled with too many lakes and ponds to count. This is the world’s purest salmon country.

Throughout the Pacific Northwest over the last 50 years, in-river problems like dams, pollution, and deforestation have harmed many salmon runs. In Alaska, too, the fisheries have suffered. Over the last decade, king salmon—the largest kind, prized for their fatty meat—have been consistently smaller, and their returns have fallen below expectations, for reasons scientists can’t explain. Towns built around king salmon fishing tourism, like Kenai, south of Anchorage, have had to reenvision their economies. Locals in small river communities who relied on kings to fill their freezers for winter have had to switch to other species. In Southeast Alaska, commercial fishing forecasts have been grim.

Red salmon had almost always been plentiful, but last summer a number of stalwart red fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska faltered. Returns came in late and weak; others barely came in at all. Fishermen used to four decades of strong fishing on the Copper River came home empty-handed. Off Kodiak Island, at the beginning of the season, boats pulled in nets full of jellyfish and nothing else. The starkest losses came in Chignik, a small Alaska Native community on the Alaska Peninsula, where commercial fishing is the only economy. From 2013 to 2017, the local fleet harvested an annual average of 18 million pounds of salmon, worth more than $15 million. But last year, the fleet earned less than $5,000, Evridge says. The state declared it an economic disaster.

Scientists have been cautious about saying what happened with reds last year, insisting they need more time to study it. But many suspect the anomalies may have to do with rising ocean temperatures. A large pool of warm ocean water called the Blob moved north from Mexico in 2014. Blooms of toxic algae followed. Birds and mammals washed up dead.

Yet even with last year’s weak returns elsewhere, Bristol Bay’s fishing remained strong, with fishermen harvesting some 232 million pounds of salmon worth nearly $281 million, according to the Alaska Department of Fishing and Game. The reason, according to Tom Quinn, a University of Washington professor of aquatic and fishery sciences who has spent more than 30 years studying Bristol Bay, stems from the remote bay’s particular geography and topography, which makes it uniquely positioned to resist climate change. The lakes and rivers around it are fed by snowmelt, rain, and glacial runoff, and they have different depths and temperatures. This provides a diverse set of freshwater habitats for young salmon.

“It’s undammed and unpolluted,” Quinn says. “It’s not quite as God made it, but it’s in very, very good condition.”

Moreover, he adds, there isn’t competition from Japanese fishermen as there once was, and the area is well managed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Still, the threat of climate change looms large, hovering at the edge of every fisherman’s consciousness. This past summer was the hottest in Alaska’s recorded history, with record-breaking temperatures and unprecedented drought. Quinn’s team reported the warmest temperatures it has ever seen in its decades studying the bay. Plus the flow of water in the rivers is extremely low.

“We will have to see how the salmon fare under these conditions,” he says. If it becomes the new normal, “there is reason to be very concerned.”

H
oover and I watch the big metal spool on the boat deck turn, reeling in the net. The fish come in C-shaped and muscular, with scales the color of moonlight, suspended in their last conscious moment. Mouths open, needle teeth. The crewmen shake them loose, each one a little puzzle of tangled line and fins. The fish pile around their boots. The deck glitters with a thousand scales.

The average sea surface temperature outside Egegik in July has trended higher each decade since Hoover started fishing in elementary school. Today it is nearly 60 degrees, roughly 10 degrees higher than it was at the same time 30 years ago, according to the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy. In August it reached 62.7 degrees, the highest temperature since records have been kept.

“Sometimes the fish are so warm when you pick ’em up, you can feel it through your gloves,” Hoover says.

Nature has become erratic in Alaska, with each season seeming to bring eerie new surprises. The state had never seen a year like this. In the spring, river and sea ice vanished earlier than ever in many places. Temperatures soared 10 to 20 degrees above normal.

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Netted: Red salmon are picked from a gill net at a frenetic pace to make sure the fish are delivered fresh to the buyer.

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Scientists are still sorting out the signs of trouble in the ocean. Seals, krill, seabirds and thousands of blue mussels washed up dead on the beaches. Hundreds of salmon perished in the lower Kuskokwin River, where water temperatures reached the 70s, before they’d had a chance to spawn. Scientists theorized the fish died from heart attacks caused by the heat. Later in the season, Hoover heard about Bristol Bay fishermen rescuing salmon from warm, shallow river water, carrying them in bags upriver toward their spawning grounds. By September, another mass of warm water similar to the Blob had formed off the Pacific Coast and was expected to move toward Alaska.

Out on the bay on this early-July day, though, there’s nothing but pink sky and the far-off sight of grassy muskeg atop sandy cliffs. There’s also fish. For three hours, we watch the crew slide their bodies across the deck into the cool, foamy water of the hold. The boat is heavy with them. In the captain’s seat, Hoover chews dried apples and sips tea. We pull in the final net of the day.

**CLIMATE CHANGE, FOR ALL ITS DISRUPTIONS AND DISTORTIONS, ISN’T THE ONLY THREAT LURKING OVER THE BAY. FAR MORE MENACING, FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF Hoover and many others, is the prospect of Pebble Mine. The controversial extraction operation was first proposed 30 years ago. Hoover isn’t an emotional person, but if you ask her about it, her voice thins.

Pebble Mine is a large copper, gold, and molybdenum open pit mine set to be located in the Kvichak and Nushagak water systems, which feed into Bristol Bay. In its current iteration, it is slated to cover 8,000 acres, including a 608-acre pit that’s almost 2,000 feet deep. This version, which is smaller than previous ones, would produce 1.4 billion tons of materials over 20 years.

Environmentalists, scientists, and fishermen have warned for years about the dangers that would be posed by any mine in the area. The process of extraction would generate a massive amount of acidic toxic water that must be kept out of the larger ecosystem. The mine development would require building roads, power lines, pipelines and ports on undeveloped land, putting new stressors on fish habitat, says Lindsey Bloom, a longtime fisherwoman and a strategist with Salmon State, a political advocacy group opposed to the mine. “It directly impacts thousands of years of subsistence relationships with the landscape, tens of thousands of jobs, billions of dollars a year in economic activity at regional, state and global networks,” she adds.

There was a time during the Obama administration when it seemed that the anti-Pebble forces won and the project would be stopped. In 2014 the Environmental Protection Agency issued what amounted to a preemptive veto of the mine proposal after determining that it would “pose significant risks to the unparalleled ecosystem”; later that year, a successful voter initiative gave the state legislature the power to approve or reject the mine, putting up an additional hurdle. Along the way, Northern Dynasty Minerals, the Canadian company behind the mine, lost several of its major backers.

But now, as with many once-stalled extraction projects in Alaska, Pebble Mine is moving forward again, in a more modest form. In late July the EPA’s leadership formally reversed the agency’s 2014 position, reportedly after Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy, a Trump ally and mine supporter, met with the president on Air Force One. (Notably, EPA scientists still object. They’ve submitted over 100 pages of comments critical of the newest plan, saying that substantial concerns remain about adverse effects on the ecosystem.) The partnership now developing the mine has been pushing to get as far as it can through the federal permitting process before the next presidential election.

For many of the mine’s opponents, the greatest concern is the possibility that the dam designed to contain a basin of concentrated toxic mine tailings could fail. They talk about other mine catastrophes, like the one in Brumadinho, Brazil, in January that buried hundreds of people and the Mount Polley disaster in British Columbia in 2014 that spilled a torrent of toxic water into neighboring lakes and rivers. Though the current mine plan is smaller than before, many say that once the mining begins, the size of the operation will expand.

I talked about that with Cameron Wobus, a geomorphologist and consultant who specializes in assessing the hydrologic impacts of mining. He was hired by the Nature Conservancy, an international conservation group, to study the Pebble Mine proposal and presented his findings to the state legislature in April. He says that Pebble’s tailings storage facility is 10 times larger than the Mount Polley mine’s and more than 50 times larger than the Brumadinho mine’s. The dam has to survive forever, but the plans project the odds of its failure only over 20 years, he says.

Even barring a large disaster, smaller-scale pollution would be almost impossible to prevent, Wobus continues. “They can’t capture and treat all their contaminated water…. It is not a stretch to say mines always leak. Water quality downstream of mines is never what it was before you built the mine.”

As currently planned, Pebble Mine would have massive water treatment needs, he adds. He says it would be the biggest mine-water treatment plant in North America.

A spokesman for the Pebble Partnership, Mike Heatwole, states that the group “fundamentally disagrees” with the claim that all of the contaminated water produced by the mine cannot be treated and contained. He stresses that the mine’s footprint has shrunk and that more safeguards have been put in place to prevent pollution and help address environmental concerns. The facility is designed to “stand the test of time,” he adds. “We continue to try to reach out to [fishermen]
and try to share as much as we can, because we do understand people's concerns.”

The EPA is now working with the Army Corps of Engineers to determine whether to grant the permit that Pebble needs under the Clean Water Act. The EPA can still raise concerns, but that may not stop the proposal from going forward. “The cynic in me says the permit will go through,” Wobus says, “but I still have hope that science and reason could actually prevail.”

Some communities in the region support the Pebble Mine project because of the jobs it would provide. But in Naknek, anti-Pebble signs are everywhere—at the engine repair shop and the bar and on the bumpers of old trucks, right next to faded Sarah Palin and Trump stickers.

Hoover pulls her boat into a long line at the tender, a larger vessel that will hoist the fish from our holds and weigh them. On the decks around us, crewmen mend nets. I count a half-dozen anti-Pebble flags catching the wind.

After a long while, it’s our turn. The fishermen on board the tender are red-eyed and wired, facial hair gone feral. They scribble the weight of our fish on a sticky notepad and shovel them into the hold. Wildfire smoke makes the sinking sun glow crimson as a salmon egg.

Friends have gotten law degrees to help fight the mine, Hoover tells me. She has written a dozen letters to officials involved with the permit process. “We’ve all testified so many times,” she says.

Still, the proposal moves forward. Assuming it survives the federal process, it will likely see a number of court challenges. Next will be a state permitting process. If the plan proves successful, the mine could begin operations within the next decade.

“Maybe I could get my boat paid off,” Hoover says, “before it really starts up.” What she wants most of all, though, is for Amlia to know this life, too, and to be able to take it on someday.

With the boat finally empty and our eyes dry with smoke and salt, we rock home in the dusky light, passing lines of fishing boats moored up, the crews napping in their cabins.

Hoover tells me she listened to a story on NPR recently about how partisan the United States has become. “There’s a fracture between two ways of thinking in the country,” she says.

