Fallujah’s Children

Years after the US invasion, the greatest medical mystery of the Iraq War remains unsolved—and children are still dying.

Laura Gottessdiener
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Fallujah’s Children
LAURA GOTTESDIENER
Seventeen years after the start of the Iraq War, the city’s doctors still don’t know if a spate of birth defects is related to the US invasion.

The Liberal Media
We must thwart Trump’s plan to destroy our democracy.
ERIC ALTMAN

The Front Burner
Trump has intentionally leveraged psychological pain and mental terror.
KALI HOLLOWAY

David Opdyke’s This Land
LAWRENCE WESCHLER
An epic mural uses snippets of vintage Americana to prophesy large-scale climate destruction.

“"This magazine has never been inclined to genuflect before the myth of impartial judges, detached from political passion or pecuniary interest."
Unpack the Court

The Senate’s obscene rush to confirm Amy Coney Barrett—in time to allow her, as Donald Trump has made clear, to assist his efforts to steal the election—should force even the most blinkered observer to acknowledge the deeply political nature of our judiciary. Coming after the Senate’s refusal to even grant Barack Obama’s nominee Merrick Garland a hearing and its subsequent confirmation of Neil Gorsuch for that stolen seat, the latest Republican power play has done much to strip away the mystique that previously cloaked the deliberations of the Supreme Court’s nine justices. Despite their black robes, ritual use of Latin, and lifetime appointments, they’re simply fallible mortals with the same prejudices and predilections as the rest of us.

Unlike the blindfolded figure of Justice, the Supreme Court has a long history of blindness only on one side: the left. Since 1794, when Associate Justice James Wilson authorized the use of federal troops to terrorize western Pennsylvania farmers into paying a new tax on whiskey—which favored wealthy merchants and manufacturers—the court has been a reliable servant of money and power. The court that ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) Black Americans “had no rights the white man was bound to respect” but that leaped to extend the protection of the 14th Amendment from people to corporations, that sanctioned the wholesale imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and that overturned any limit on corporate spending in elections while granting corporation owners the right to refuse to provide their employees with health coverage for birth control has hardly ever been on the side of working people. Or swift to correct its mistakes: The gap between *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education* kept Black Americans in a state of legalized racial oppression for over half a century.

Joe Biden’s announcement on *60 Minutes* that he would appoint a “bipartisan commission of scholars” to consider how best to reform the courts might have been tactically smart, depriving the Trump campaign of at least one weapon of mass distraction. But Biden’s remark that “the last thing we need to do is turn the Supreme Court into just a political football” reveals remarkable ignorance of both court history and current political reality.

*The Nation* has been in this fight a long time. From James Bradley Thayer’s 1884 argument against the overweening tendency of federal judges to strike down laws they dislike to I.F. Stone’s warning, in *The Court Disposes* (serialized in these pages), that “democracy must curb the Supreme Court or the Supreme Court, instrument of our great concentrations of economic power, will destroy democracy,” this magazine has never been inclined to treat the judicial branch with excessive deference. Or to genuflect before the myth of impartial judges, detached from political passion or pecuniary interest.

“The Supreme Court has been ‘packed’ for years with safe, conservative majorities,” Stone wrote in 1937. “Those safe, conservative majorities have stood in the path of almost every major piece of social legislation enacted by the elected representatives of the American people.” And if a Democratic president and Congress fail to act decisively and boldly, that’s exactly what they’ll do again. As *Nation* justice correspondent Elie Mystal points out, there is simply no way for a Biden administration to make good on any of its promises on health care, racial or economic justice, the environment, or corporate monopolies without addressing the reactionary tilt of the courts.

Unlike some Democrats, Mystal doesn’t shy away from the label or the idea of court packing—arguing that adding 20 justices to the Supreme Court would not only redress Republican court packing but also improve the court by making rigid majorities less likely and the justices more amenable to persuasion. And unlike proposals to impose term limits, court expansion requires no constitutional amendment.

But there is nothing magical about the number of justices. What matters more is the willingness to recognize the court for what it has always been: an unelected political body acting to restrain our democracy. Republicans haven’t hesitated to use that restraint. Unless Democrats show they are willing to face off to make America redeem its promise, the fight will remain one-sided.
A History of Abuse

Alleged sterilizations in Georgia are only the latest in a pattern of reproductive violence in America.

His place is hell…. My experience was darkness, dirtiness, muddiness. The floors—dirty. The walls—dirty. Everything was dirty.”

In 2019, Jaromy Floriano Navarro was sent to the Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia, where she was held for nearly a year before being deported to Mexico in September. While at Irwin, she had a distressing experience with a medical provider who treated detainees at the facility. “I met [gynecologist] Dr. [Mahendra] Amin in March. He said I had a cyst…. He told me about the process to get my cyst removed. I was going to have three little dots on my belly, and it would take 20 minutes. One hole by my belly, one by my womb, one by my vagina,” she said. “The nurse who was taking me to the hospital told me that I was going to have my womb removed. I was like, ‘What? No, that’s not right. I am going to have my cyst removed.’”

Upon arriving at the hospital for the procedure, Floriano Navarro learned that she was positive for Covid-19 antibodies and her procedure would be delayed. When she returned to Irwin, she said, she was put in isolation. A few days later, she was told that she could now have her surgery. She said, “I refused, and this made them mad. They were so mad. [They said,] ‘You stay here. You get the surgery. We’ve already paid for it.’”

Floriano Navarro began talking to other women housed at Irwin and learned that others had had similar experiences. Then on September 14 of this year, whistleblower Dawn Wooten went public with the claim that Amin had been performing an unusually large number of hysterectomies on women held at the center. “You could quote me as the one that got away,” Floriano Navarro said. Wooten, who was a licensed practical nurse at the facility, reported that several detained women told her they were given hysterectomies and did not understand why. In a complaint, she alleged that once the information about this practice spread, many detainees became wary of seeing doctors at the facility at all and other staffers began to wonder how widespread the practice was. “We’ve questioned among ourselves like goodness he’s taking everybody’s stuff out…. That’s his specialty, he’s the uterus collector,” Wooten said in her complaint. “I know that’s ugly….is he collecting these things or something…. Everybody he sees, he’s taking all their uteruses out or he’s taken their tubes out.”

The complaint, filed with the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) by human rights groups, including Project South, quoted an Irwin detainee who had spoken with other detained immigrants who had received hysterectomies, saying that they “reacted confused when explaining why they had one done.” The woman told Project South that it was as though they were “trying to tell themselves it’s going to be OK.” She added, “When I met all these women who had had surgeries, I thought this was like an experimental concentration camp. It was like they’re experimenting with our bodies.”

Since the complaint went public, multiple women have come forward with accounts of similar experiences at Irwin. One former detainee, Pauline Binam, said she had her fallopian tubes removed without her consent. Mileidy Cardentey Fernandez told The Guardian that she was told she would undergo an operation to treat ovarian cysts but she remained unsure of what procedure she actually underwent. Most recently, the Los Angeles Times reported on the accounts of 19 mostly Black and Latinx women who underwent or were pressured to undergo “overly aggressive” or “medically unnecessary” surgeries without their consent while detained at Irwin, according to a report by nine board-certified ob-gyns and two nursing experts who reviewed thousands of pages of those women’s medical records. Wendy Dowe, speaking to the Los Angeles Times, said she told Amin, “I’ve got the right to know what’s going on with me.” After surgery, she was surprised to see bandages on her stomach. She wrote to his medical office, asking, “What type of surgery did I have?”

Amin has seen at least 60 women detained at Irwin, according to a lawyer investigating the alleged wrongdoing, and is now under investigation by