There’s a fracture at the center of life in Alaska, as well. The oil revenues that used to pay for state government have declined, and the state budget is in crisis. Alaskans all have a deep allegiance to the wild place. But there are also the rich resources that bring people here and help them stay. Alaskans aren’t usually staunchly on one side or another, but still they find themselves in conflict. How much development can be done without risking the core of the place? The sides have gotten so far apart.

“For me, a healthy ecosystem is sacred,” Hoover says. “I respect it. If I could communicate it well enough, I feel that we wouldn’t still be having this conversation.”

— Hoover
Lake Pontchartrain glistened as Rinata Williams rode north from New Orleans. She watched from the back seat as the city receded from the causeway, miles and miles of concrete bridge she hoped would transport her to the future she’d been promised.

It was August 2012, and no one in her family had ever left home for college. Before Hurricane Katrina, just half of New Orleans’s public school students earned a high school diploma, and few went on to succeed at a university. But as her mother steered the car toward Alabama, Williams believed that she’d be different. She’d spent four years at a high school determined to send minority students like her to college. She’d earned a high GPA, an above-average ACT score, and a generous scholarship. She was one of

In 2012 almost all of Sci Academy’s seniors were heading to college. Seven years later, only 18 percent had graduated.

CASEY PARKS
the first graduates in a new charter school landscape that many in New Orleans believed would fix a broken education system.

The car cruised east, and Williams’s favorite R&B station crackled with static as the signal from New Orleans faded. Her uncle turned around in the front passenger seat. Soon, he told her, everything would be new. He twisted the dial and landed on a station playing Tim Mcgraw. Williams listened to a few lines, then began to sing.

The sun burned bright as they pulled close to Birmingham-Southern College. The campus looked as beautiful as it did when Williams visited with a high school chaperone a few months back. She had loved the way its brick buildings sat on a hilltop, the way the grass stayed green and moved. But her stomach tightened as she looked out now. She was the only student with dark skin and the red-and-black braids that were popular back home.

Her mother killed the engine, and Williams started to cry. Newspapers had reported that nearly everyone in Williams’s graduating class at Sci Academy in New Orleans had been accepted to college, as if they were a group moving toward one unprecedented future together. But her friends had left for universities in Vermont and Colorado and Massachusetts. Her family would drive back to New Orleans that afternoon.

Williams opened the car door, then cried harder. To succeed, she realized, she would have to face college alone.

Williams had always wanted to go to college. She’d dreamed of attending a historically black school out of state, maybe pledging a sorority at Spelman College or Clark Atlanta University. But she wasn’t sure how she’d make it out of New Orleans until 2008, when she met a skinny white guy from Washington, DC.

Ben Marcovitz was unlike anyone Williams had known. He was 28 but already had degrees from Harvard and Yale. He studied English and theater in college and moved to New Orleans for a girl. After a year of teaching there, he came to believe that he could help any student get into college.

Just a third of adults nationwide have a bachelor’s degree, and New Orleans students face particularly bleak odds. Only one out of every 10 low-income students nationwide finish college on time. But Marcovitz had a brash mission shared by a new breed of charter school leaders who said they could succeed where traditional neighborhood schools had failed.

By 2008, education reformers had opened charters in Texas and New York with a similar college-for-all promise. But nowhere was this movement stronger than in New Orleans. The city’s public school system had been such a “disaster,” said Arne Duncan, who headed the Department of Education under President Barack Obama, that in 2010 he called Katrina the “best thing” that had ever happened to education in New Orleans. After the 2005 storm, in a state effort to reinvent the city’s schools as charters, the school board fired nearly all the city’s public school teachers, most of them black.

Eventually, all the neighborhood schools in New Or-
and Sci’s test scores were the best among open-enrollment high schools in the city. Its students performed so well that Oprah Winfrey gave $1 million to Sci in 2010 and called Marcovitz and other charter leaders “real-life superheroes.”

When Williams and her classmates began considering colleges, Marcovitz wanted them to have the same experience he had at Maret, a prestigious private school in DC that he attended on a scholarship. He brought in an ACT expert and hired an admissions counselor away from Wesleyan University to help with the teenagers’ personal statements. Sci even paid for the students to visit dozens of colleges across the South and Northeast.

Williams considered Florida A&M University, a historically black school in Tallahassee, but when she toured, the dorms reminded her too much of the public housing projects she’d lived in back home. College, Sci’s teachers told her, was about new beginnings, so she scrapped her application.

Researchers have found that low-income students are more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree if they attend more challenging institutions, so Sci’s teachers encouraged the teenagers to enroll in the highest-ranked schools that would accept them—no matter how white or how far away.

As graduation neared in 2012, Williams narrowed her choices to Louisiana State University, Sewanee, and Birmingham-Southern College, schools whose campuses were pretty and whose populations were majority-white. That April, Sci officials rented a church auditorium down the road for the school’s first Senior Scholar Signing Day. As cheerleaders rallied the way they would for football teams elsewhere, Marcovitz announced that 49 of Sci’s 52 graduates were headed to college—a then unheard-of rate for a New Orleans public school with open admissions. Some were going to Wesleyan, Amherst, and Smith, selective institutions with near-perfect graduation rates.

Williams, who had never missed a day of class and finished with Sci’s top honors in math, chose Birmingham-Southern College, schools whose campuses were pretty and whose populations were majority-white. She spent four years at Sci Academy, the nation’s largest nonprofit charter school network, released a report criticizing its own programs, or KIPP, the nation’s largest nonprofit charter school network, released a report criticizing its own outcomes. Yes, KIPP officials wrote, their first students in Houston and the Bronx went on to college at more than double the average rate of their peers. But KIPP found that only a third of its alumni earned a bachelor’s degree—above average for low-income students but a long way from KIPP’s goal of 75 percent.

Still, as Williams and her classmates moved away in the summer of 2012, Marcovitz said, he believed they’d all have “a happy ending with college.” Then, “pretty much immediately,” he realized he had underestimated just how tough college would be for them.

Williams wasn’t sure what to do after her mother and un-
letters for Christmas break. She hadn’t told anyone, but she had decided she couldn’t go back to Birmingham in January. As her mother drove her home, Williams daydreamed about transferring to the University of New Orleans. UNO wasn’t as prestigious as the private school that Sci’s counselors had steered her toward, and she would have to repay Birmingham the tens of thousands of scholarship dollars it gave her.

Her mother drove across Lake Pontchartrain, and then Williams’s old neighborhood appeared. It wasn’t as idyllic as her college campus, but she didn’t care. The air smelled familiar. Her sisters rushed out, and she was home.

By Christmas, 12 percent of Sci’s first graduates had either dropped out or transferred to a community college.

Most couldn’t point to just one reason for their decision. Some missed their families or needed to find jobs to pay for gaps remaining after their scholarships. Students who enrolled in a North Louisiana university found that the food was too bland. No other place in America is like New Orleans—not even North Louisiana—and it hurt too much to lose the city again after they’d been displaced by the hurricane. Others grew unfocused after they left Sci’s scaffolds.

Some earned their first F’s, and the failures depressed them. Eddie Barnes had been one of Sci’s most celebrated students. He finished with the fifth-highest GPA and won nearly every social accolade the school gave out. He went to Middlebury College, a selective school in Vermont, where only 4 percent of students are black.

His Russian intro class was tougher than advanced Spanish had been at Sci, and he couldn’t always bring himself to trudge through the snow to his 8 a.m. psychology class. But he spoke up in his romantic literature course, and he helped other students with their African American religious history papers. Still, none of that mattered after his grades came back lower than he’d expected. By his second semester, he was on academic probation. He dropped out during his sophomore year.

“It was the saddest point in my life,” Barnes said. “I felt like I couldn’t do anything. I felt inadequate. I didn’t have any type of positive thought about anything.”

Jordan Pierre, after one semester at Sci’s most celebrated university, also landed on academic probation, but he worked harder the following spring and pulled his grade point average up to a 3.2. He hoped to earn a degree in business law, but during his sophomore year, he fell $8,000 short of what he owed the university. He had maxed out on loans, so he applied for grants and scholarships, but none materialized.

In 2014 he enlisted in the Air Force, intending to use his salary and the GI Bill to pay for his education. But he had to take semesters off for training, then the military deployed him to Qatar, Kuwait, and Turkey. He squeezed in online classes when he could and earned an associate degree through the Community College of the Air Force, but as he passed his 22nd birthday, he couldn’t help feeling ashamed that he hadn’t earned his bachelor’s.

“It weighs heavy on me,” Pierre said. “I didn’t want to leave, but I really didn’t know how I could continue.”

Williams was an extraordinary student who always wanted to go to college. She finished Sci Academy with its top honors in math.

Williams withdrew from Birmingham-Southern just after Christmas and enrolled instead at the University of New Orleans. She said she felt more comfortable there but found UNO’s larger classes overwhelming. She missed the way Sci’s teachers locked eyes with students, the way instructors adapted their styles to make sure she understood every lesson. She said she wanted to ask for help but couldn’t go during her professors’ office hours because she’d taken a full-time job as a cashier at a Save-a-Lot store. Most nights, she got off at 1 a.m. She didn’t have a car, so she spent hours waiting for buses in a system with infrequent service. She had to be up again by 5:30 to catch a 7 a.m. bus, the latest she could ride to make it on time for her 8 a.m. math course.

In biology, she found a seat in the back where she could doze as her professor droned on in terms she didn’t recognize. In her dreams, the instructor sounded like Charlie Brown’s teacher, a muted trombone going “Wah, wah, wah.”

Sci officials tried to help out the school’s graduates. Marcovitz hired a woman to track the alumni; she and other staffers e-mailed students and visited a few out of state. They bought college textbooks for some and gave internships or jobs to a fourth of the class, including Barnes. Sci even paid back Birmingham-Southern so that Williams could try UNO without worrying about the money she owed the college.

Instead of asking for help again, in August 2013, Williams transferred to New Orleans’s Delgado Community College. She switched her major from music business to psychology in hopes of becoming a counselor. She still worked long hours and didn’t have a car, but she said she felt more at home. Strangers introduced themselves when she sat in the courtyard. She started helping other students with their coursework, and she no longer felt the isolation she experienced at Birmingham-Southern. Even big classes didn’t bother her. Students lined the walls in her packed medical terminology course, but the professor made eye contact with everyone, and that connection helped keep Williams focused.

She loved Delgado so much that she kept going even after she had to take a second job. She worked 85 hours a week and on some days skipped class if she missed the (continued on page 25)
Under proposed new rules, if a single member of a family is undocumented, the entire family can be evicted from public housing.
Under the amended Section 214 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1980, mixed-status families—in which some members, usually children, have legal status and others are undocumented—can live in public housing or receive Section 8 vouchers, but only those with legal status are subsidized. Those without it have to pay market rent to the local housing authority if they are living in public housing or to the landlord if the family is covered by Section 8. The rationale for the legislation, which passed with bipartisan support, was pretty straightforward. It was intended, says Karlo Ng, a San Francisco–based supervising attorney for the National Housing Law Project (NHLP), “to ensure the integrity of the family unit and to preserve the family unit.”

After all, it’s no great mystery that children function better if their parents, whether documented or not, are part of their lives and that they succeed educationally and move up the economic ladder faster if they have a stable home to live in.

“We very much benefited from public housing,” says Francisco Rodríguez, who was born in El Salvador and came to the United States at age 3 with his mother and elder brother to escape the extreme poverty and violence of his home country. Francisco’s younger brother was born in the United States and is therefore a citizen. His stepdad, a legal resident, qualified for public housing. And so while family members worked to adjust their legal status (Francisco got his green card two years ago), they were able to live in the Mar Vista public housing complex near LA’s Culver City. “It gave us a stable home, opportunity,” Francisco continues. “I was able to get into the University of California at Santa Barbara. I’m studying economics. Having a safety net helped us move on from generation one and have more stable lives for the future.”

Francisco’s story is the quintessential upwardly mobile immigrant story, but it is one that Trump, Stephen Miller, Ken Cuccinelli, and the rest of the nativists running the show in DC want to eliminate.

HUD’s proposed regulations are entirely unconcerned about the damage done to children by rendering whole families ineligible for assistance. In addition to the imminent eviction of mixed-status families, no more such families would be processed for public housing or Section 8, in accordance with stringent new proof-of-eligibility requirements. Housing advocates fear that these requirements, in addition to barring undocumented people and their families, will have the side effect of deterring millions of low-income citizens and legal immigrants, who may lack access to documents such as passports and birth certificates, from applying for public housing or Section 8 vouchers.

I am undocumented, and I have three kids. One lives in Palmdale, two with me. They’re citizens. I’m from Nayarit, Mexico. I’ve been in California 33 years.” The speaker, a middle-aged woman I’ll call M, who used to take under-the-table cleaning jobs, has found it ever harder in recent years to find employment. These days, she makes a few dollars here and there by picking up bottles off the streets to recycle.

M lives in the San Fernando Gardens public housing complex in Pacoima, in the northern reaches of Los Angeles. Because she is undocumented, she is ineligible for public assistance, but as long as she pays the rent, she is allowed to live with her family in the public housing that her children legally qualify for. Currently, the family pays $1,131 in monthly rent to the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA).

Now, however, Donald Trump’s Department of Housing and Urban Development is proposing rule changes that would upshift decades of settled policy. Under the proposed new rules, if a single member of a family lacks legal status, the entire family can be evicted within 18 months. M is, understandably, worried that her family is at risk. “I really don’t have anyone. I’ll end up on the street,” she says. “My friends could put me up maybe for three days. But I couldn’t live with anybody.”

J, 49, is also frightened. A fellow San Fernando Gardens resident, she frets over her precarious economic position. Sitting in an elementary school classroom where a local chapter of the housing advocacy group People Organized for Westside Renewal (POWER) sometimes meets in the evenings to discuss policy issues, J says she left Sinaloa, Mexico, with her husband in 1998 because there was no work. In the United States she gave birth to three boys. For the past 12 years, the family has been living in a two-bedroom public housing apartment, for which they currently pay $706 in monthly rent.

J’s husband works as a janitor, and her eldest son is in college and has a part-time job. Between them, they bring in $2,000 a month before taxes—enough to survive paycheck to paycheck but not enough to build up a rainy-day fund. J is afraid her family could become homeless. “My brother has four kids. Maybe we could cram into his house, but we couldn’t stay all the time. It would be impossible. We’d be in the street. What else is there to say?”

Preparing for the worst, she and her family have begun cutting back on everything they can. “We buy the cheapest thing there is. No luxury on the food at all. But we can still buy some meat—two times a week, if we’re lucky. We buy chicken. It’s the cheapest.”

According to HUD, more than 100,000 people—including some 55,000 kids—could lose their homes.

POWER punch: Members of People Organized for Westside Renewal protest Ben Carson’s leadership of HUD, April 2018.

Under the amended Section 214 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1980, mixed-status families—in which some members, usually children, have legal status and others are undocumented—can live in public housing or receive Section 8 vouchers, but only those with legal status are subsidized. Those without it have to pay market rent to the local housing authority if they are living in public housing or to the landlord if the family is covered by Section 8. The rationale for the legislation, which passed with bipartisan support, was pretty straightforward. It was intended, says Karlo Ng, a San Diego attorney of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA).

In October 14, 2019

The Nation.
According to a HUD impact analysis published in April, the changes could result in 108,000 people from mixed-status families—including more than 55,000 children who are US citizens or legal residents—being expelled from public housing or losing their Section 8 vouchers, with most of those affected living in New York, California, and Texas. New York City estimates that this would lead to 2,800 families, or 11,400 individuals, losing public housing. The Los Angeles Mayor’s Office and HACLA say a similar number would be affected there, adding thousands to the county’s existing 59,000 homeless residents.

Up and down California, a state already bedeviled by stunningly high levels of homelessness, chronic housing shortages, and devastating wildfires that have destroyed tens of thousands of residences, cities and immigrant communities will be pummeled. In the Central Valley, for example, Fresno may see more than 2,500 people face eviction under HUD’s new rules. In some of LA’s public housing tracts, local organizers say, up to 40 percent of families could lose their homes, and administrators at nearby elementary schools say hundreds of students could end up on the streets.

Quite apart from its cruelty, the policy is utterly impractical—and costly. It is almost guaranteed to have expensive health, educational, and employment consequences. In a scathing July letter to HUD, the NHLP wrote, “Studies have shown that unstable housing situations can cause individuals to experience increased hospital visits, loss of employment, and are associated with increased likelihood of mental health problems in children.”

The flimsy reasoning that HUD’s political appointees have used to justify the change doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. In a crude race-baiting attempt to pit poor African American and white families against undocumented Latino ones, HUD has marketed the change as a way to free up housing space for US citizens on wait lists, but the rule change could, according to HUD’s own nonpartisan analysis, ultimately lead to fewer people in public and Section 8 housing. That’s because undocumented residents pay higher rent, thus easing pressure on the country’s overstretched and underfunded public and subsidized housing systems.

Remove the hundreds of millions of dollars in rent paid by those residents without adding tax dollars, and these systems suddenly have to make do with less revenue.

This is, quite simply, government-sponsored vandalism in furtherance of Trump’s anti-immigrant agenda. “We don’t know how many of those folks have family or what everyone will do,” says Bill Przyocki, the executive director of POWER. “But a lot of people don’t have a plan. And we don’t have low-income housing stock to absorb these folks.”

In the late spring and early summer, groups like Przyocki’s coordinated a large-scale response during the public comment period that’s required before any proposed rule change may be published in the Federal Register. More than 30,000 comments were filed by individuals, community groups, public health and housing experts, educators, and so on. And of the comments the NHLP has analyzed so far, the overwhelming majority were firmly opposed to the changes.

Despite the well-organized opposition, and notwithstanding that implementation of such sweeping regulatory changes despite overwhelming opposition would likely contravene the Administrative Procedures Act, the Trump administration is almost certain to push them through by year’s end as part of its strategy of flogging immigration as a wedge issue in the 2020 election season. After all, this summer, in the face of more than a quarter-million comments filed in opposition, the Department of Homeland Security published its new “public charge” rules, designed to scare most legal immigrants away from using public benefits by declaring that enrolling in such programs would hurt their chances of gaining permanent residency or citizenship.

Housing advocates, anticipating the same trajectory regarding the new HUD rules, are girding for a legal fight. If and when the rule change is made, the Legal Aid Society in New York “intends to bring litigation to stop it on behalf of our clients in New York City,” says Lucy Newman, a staff attorney with the group’s law reform unit. “We’re hopeful a judge would issue a preliminary injunction. We’ll be seeking it on a nationwide basis.”

On the other side of the country, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra is likely to sue the Trump administration, as are various housing advocacy groups. The result will almost certainly be a legal limbo, with some courts ordering injunctive relief to prevent the new rules from kicking in while the administration appeals all the way up to the Supreme Court.

At the same time, at the urging of groups like POWER, California legislators are starting to talk about how to set up parallel safety net systems to protect immigrant families expelled from federal housing. “We need to be ready with legal responses, public outreach and education, and coordination with local and state government in case people get displaced,” Przyocki argues.

POWER has approached politicians like Luz Rivas, a California State Assembly member representing the northeastern San Fernando Valley, to start working on backstops to protect such families. Sitting in her second-floor office in the Capitol in Sacramento, Rivas—

**The people’s lobby:** Members of POWER meet with Representatives Ayanna Pressley (left) and Jesus “Chuy” Garcia (right, both facing away from the camera) at a congressional housing subcommittee meeting, April 2019.

**Luz Rivas, California State Assembly member.**

**Karlo Ng, supervising attorney, National Housing Law Project.**

**Xavier Becerra, California attorney general.**
who grew up in LA as the daughter of an undocumented woman—discusses the looming crisis. “California would have to redirect resources or work at the local level to see if there’s a way we can block it,” she says. But as she and other politicians acknowledge, it would be a huge financial gamble on the part of the states, and there’s no guarantee that immigrant families would trust state agencies to protect their data from a predatory federal government. “If we do establish a parallel system, how do we get people to trust us and to use the services?” she asks. “The fear Trump inspires is so great, it would take a lot to convince them to trust us.”

Joanne is a teacher’s assistant in Los Angeles and a community garden volunteer who emigrated from Morelos, Mexico, in the mid-1990s. She and her husband, a janitor with diabetes, are undocumented. Joanne, who requested a pseudonym because she is increasingly nervous about drawing attention to her status, says, “This is where our stress and tension are now. We are a mixed-status family. My kids are really worried. There’s always been the risk they could snatch me. Now there’s the risk of displacement.”

The couple and their four US-citizen children live in a four-bedroom public housing unit, paying $1,215 a month in rent to HACLA. Now Joanne is contemplating the unthinkable: homelessness or a return to overpriced, overcrowded, and dilapidated slum housing.

Last year Joanne’s two youngest daughters, ages 7 and 9, needed surgeries to correct their breathing problems, and her 11-year-old son was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. They desperately need stability; instead, they face the prospect of chaos. “Where would my kids go?” Joanne asks. “Especially the younger one? It hurts me, and it makes me sad. It’s really hard.”

LIKE SO MUCH ELSE IN TRUMP’S THEATER OF CRUELTY, THE fight over HUD’s rule change could reach a legal crescendo next spring—allowing Trump to dangle his tough-on-immigrants credentials to his electoral base.

Meanwhile, mixed-status families in public housing wait and worry about the pending bureaucratic pogrom being unleashed against them by the feds. It will not be bloody in the way that pogroms usually are. But it could nevertheless result in a humanitarian catastrophe, with tens of thousands of homeless kids on America’s streets, even as it stirs up racial and ethnic animosities by pitting poor Latino families against poor African American and white families over access to the country’s shrinking pool of public housing.

For 11-year-old Kimberly (a pseudonym she requested), the prospect of losing the only home she has ever known is terrifying. So terrifying that, in her own poignant way, she has begun thinking of ways to help her family survive. The girl explains her plan, wide-eyed and talking fast while sitting on a wall outside her family’s apartment. “I’ll help my mom,” she says with an air of bravado. “Maybe for a few days she could live with my sister. Then we could help her find a way to live. We could save up so we could have a house. My mom gives me money—five dollars. I could put it in a piggy bank. We could all save money, and we’d live somewhere again.”

Kimberley would like to talk to Trump about this. “I’d say, ‘It’s not fair. We should all have a house to sleep in, a place we can stay warm and not stay cold,’” she says. “I think he’d say, ‘You’re just a little kid. I don’t believe what you’re saying.’” But, she continues, “I’d show him my house and say, ‘I’m happy I have a house, because if I live outside, I wouldn’t like it.’”

(continued from page 21)

BUS. Eventually, a professor told her that she would never pass if she continued missing days. Williams knew she could reach out to Sci, but her high school counselors couldn’t buy her a car or pay her rent.

As students reported back, Marcovitz said, he told himself he’d been “horribly unstrategic” and naive. He created college-success classes at Sci to prepare students to face issues such as impostor syndrome. He and his team began to question whether the best-ranked colleges were always the best fit for Sci’s students.

Marcovitz recognized that he needed staff members who knew firsthand how alienated black students could feel on a majority-white campus. He needed teachers who had attended historically black schools and participated in African American fraternities and sororities. Marcovitz expanded his college counseling program and hired more New Orleans natives and people of color, who he believed could better help his students find the college best suited for them.

In the fall of 2015, after Williams failed a third semester, she began to question whether college was the surest path to the life she wanted. The few people she knew with bachelor’s degrees hadn’t found high-paying jobs. And some of her high school classmates had reached the middle class even though they’d dropped out. One earned $85,000 a year working for Coca-Cola. Pierre, who had left Louisiana State University for the Air Force, now had a good job working in the executive branch of the federal government. Others had joined the military or the sheriff’s department and seemed fulfilled.

Marcovitz, too, noticed that many of his students were happy and prosperous without a degree. He now runs six high schools. Though his organization, Collegiate Academies, still publicizes the fact that 99 percent of its seniors are accepted to college and though its mission still includes a collegiate focus, he said he believes that for some young people, leading “lives of unlimited opportunity”—finding careers or vocations they love, even without a degree—might be just as good.

Williams said she loves learning. She still writes down words she doesn’t know and looks them up later, and she spends her free time scrolling through the Internet to research any topic that piques her interest. She said that she didn’t want to quit college but that she was tired. “She’d been out of high school for more than three years and still didn’t have enough credits for even an associate degree. When the semester ended in late 2015, she withdrew from Delgado.

By 2016, four years after their triumphant graduation from Sci, only two members of that inaugural class had finished college. Neither one had an easy time. Erica Willard said she was so depressed and homesick at Colorado College that she “completely broke down” when she saw a group of upperclassmen cooking fried chicken and cornbread, the soul food she grew up eating. Troy Simon, who went on to earn a master’s degree in divinity at Yale, said he realized at Bard College that higher education might divide him from the family members he’d left behind.

“You become your own person, and that is scary,” he observed. “There is a fear of letting go of family, letting go of your community. I struggled with that. There is a feeling that I am an interloper now, an outsider.”

Only six of Sci’s first graduates finished college within six years, the federal standard for on-time graduation. Three others earned degrees this year. Though eight, including Pierre, are still working toward a degree, 32 of the 49 who enrolled in college have dropped out.

Collegiate Academies is the only charter network in New Orleans that has publicly shared its college persistence results. Most of the city’s charter high schools don’t track the number of alumni
who go on to earn bachelor’s degrees, and KIPP New Orleans, the one network that does, declined to share its data. KIPP’s first graduating class from New Orleans has been in college for only five years, shy of the federal cutoff for on-time graduation. But researchers at the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, a Tulane-based organization that studies post-Katrina education reforms, found last year that the high schools have increased college graduation rates by 3 to 5 percentage points since Hurricane Katrina. None have come close to achieving the college for all they once promised.

Most made the same mistakes that Sci did, said Brian Beabout, a former New Orleans teacher who evaluated charter applications for the state and now studies the city’s charter schools as an associate professor of educational leadership at UNO. Most charters hired young white teachers and counselors from selective universities, and they steered their students toward elite institutions. These high schools improved education for a large swath of the city, he said, but many did so without preparing their students to succeed socially in college.

“We underestimated the importance of social integration. We underestimated the cultural gaps between the communities our students come from and the more elite, highly selective institutions that a lot of people got placed into,” Beabout continued. “Even if I can hang in my college algebra classroom, can I make a happy life for myself in a dorm with very few people who have had very similar life experiences?”

Over time, Marcovitz has hired a more diverse teaching corps. That first year, only one of seven teachers identified as a person of color. Today, more than half of the 140 teachers who work at his schools do.

As Marcovitz’s staff has focused more on social integration, he has found that the students who returned to Sci for nonacademic help were often the ones who succeeded in college. When Jeon Domingue took a summer off from Amherst College, she moved home to work for Sci. She graduated in 2017 and now works for Opportunities Academy, a postsecondary program in New Orleans that Marcovitz’s organization runs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Raven Matthews attended four colleges before earning her degree from UNO this May, but she remains so close to Marcovitz that she babysits his children and works at one of his schools in Baton Rouge. And Marquisha Williams turned to her old high school for advice after she dropped out of the University of Louisiana at Monroe and developed lupus. Sci’s counselors helped her find a therapist and a low-pressure job. When she enrolled at Louisiana State University, Sci paid for her textbooks. She graduated last December.

Rinata Williams still wants a degree, though pursuing one has left her worse off financially. She is deeply in debt, and her credit score dropped after she defaulted on the $22,000 she owes in student loans.

For now, she works the night shift in a post office mail room, but she said she wants to help people. Maybe, she said she thought this summer, she could stop by Sci a few days a week to talk to students who need it. She knows she isn’t as credentialed as the counselors who will guide Sci’s graduates forward. But struggling through college was its own kind of instruction, and in that, Williams is more of an expert than most educated people will ever be.

This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.
In early March, thousands of Algerian demonstrators occupied the Place d’Armes in Oran, Algeria’s second largest city. They were protesting the announcement by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika that he intended to run for a fifth consecutive five-year term, although the former officer has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. Kamel Daoud arrived at the square early. A novelist and columnist for Le Quotidien d’Oran, one of the local French-language papers, Daoud has long been a ferocious critic of the military officers who have run Algeria since it won independence in 1962. Well before the recent protests, he denounced the ruling clique—le pouvoir, as it is locally known—as a gerontocracy that humiliated the populace under the guise of providing stability. He decried the regime’s theft of oil profits, its violent suppression of public dissent, and its creation of a political system based on paranoia and mistrust. In a column written in 2010, he despaired over “the mummification of Algerian society by its pharaohs” and asked, “How long has it been since Algerians went out in the streets to demand democracy?”

Daoud celebrated the March demonstrations as an Algerian renaissance. In a column for Le Point, he contrasted the dynamism of the protesters with...
the sclerosis of the regime, in prose that seemed to draw inspiration from the music and energy of the crowds:

On the one hand, the immobile body of Bouteflika, the incarnation of a generation that refuses to die and will not accept a transition, a handing-down of power; on the other hand, the body of the demonstrator, exuberant, laughing, singing, feminine, masculine. This was the first thought that struck me that day, marching with hundreds of thousands of others from Oran: the return of the body.

Chroniques is a selection of Daoud’s columns, primarily published in French-language newspapers from 2010 to 2016, that exhibits his fierce yet frequently ebullient sensibility. To read these pieces now is to relive the sudden blooming of the Arab Spring and its bitter aftermath. It is also to meet a journalist primed for the moment. Daoud writes with his nerve endings. His columns are impulsive, risky, and full of punchy formulations. For Islamists, he once declared, “democracy is like a camel—you can climb on top of it, milk it, eat it, use it as shelter, make clothing of it, raise it, but never hesitate to slaughter, sell, or buy it.” His comments on the regimes in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and the Persian Gulf nations are, if anything, more scathing: “We accomplish nothing by fighting a poorly dressed ISIS in Syria, while shaking hands with a well-dressed ISIS in Saudi Arabia.” Daoud casts the struggle against Arab authoritarianism as the unfinished business of the region’s wars for independence. (The original French edition of this collection is titled Mes Indépendances.)

Daoud’s pieces are stylishly written and often courageous in their pointed criticism of powerful regimes, but the real reason to read them is for his equally sharp treatment of would-be allies. He is dismissive of the slogans of the Arab left, which he finds out-of-date and even pernicious. Although friendly to the Pal estinian cause, he rarely writes about life in the occupied territories, nor does he often criticize Israeli policies. Instead, he rails against the conformism of Arab intellectual life, accusing both Islamists and Arab governments of treating Palestine “like a G-string”—that is, a showy but thin contrivance to cover up their ineffectuality and corruption. When it comes to Arab unity and anti-imperialism, he is just as scornful, arguing that those causes have been turned into excuses for maintaining the status quo.

Daoud’s political hopes lie with the youth. Almost 60 years after independence, Algeria’s rulers continue to justify their reign by pointing to the trauma and triumph of the 1954–62 war with France. Born eight years after independence, he doesn’t deny the trauma, but he urges his readers to get over it. When French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged last fall that France had tortured pro-independence activist Maurice Audin during the Algerian War, Daoud wondered what it had to do with his generation’s struggles for democratic governance and economic opportunity. In an op-ed published in The New York Times, he worried that “instead of using [Macron’s declaration] to start a discussion about Algerian memory, the Algerian government may, once again, try to bolster its legitimacy by pointing a finger at colonization.” In a country obsessed with national memory, Daoud offered a radical cure: “The decolonized must get beyond the past, and take responsibility for their present, with sincerity.”

His resolve to move beyond the idées fixes of postcolonialism is the reason that his work has generated so much excitement in some quarters and so much wariness in others. He writes as the representative of a generation for whom the pathos of the Algerian War and, by extension, other wars of national liberation has been exhausted, their lessons turned into dogma. “It’s a tragedy,” he writes, “to be confined to this decolonization without end, this perpetual jeremiad, this complex of the periphery.” To break free of this complex, Daoud writes with a rage and clarity that are exhilarating to read. His skepticism toward the orthodoxies of the left and his faith in “the present” as a time of unpredictable transformations perfectly suit the mood of the thousands who occupied mayadeen across the Arab world eight years ago—and who seem to have returned in Algeria and Sudan. Anyone interested in knowing what brought those crowds into the squares, what happened to them during the past eight years, and where things might be headed next would do well to read Chroniques.

Daoud is best known for his slim novel The Meursault Investigation. First published in Algeria by Éditions Barzakh in 2013 as Meursault, Contre-Enquête, it appeared a year later in France and soon was widely translated. The novel’s premise is so simple and elegant that one wonders why no one thought of it before. The book is a kind of sequel to Albert Camus’s The Stranger; in which the anonymous Arab of the original, who was shot to death on a beach outside Algiers by Meursault, Camus’s narrator, is given a name (Musa) and a family history. Daoud’s narrator, Musa’s brother Harun, tells us that he has learned French expressly to tell the murdered man’s story—the one left untold by the local boy who went on to literary fame in Paris.

The Meursault Investigation mimics Camus’s novel by turning it inside out. The first sentence reads, “Aujourd’hui, M’ma est encore vivante” (in John Cullen’s translation, “Mama’s still alive today”). Other reversals are less mechanical. Unlike Camus’s flinty prose and Meursault’s tough-guy silences, Harun is talkative and self-dramatizing. (Like the narrator of Camus’s The Fall, Harun delivers his monologue at the end of a bar.) In place of Camus’s stoic philosophy of the absurd, Harun announces an ethics of witnessing. “That’s the reason why I’ve learned to speak this language,” he tells us on the first page of the novel. “So I can speak in place of a dead man, so I can finish his sentences for him.”

So far, so familiar. We seem to be reading a late addition to the canon of “The Empire Writes Back” (in Salman Rushdie’s phrase). But then things get more interesting. After telling the story of Musa, Harun relates his own, which turns out to mirror his nemesis’s in ironic fashion. For Harun, like Meursault, is a murderer: Driven by his mother’s thirst for vengeance, he kills an unarmed Frenchman during the early days of Algerian independence. Harun is interrogated by an Algerian officer, who
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notes that if he had just killed the man a few days earlier, his deed would have been an act of resistance; since it occurred after independence, however, it’s a common murder (though since the victim was French, Harun is still let go). In other words, Harun’s killing of the Frenchman is as meaningless in the existentialist sense as Meursault’s killing of the Arab, a mere acte gratuit.

But Harun’s similarity to Meursault goes even deeper. Both are nonconformists of a peculiarly French type—passionately atheist and anticlerical. In the final scenes of Camus’s novel, Meursault is visited in his cell by a chaplain, who needles him with questions about the afterlife and offers to pray for him. Meursault, who spends most of the novel in a haze of je-m’en-foutisme, seizes the priest by his collar and tells him not to waste his breath: Meursault’s certainty of God’s absence is more than a match for the priest’s faith. Daoud has called this the most powerful scene in the novel, and his Algerian narrator also feels besieged by meddlesome believers. His neighbor reads the Quran at the top of his lungs, and the bars in Oran are all closed on Fridays. Harun describes his dilemma as that of a man caught “between Allah and ennui.”

Daoud’s admiration for Camus puts him in the minority in Algeria. For most of the country’s Arabophone writers, as for many postcolonial intellectuals, Camus is a political dead end—the last, most ambivalent of the imperialist writers who refused to support Algeria’s fight for independence. For Conor Cruise O’Brien, writing in 1970 at the height of third-worldist politics, Camus was a writer who “flinched from the realities of his position, as a Frenchman of Algeria.” Edward Said, in an influential essay written some 20 years later, largely agreed with O’Brien’s diagnosis of the philosopher’s blind spots, saying, “The Arabs of The Stranger are nameless beings used as background for the portentous metaphysics explored by Camus.”

Some Francophone Algerian writers have dissented from this postcolonial reading. For Assia Djebar, the most internationally celebrated Algerian novelist and a member of the Académie Française before she died in 2015, Camus represented a road not taken in her country’s history: the possibility of a peaceful decolonization. In 1995, in the midst of a bloody conflict between the Algerian regime and Islamist groups and a year after the posthumous publication of Camus’s unfinished novel The First Man, Djebar eulogized him as a pacifist of principle. She recalled his 1956 proposal for a truce between France and Algerian nationalists—a truce that neither side was interested in at the time—and wondered whether it might have led to “a solution like the one Mandela found in South Africa.”

Daoud’s enthusiasm for Camus is more personal, even intimate. The Meursault Investigation is an homage not only to The Stranger but to all of Camus’s novels and essays, which serve him (and Harun) as a secular litany. In one of his more affecting columns, Daoud writes of a trip to Yale’s Beinecke Library, where he finds a hand-written manuscript of The Myth of Sisyphus. Daoud pores over Camus’s scratched-out lines, noting that “the manuscript is the place where the book hasn’t erased its other possibilities.” He compares the yellowing pages to “a desired body” and suggests that Camus’s crabbed script was a symptom of his famously short breath: “To read the manuscript is to experience this rhythm directly, hear his respiration, perceive within it the noise of the earth beneath his tread.” This is reading and writing as bodily inhabitation.

One might say The Meursault Investigation is an actualization of the “other possibilities” latent in The Stranger. This is what makes it a pleasure to read, but it is also a limitation, since it’s difficult to imagine enjoying Daoud’s novel without first caring about Camus’s. (Lots of people do, of course, and Daoud’s book has become an international best seller.) The Meursault Investigation was born out of a newspaper column, a short monologue that Daoud later used in the novel’s opening pages, and the story feels like a clever conceit that has been fatally overextended. For all his interest in godless freedom, Daoud’s fiction is somewhat cramped. The plot is static, the characters (particularly the bloodthirsty mother) are types, and the narrator’s disquisitions—on Algerian society, Camus’s novel, and the guilty pleasures of drinking wine—come to seem more like a series of amusing op-eds than a barroom confession.

But Daoud’s devotion to Camus garnered him a significant readership in France and now widely across the rest of Europe and in the United States. Metropolitan tastes for Algerian literature have traditionally skewed toward a fascination with intégriste violence and retellings of the Algerian Revolution—things one finds in the works of Yasmina Khadra and Rachid Boudjedra, for example. Daoud’s novel, which came within two votes of winning the Prix Goncourt, France’s most prestigious award for fiction, appealed to a different set of Parisian readers: those convinced of the universalism of French culture and with a particular reverence for its classics. For them, Daoud’s dedication to The Stranger (an all-time best seller in France, though it isn’t taught in Algeria) was gratifying evidence of, if nothing else, the enduring and widespread appeal of French literature. “I know the book by heart,” Harun says of Camus’s novel. “I can recite it to you like the Koran.”

Daoud’s next moment in the spotlight came in the winter of 2016, at the height of the European migrant crisis and in the wake of mass sexual assaults in Cologne and other German cities during the celebrations on New Year’s Eve. The perpetrators were mostly men of North African or Middle Eastern background, and the incidents became a flash point in debates about immigration policy on the continent. In a pair of op-eds published in Le Monde and The New York Times, Daoud criticized those on the right who argued for barring Europe’s doors against Muslims, but he reserved his harshest words for those on the “naively optimistic” left who shut their eyes to what he called “the sexual misery” of “the lands of Allah,” where an ongoing “war on women” amounted to an undiagnosed and fast-spreading “sickness.”

A group of 19 mostly American and French academics published a letter in Le Monde accusing Daoud of trading in Orientalist clichés and giving rhetorical support to Islamophobia. In response, he called his critics “coddled petitioners” who were mounting a Stalinesque show trial from the safety of Western capitals and café terraces. One can understand his umbrage, given the risks he runs in publishing his opinions while living in Algeria, where an Islamist imam issued on Facebook a call for his death. Less fathomable, however, was his surprise that his
most passionate defenders—including the philosopher Pascal Bruckner, who called Daoud's critics "fatwa-writing guard dogs disguised as scholars"—should come from the secular French right, long obsessed with the threat of sexual barbarism from the East as well as that of so-called Islamic totalitarianism. That he would be embraced by such figures was in fact entirely predictable, and naïve optimism seems like a charitable interpretation of Daoud's lack of concern.

The controversy that his two op-eds provoked caught many readers' attention, but the writings collected in Chroniques show that Daoud's commentary on Colomne wasn't a fluke—nor, as he has sometimes suggested, an emotional outburst. On the contrary, the sexual misery of "the lands of Allah" is a subject he returns to again and again in his journalism, where he suggests that the root problem is the spread of Islamist teachings and social movements. Islamism, for Daoud, is an especially joyless version of Platonism, morbidly suspicious of the body and its pleasures, intolerant of dissent, and disdainful of the world's actual, teeming diversity. The Islamist is "unsettled by difference," Daoud writes. "He dreams of a world that is uniform, unanimous." Islamism is "an affliction of Islam," a death-haunted cult spread by Saudi-funded media, cable television theologians, and a lack of ideological alternatives. "Islamism is a kind of fascism," he concludes, "a kind of muffled totalitarianism [that] can't be moderated."

Daoud was an Islamist in his youth, and his writings bear the stamp of a convert's disillusionment. They recycle, wittingly or not, the tropes of right-wing opinion in France, as well as those of Arab secularists like the Syrian poet Adonis—comparisons of Islamism with fascism, metaphors of illness, and fixation with veiling practices. And they fail to explain why Islamist politics—hardly a monolithic phenomenon—attracts so many millions of ordinary and intelligent people, from Algeria to Egypt to Indonesia: its ethos of asceticism, its practical support for the poor, its impressive methods of mobilization. Nor does Daoud mention, except in passing, the Cold War history of Arab governments, often supported by the United States and its allies, that co-opted and murdered leftists, thereby opening the door to precisely those Islamists whose rise gave the regimes a pretense for demanding further handouts and friendly treatment from the West. Daoud knows this history, as every Arab intellectual does, but it falls victim to the same scalpel he uses to divide contemporary Algeria from its war for independence. It is as if taking responsibility for the present meant simply forgetting the past.

If Daoud's analysis of Islamism is insufficient, his emphasis on its puritan elements usefully highlights his celebration of the body—that laughing, dancing, singing body whose "return" he recognized in the crowds occupying Oran's Place d'Armes. Here it becomes clear that Daoud's deepest affinity is not with Camus the novelist—the steely-eyed moralist of The Stranger, The Plague, and The Fall—but with Camus the lyrical essayist. Camus's essays of the late 1930s are his most obviously "Algerian" texts, ecstatic evocations of a sun-drenched, sensually abundant landscape "where the mind finds its justification in the body." In the splendor of the Mediterranean littoral, the young Camus detected "an invitation to life," a summons to this-worldly pleasure and corporeal gratification. He praised his countrymen's healthy devotion to the here and now:

This people, plunged wholly in the present, lives with neither myths nor consolation. It has placed all its goods on this earth and hence remains defenseless against death. The gifts of physical beauty have been heaped upon it.

Camus's Mediterranean paganism was a rebuke to Catholic thinkers like Charles Maurras, founder of the right-wing Action Française. For Daoud, the enemy is the arid idealism of Islamist theology. "I like ancient religions," he writes in his homage to the topless activists of Femen, "those of the body and the sun, which were extinguished by guilt, abstinence, and mortal fear." Daoud's form of body worship is also a fantasy of escape from what he calls "identity pathology," the demand made by Islamists on the one hand and political regimes on the other that people identify themselves as Muslim or Arab, with all the historical baggage that comes with such a choice. For Daoud, the liberation of the body, its release from the shackles of the past, is paramount:

The body is the only thing that's divine, the only eternity that I can touch with my hands.... It's in the body that I find heaven or lose it, not in prayer. I dream of it, naked, proud, vigorous, praised for its performance, revered as a fortune, a conquest. I want it to be free; I don't want the body to apologize for itself, to hide, retreat, suffer, become isolated, or want for anything other than itself. The body is not a nationality; it's my only source of humanity.

But all this talk about the body can quickly feel rather abstract, as if Daoud's reverence for it were merely the mirror image of the Islamists' denial of it. To dream of nakedness as a liberation from the past is, after all, another form of idealism. Actual bodies are marked precisely by their individual histories. Likewise, Daoud's fantasy of freedom—"I don't want any more history," he declares in one of his more categorical moods—is of a piece with his desire to think everything anew, outside all the old categories and traditions. While the Islamists imagine a past purified of the fallen present, Daoud images a present purified of its own history. It isn't by chance that his favorite myth, omnipresent in his fiction as well as his essays, is that of Robinson Crusoe, the man of new beginnings.

Daoud's idea that history is something to escape rather than something to revisit and revise leads to some of his weakest writing and most risible judgments. What he has to say about women is a case in point. Throughout Chroniques, he condemns Arab governments and Islamist preachers for their reactionary treatment of women and especially for their view of female bodies as a source of shame. Here the various strands of Daoud's thought—his critique of religion, his reverence for the body, and his outspoken feminism—come together: "The Islamist is uncomfortable with a woman because she reminds him of her body, and therefore of his own body. The Islamist wants to veil woman to forget her, deny her, disembodify her, escape her." Over and over in his writings, Daoud claims that the problems of the Arab and Islamic world result from the repression and coercion of bodies and of women's bodies in particular. Rather than a source of shame, Daoud argues, women's bodies should be a source of hope and resistance.

But this is a severely limited version of feminism—one that pays scant attention to women's minds, for example, or indeed to the long history of feminist movements in the Arab and Muslim worlds, about which Daoud has almost nothing to say. When he
travels abroad (the countries he visits are postcolonial, post-socialist analogues of Algeria), he describes himself as a journalist “who judges people based on how they treat women.” But the evidence he cites appears limited to dress codes. In Vietnam, women “can have bare legs, they are elegant, and not harassed.” In Romania, “short skirts don’t cause earthquakes.” In Senegal, Daoud finds women “so elegant as to take your breath away…. Smiling. Bodies betraying desire, precise in their movement. Free.” Senegalese women might quibble with this, but in any case, what sort of freedom is Daoud talking about? Beyond the ability to wear short skirts and go unveiled, it’s hard to know.

In 2017, Daoud was invited to spend a night in the Picasso Museum in Paris without books or companions and to write about his experience. The show on exhibit was “Picasso 1932, Année Érotique,” which included many nude portraits of Marie-Thérèse Walter, the artist’s love interest at the time. In his earlier writings, Daoud never evinced any interest in Picasso, but something about the setup must have appealed to him: the empty museum as a kind of desert isle, in which the solitary man of sensibility attempts, à la Crusoe, to fashion a world of ideas from scratch. And then, as Daoud explains in the resulting book-length essay, Le Peintre Dévorant la Femme (The Painter Is Devouring the Woman, not yet translated into English), “Eroticism is the key to my vision of the world… proof that the Beyond is a body that one can hold and eat, here and not ‘after.’”

Daoud’s descriptions of Picasso’s canvasses are always vivid, but these nudes have hardly been ignored by scholars, so the idea that one might have something fresh to say about them simply by the force of looking—Daoud doesn’t cite any previous work—implies a peculiar sort of hubris. The strangest, perhaps most telling moment comes when Daoud imagines himself as an Islamist fanatic, a man with no knowledge of figurative art, confronting these icons of desire:

In the cold of the museum, it’s the nude that unsettles me…. It’s the nude that attracts the child of calligraphy in me, the man of the South, the planet of Allah. The West, for us, is the nude. (The Orient—is it the eternal veil?) No matter what they say, no matter how they hide it. It can happen that in the fight for independence, one set of constraints gets exchanged for another, possibly tighter set. In his exasperation with the norms of modern Arab life and politics, Daoud has liberated himself from the straitjacket of postcolonial thinking, only to end up, at times, repeating platitudes about Western culture and Eastern primitivism, sexual mores, and the eternal veil. In his impatience with the Arab left’s slogans, Daoud tells his readers that Arab nationalism, Marxism, and feminism have little to teach.

Those traditions have flaws, of course. Some have been co-opted by autocratic states, which use them reflexively to stifle dissent. But these traditions also offer flexible visions of history and substantive notions of freedom that Daoud’s politics—like those of the demonstrators in the squares—frequently lack. “The planet of Allah” does not have a monopoly on dogma disguised as knowledge; France and the West have their own orthodoxies and complexes. One hopes Daoud will acknowledge as much and begin the difficult work of liberating himself from them as well.
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The Ethics of Eating
How our food culture is killing us

by SUSAN PEDERSEN

was born and grew up mostly in Japan, the second of four children of missionary parents who went there in 1955 to convert the Japanese to Lutheranism. Instead, the Japanese converted my family to better eating. Japan’s luscious fruits seduced us first (loquats, persimmons, nashi, the ubiquitous mandarin oranges), but we children fell hard too for its “diner” foods (donburi, ramen) and fishy snacks, especially dried squid and those delectable tiny spicy fish whose bones cramped so satisfyingly when we bit into them. My parents were Western Canadians, so we mostly sat down at dinner to what I still think of as “Lutheran food”—meatloaf, scalloped potatoes, casserole—but here too Japanese habits slowly transformed our table. Feeding four children on a missionary’s pay is no easy business. Meat was expensive, and there weren’t really any supermarkets in Nagoya or Tokyo in those days, either. So my mother biked daily to the local shops, buying small quantities of meat or fish and larger quantities of vegetables—greens, beans, those lovely little eggplants—that she began heretically sautéing or steaming rather than boiling to death. The electric rice cooker that is a fixture in all Japanese kitchens got hard use in ours, too, and while my mother cooked most of the time, my adventurous father occasionally took a turn. The food I still associate most strongly with my childhood is my father’s fried rice. He’d sauté some onions, throw in whatever leftovers he found in the fridge—two hot dogs, some cooked carrots, half a cup of peas—add a couple of cups of boiled rice from the cooker and pour soy sauce over the whole mess. To our mother’s irritation, it was the favorite food of us kids.

Families with more than one or two children put them through a kind of sorting hat, and I somehow ended up as both surrogate son (the one my father shouted for when he needed to move a couch) and surrogate cook, left in charge when my parents had Bible studies or fellowships. I can’t remember when I learned to roll piecrust, knead bread, fry a chicken, or make a basic white sauce, but long before we left Japan for Minnesota in 1974, when I was almost 15, I could be trusted to put on the table a dinner that everyone would eat. And while we mostly went back to Lutheran food in Minnesota and began buying the kind of sugared cereals and soft drinks that have caused obesity and diabetes rates to shoot up worldwide, we still ate more vegetables than any other family we knew. My father, who never paid for anything that he could make or do himself, pegged out a huge garden behind our mission-owned house in St. Paul, and it was my job and that of my older sister to keep it weeded. This was hot work, but we had salads throughout the summer and frozen beans, peas, and corn, as well as jams and jellies and quarts of pickles, throughout the winter.

I left my family, and my faith, before I was out of my teens, but the foodways of my childhood have stayed with me. I still tend to shop almost daily, often by bike, and for four decades, I’ve cooked and sat down to dinner—with housemates, with family, or on my own—almost every night. Sure, I went vegetarian for a time in my 20s. I also learned that the white sauce and piecrust I made as a child have fancy French names (béchamel, pâte brisée) and developed more range. But I still don’t cook the expensive cuts of meat that I never ate as a child (or buy prepared foods or order takeout), and the pastas and risottos I served my kids and their ever-famished friends are, after all, just the Italian relations of my father’s fried rice. I stopped growing tomatoes when I moved from Massachusetts to New York and stopped baking all our bread about a decade after that, but I still can’t roast a chicken without boiling the carcass down for stock or pass the farmers market at the end of the summer, when field tomatoes are knocked down to a dollar a pound, without making my son carry home 40 pounds so I can cook and freeze pasta sauce for the winter. “You might be a professor, Susan,” one

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FRANS SNYDERS, KITCHEN TABLE WITH GAME AND VEGETABLES, CA. 1635–40
friend once said to me, picking her kids up after dinner, “but you’re also a farm wife.”

I’m not, of course, not least because a real farm wife in the United States today might live amid an ocean of soybeans and in a food desert, miles from a decent grocery store. I, on the other hand, live in Manhattan, less than six blocks from two farmers markets laden with grass-fed beef, free-range eggs, and all manner of fresh produce from Ulster and Dutchess counties’ orchards and family farms. We think of how we eat within a framework of choice, but as Bee Wilson tells us in her new book, *The Way We Eat Now*, that is ridiculous. We “choose” within a contained food environment, one shaped by availability and advertising, prices and profits, traditions and trends. How we eat has less to do with conviction and still less to do with virtue than with habits and traditions, environment and especially economics—that is, with the complex social order within which we live. New York, for example, seems to offer almost limitless “choice,” but its cornucopia and variety (its Michelin-starred restaurants and gourmet food trucks, its farmers markets and specialty stores) coexists with rampant inequality and ill health. New York might seem a foodie’s heaven, but one-fifth of its residents live below the poverty line and an additional 25 percent in what the city calls “near poverty,” and homelessness has reached levels not seen since the Great Depression. In 2016, 1.2 million New Yorkers were “food insecure.” Today almost 1 million are living with Type 2 diabetes. Commendably activist though the city’s government is, battling those statistics with a host of neighborhood- and school-based health and nutrition programs, New York nevertheless captures perfectly the polarization and paradoxes of “the way we eat now.” And this is why I fell so hungrily on Wilson’s book—devouring it, really—in a quest to understand a global food culture that, frankly, is killing us.

Wilson doesn’t mince words about the magnitude of the problem. We think of food crises in terms of famine or scarcity, and while those can still strike hard, we also face a different kind of challenge today. For the first time, more people (1 billion) are overweight or obese worldwide than are underfed (about 800 million). Today, more people die from diet-related diseases than from the effects of tobacco use. To explain how a prosperous world could defeat hunger, only to fall victim to toxic diets, Wilson turns to nutrition scientist Barry Popkin’s account of the stages through which human diet has evolved. To the meat and foraged plants of the hunter-gatherer days (Stage 1), settled societies added a staple farmed cereal such as wheat, rice, sorghum, or maize (Stage 2), and from the crop rotation and commercialization that allowed for more variety (Stage 3), they saw the rise of cheap-energy-enabled food processing, industrial farming, and the heavy consumption of meat, fats, and sugars (Stage 4). The nations of the West had mostly moved to Stage 4 by the 1960s and ’70s, but the big story about food is how quickly the rest of the world followed suit. Rising mass purchasing power, food companies’ restless search for new markets, and our human cravings have utterly transformed diets—and with them, health—around the globe.

Reading Wilson’s first chapters, I realized that I had lived through one of these transitions in the 1960s, when Japan moved from Stage 3 to Stage 4 in the midst of a period of rampant economic growth. Suddenly, other aspects of my childhood fell into place. The fathers of my friends at the American School in Japan, I remember, worked for Chase Manhattan, Caterpillar, and Coca-Cola. They were changing Japanese food culture just as Japan was changing my family’s dinner. And Japanese diets, although still rice-based, did change and change fast in that decade, incorporating more animal products, fewer vegetables, and much, much more sugar. According to Japan’s National Nutrition Survey, begun by the Americans in 1946 to assess need in the terrible postwar period, average meat consumption tripled between 1961 and 1972, and confectionery consumption peaked in 1971, sparking an epidemic of tooth decay among preschoolers. McDonald’s moved in that year, too, opening its first Tokyo branch in Ginza, the heart of the downtown area. My family started going there for lunch after church on Sundays.

This transformation would be repeated, more rapidly and often more disastrously, in one country after another. As the price of cooking oil tumbled, food became oilier. Fast foods, snack foods, and carbonated beverages swept across the world, and more calories (but not healthy nutrients) came in these unsatisfying forms. Mexico, which serves the behemoth US food market and has been infiltrated by American food companies in turn, shows those effects especially strikingly. The percentage of the population classed as overweight or obese has nearly doubled, from 33 percent in 1988 to almost 60 percent a mere 10 years later but without an equivalent increase in healthy nutrients, as women in all weight percentiles showed equal propensity for anemia. The rest of Latin America, China, and India are also undergoing rapid change. Everywhere, people are consuming more calories (500 more per day than 50 years ago), in forms that are energy-dense but nutrient-poor, creating the phenomenon of the overweight malnourished—who, in a world addicted to a language of choice, are then blamed for their own illnesses. Westerners too readily think of Africa as the locus of famines, but—though food shortages are very real—the continent is a place where most people still eat a staple cereal and a lot of unrefined foods, making it a last home of healthy diets in terms of quality. But African diets, too, are worsening, as beverage companies work to get coolers and sodas into every village shop.

Wilson does a creditable job summarizing the economics and nutritional effects of these transitions, but she’s a food writer, not an agronomist or policy-maker. She’s more interested in eaters and consumers than in growers and producers. She says relatively little about the factories and methods that produce so much of our food (including our meat) and still less about the sustainable and ethical farmers challenging those conglomerates. Nor is she focused mainly on body politics: While she denounces the ubiquitous stigmatization and sheer cruelty to which the overweight are subject and cites studies that demonstrate that stigma’s serious economic, health and psychological effects, she doesn’t really tackle the question of how treating obesity (and not ill health) as an epidemic itself contributes to that stigmatization or delve into recent research on the “healthy obese.” What she does do, very well, is tease out the relationship between the pell-mell socioeconomic and lifestyle changes since the 1980s, changes that have swept the globe and affected virtually all of us, and our often obsessive and self-punishing attitudes and habits around eating. Our “culture of extreme individualism,” she shows, is a major cause of the way we eat now.

Take mealtimes, for example. Most European societies once had fairly strict norms about mealtimes, even though those norms differed. Germans often ate a main meal at midday and sat down to *Abendbrot* in the evening. Scandinavians eat dinner comparatively early, and the Spanish comparatively late.
But “areagrafs”—visualizations of the proportion of the population doing a given activity (working, eating, sleeping, leisure) at a given time—reveal that while sleep and work still fall into conventional periods, eating has become unmoored. People in Mediterranean Europe still have regular mealtimes, with clear activity bubbles showing about 50 percent of the population eating at some point between noon and 2 pm and between 7 pm and 10 pm, but in Northern Europe and especially in England, the most “liberalized” European country, those bubbles have pretty much disappeared. Instead, as Wilson puts it, eating has just become “something that around 10 percent of people, give or take, might be doing at any given time.” Recent research on London families confirms this: Fewer than a third managed to eat together most nights.

Nor is this just a matter of family meals. Regular workplace mealtimes have nearly vanished too. Labor unions spent years struggling for decent meal breaks and regular hours, but factory canteens have gone the way of most factories, and more work is shift work done in hospitals or offices with nothing but snack machines to turn to during breaks. And once eating becomes radically individualized and done on the fly, norms about what constitutes a meal erode as well. Instead, meals are replaced by a kind of generalized grazing.

It’s true that we eat out more than ever, at all income levels, and order prepared food to our homes as well—patterns that undoubtedly add interest and convenience but worsen our health for the simple reason that restaurant (especially fast food) meals tend to be less healthy than ones cooked at home. We also eat more and more snacks. By the turn of the 21st century, Americans were eating on average 22 pounds of commercial snack food per year; 10 years later, the average American child was getting 37 percent of calories (but nothing like a third of nutrition) from snacks, and the rest of the world isn’t far behind. Of course, people knew that cheese and onion flavored crisps and shrimp flavored crackers weren’t exactly healthy, but American capitalism is adept at turning critique into opportunity. Before we knew it, a whole line of ostensibly healthy snacks had hit our shelves. Wilson, bless her, is absolutely scathing about these, like the yogurt-covered strawberry bits that have more sugar than a Mars bar, the pumpkin and chia “power ball” that has more sugar than Ben & Jerry’s chocolate fudge brownie ice cream. The “protein bar,” she says stoutly, is just “a license to eat candy and call it a virtuous main course.”

Wilson recognizes that millions of people want to eat healthily and well, and she catalogs the many hindrances in their way. Nowadays, diets promising health can gain an immediate global following, but since food grows more slowly than Facebook likes, trends can also have unanticipated effects. The identification of quinoa as a superfood drove prices up by 600 percent in eight years, leading the Bolivian farmers who grow it to make the economically rational but nutritionally disastrous decision to let college students pile it on their Sweetgreen salads and feed their own families American processed foods instead. The craze for guacamole and avocado toast quadrupled US avocado consumption, leading to deforestation and water depletion in the Michoacán region of Mexico and attracting the interest of the drug cartels—which are experienced, after all, at running protection rackets on desirable crops. Crazes induce adulteration, too. As Wilson dryly notes, not enough pomegranates are grown in the whole world to account for all the juice marketed as “100% pomegranate juice.”

Small wonder, then, that debates over food have become so strident and angry—and that some people have just gone off “food” altogether. The market for drinkable “meal replacements” like Soylent and Huel is growing. If you want to meet your nutritional needs while minimizing your carbon footprint and not harming animals, mixing up regular portions of Huel, which advertises itself as a vegan “human fuel” concoction of pea protein, rice, flaxseed, and all the vitamins and nutrients you need, is the way to go. Wilson, who is nothing if not game, tried Huel for a time but just didn’t like it. (She found it “grainy” and “slimy.”) But she clearly also hated seeing food simply in terms of “fuel” rather than as a medium through which people have created culture and meaning for millennia.

S

o what is to be done? Wilson closes her book with some sensible, if fairly obvious, suggestions: Downsize your plates and glasses; don’t drink anything but water; eat regular meals and avoid snacks; eat more vegetables and less meat; ignore food crazes. It would be a shame, though, if people read this book as simply a guide to healthy living, for Wilson’s more profound point is that we need to stop treating eating as an individual “choice,” as if it were just an “amusing leisure activity” rather than a basic human need. Improving diets and health, she says rightly, will require action on many fronts, including much more aggressive public policy. This will not be easy. “The idea that government has a duty to help its citizens eat and drink more healthily remains deeply controversial,” she notes, and it’s readily dismissed as yet another elitist ploy to keep people from eating (and feeding their kids) whatever they like.

Wilson, however, insists that when diets are killing us, “we are allowed to be pejorative,” not toward our fellow eaters but toward those corporations that have virtually shoved bad food down our throats. In her last chapter, she spends some time on the state and local interventions that are attempting to change food cultures. Chile, which had the highest per capita consumption of sugary drinks on the planet in 2016, has brought in tough laws taxing sodas, banning cartoon characters on cereal boxes, and sticking scary black warning labels on foods high in sugar, salt, or fat, including foods like sweetened yogurts long marketed as “healthy.” Still more heartening are policies that seek to turn some good things—clean water, fresh vegetables, collective meals, cooking or farming skills—from “choices” into habits or even entitlements. Wilson credits Amsterdam’s ban on cookies, cupcakes, and all drinks except milk and water in schools with contributing to bringing childhood obesity rates down, but what has brought the city’s children on board, at least if the Dutch 10-year-old I know is any guide, is the program that gave him and his school friends allotments to farm for a year.

New York City has also taken on the battle against food insecurity and poor diet through efforts to raise incomes and expand public services. Wilson approvingly cites a city program that distributes farm produce to senior centers, among other places, where it is turned into low-cost healthy communal meals. The city has other programs as well, including the creation of school gardens and farm-to-school initiatives that bring fresh produce into schools for students to handle, prepare, and eat. It is also committed to increasing public water fountains, which could cut plastic and soda consumption alike. (Next frontier, please: attended public toilets. If the Germans can have these, why can’t we?) Seeing food policy as a matter of distribution and right, not just incentive and choice, might also help us address the pressing question of how we might eat in ways that will do less damage to our already overstretched planet—an issue about which Wilson says too little and that may have to be addressed through rationing, as Guardian columnist Sonia Sodha has suggested, instead of through tax policies that will put carbon-heavy foods (like beef) out of the reach of poor people altogether.
But if we need to think about food more in terms of entitlements, we also need to think of it more in terms of skills and duties, which brings me back to where I started: We need to think about cooking. Wilson is obviously a good and imaginative cook, someone who wants more people to know how to handle a chopping knife and a frying pan and to put a reasonable meal on the table in 30 minutes. Her respect for the skill and value of cooking leads her to say nice things about meal kits, which for all their wasteful packaging and expense are at least instructing some novice cooks. She even finds hope in statistics that reveal that although only 10 percent of people say they love to cook and 45 percent say they hate it, at least 45 percent are ambivalent and perhaps willing to give it a go. I tend to think, however, that this whole survey is another sign of our mixed-up ideas about eating. I cook every day, but I don’t know whether I’d say I “love to cook.” That’s like asking me whether I love to wash or loved to walk my kids to school. It’s like asking hunter-gatherers whether they love to hunt and gather. Some things are necessities or duties, not choices. We treat a great many skills—riding a bike, driving a car, typing, using a smartphone—that way. What gives me hope, then, is less the pricey innovations like meal kits and more the return of cooking to the schools, and not in the girls-only “home economics” form it was taught to me but as part of farm-to-school and, in New York, Cookshop programs that teach much younger children to touch, taste, prepare, and like fresh food.

When my daughter was in the first grade, she had a wonderful, charismatic teacher who disliked the school administration’s determination to put 6-year-olds in front of computer screens and filled her classroom instead with books and drawings, silkworms and turtles. Unsurprisingly, she was fired after a year. (Safety! Hygiene!) But for a few months another mother and I found ourselves in the school’s kitchen every so often, teaching the children math through cooking: If you need one teaspoon of baking soda and half a teaspoon of salt for one pan of cornbread, how many teaspoons do we need for three pans? If the recipe calls for one cup of cornmeal and one cup of flour and we know we need two-thirds as much of the wet ingredients as of the dry, how much honey and buttermilk should we put in if the egg we’re adding measures about a quarter of a cup? The children would puzzle out the math, measure and stir, taste and pour—and then we ate the cornbread together.

Y ou might know the story of Justin Vernon’s first album as Bon Iver; it’s been repeated so often that it reads like hyperbole. A man, disillusioned with life, retreats to a cabin in the dead of winter and writes songs about a lost love. That was in 2006, and the resulting record, 2007’s For Emma, Forever Ago, has been credited with giving new life to contemporary folk music. Twelve years later, Bon Iver is a full-fledged band with a growing list of collaborators and two Grammy Awards to its name. Vernon has become a star, lending his voice to collaborations with rappers Kanye West and Travis Scott and experimental singer-producer James Blake, among others. Yet as Vernon has ascended, there’s a sense that he would rather be off somewhere alone—plucking a guitar, smoking some weed, and turning the dials on a sound machine. His music as Bon Iver has always been tied to some form of escape.

For i,i, his fourth studio album leading Bon Iver, Vernon retreated once again—this time to Tornillo, Texas, the site of the largest residential recording studio in the world. But unlike in the For Emma days, he isn’t just some dude with a few instruments and a laptop: What began as a solo folk act has swelled into a collaborative mix of rock,
avan-pop, gospel, and hip-hop. And he’s not sad or agitated anymore. On *i,i*, the melancholy that defined *For Emma* and the 2011 breakthrough *Bon Iver* is all but gone. For the first time, it seems, Vernon sounds content, untethered to old sorrow.

Still, it wouldn’t be a *Bon Iver* record if Vernon didn’t look to the past or at a map. There’s a deep sense of longing to his work; his memories, no matter how pronounced or fleeting, are the essence of his overall approach to songwriting. On *Emma*, a failed romance was the focus, while on *Bon Iver*, geography was the anchor: “Holocene,” the band’s most popular song, was based on a bad night in an Oregon bar of the same name, and “Perth” was spawned by the death of actor Heath Ledger (who was born in Perth, Australia) and Vernon’s feelings of isolation during his time in the city. The band’s third album, 2016’s *22, a Million*, was also inspired in part by location. Vernon, in another attempt to find himself, decamped to a remote island in Greece and had an awful experience. “Don’t go to the Greek islands off season by yourself,” he once said. “Trying to find myself and I did not. And I just heard this chorus in my head, ‘This feeling might be over soon.’” The line opened the album in modified form (“It might be over soon”) and became what might be one of his most memorable lyrics.

Vernon’s narrative strength isn’t based in long tales like those of, say, Bruce Springsteen or Bob Dylan; it’s in his ability to make you see his world through one-off missives that, sung in his haunting falsetto, feel like alien transmissions from some far-away land. On *i,i*, Vernon further unpacks his history, but this time it’s with a smile and not a furrowed brow.

Vernon has called *i,i* his most “adult” record. He says it’s more mature because of the particular period in his existence that it catalogs: “It feels like when you get through all this life, when the sun starts to set, and what happens is you start gaining perspective.” In that way, *i,i* is exceedingly pleasant, reflecting the views of a man finally at peace with himself and his surroundings. He’s still looking back, to be sure, but the dejection that once pressed upon his mind has dissipated. The bad ol’ days can weigh you down if you hold on to them, so on “iMi,” when he admits that “living in a lonesome way had me looking other ways,” he’s trying to shed his excess baggage and be more affable. Indeed, *i,i* is a communal record, one in which he allows his bandmates to test their own ideas. In years past, Vernon was Bon Iver; this time he’s stepping back to become more collaborative. In an interview, he admits that therapy has helped change his creative process. It’s evident on “Holyfields,” on which he declares, “Danger been steppin’ in, / I’m happy as I’ve ever been.”

As with any *Bon Iver* record, the lyrics are open-ended and somewhat cryptic, and it takes a patient ear to fully decipher what Vernon is singing about. So on the surface, “Hey, Ma” could be about his mother or his childhood memories (“I wanted a bath,” he exclaims), but he also recalls “tookin’ on dope” and reminds you to “call your ma.” Then there are songs like “Jelmore” and “Marion,” in which he could be talking about US politics and climate change: “We’ll all be gone by the fall,” he sings on “Jelmore,” and on “Marion” he refers to “the rising sea.” Serenity is the theme of *i,i*, but on these tracks, the picture is a bit foggy. Yet these examples speak to the power of Vernon as a visionary and Bon Iver as a band. The lack of lyrical clarity isn’t a deal breaker; the way the songs sound overall is more important. That’s most evident on “Naeem,” *i,i*’s gospel-infused centerpiece. Just like in “Hey, Ma,” Vernon seems to draw from his childhood memories; with its pronounced marching drums, “Naeem” feels like something he and Kanye could have recorded for the rapper’s 2010 album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*.

Musically, *i,i* is a much smoother listen than *22, a Million*. That record, with its dense vocal layers, frenetic computer glitches, and hieroglyphic-like song titles, swayed too hard from the lush folk of *Bon Iver*, which earned the band a pair of Grammy Awards for Best Alternative Music Album and Best New Artist. Vernon has never crafted music for recognition, but given his thoughts about the Grammy process (he’s called it “ridiculous”), I can’t help but see *22, a Million* as his anti-Grammy record. *Bon Iver* was loved by voters and the public at large, counting among its fans the comedian Rosie O’Donnell. It seems that in reaction to all that adulation and attention, Vernon decided to make a record that ran away from what people loved about his music. Instead, *22, a Million* is the sound of catharsis, of Vernon wrestling with anxiety very loudly in search of something true. Here, he dials back the glitch and recenters the folk-rock hybrid that won Bon Iver its fame. With *i,i*, the band comes full circle, leading to its most balanced record in eight years and Vernon’s most honest work yet.
Puzzle No. 3511

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

8 Reed concealing sheep left a smoky hole in the ground (8)
9 Operator with tractor trailer in the beginning (6)
10 Rip off HarperCollins’s chief (6)
11 Believing in God and the self, be loyal almost to the end (8)
12 Assuming a flute (4)
14 Roots transformed into trunk (5)
16 Loudly supplicate for the hunted (4)
17 At first, experiments yield redesigned something to keep out the light (6)
18 Marine struggling to stay put (6)
21 50 start to unclog duct (4)
23 Feel bad about decapitated bird (5)
24 Designer employed by Mother Teresa (4)
25 Look for this below—it’s not too complicated (8)
27 Someone aiming for improvements rioted recklessly (6)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3510

29 Wild, wild rice (6)
30 Unbreakable, like 14 entries whose extremities are excluded from the wordplay (8)

DOWN

1 Jethro, heading to the back: “I’m on the job all day, every day” (4-4)
2 Encounter air conditioning (4)
3 Some things of mine: tip of tall tree, and something that might destroy it (6,4)
4 Take in aura’s core characteristic (7)
5 Front of hospital locale (4)
6 Creative clip art’s deserving of gold medal (5,5)
7 Competitive, within limits (6)
13 Like ABC or another trio of consecutive letters spoken by sailor? Yes (10)
15 Excessive, like a Hanukkah quarrel? (4-3-3)
19 No Latina is wrong in this magazine? (8)
20 Hoist one brew—you get it for nothing (7)
22 Fool that is tender on the other side of the border (6)
26 One convertible holds ten team members (4)
28 Finchley resident’s unit (4)

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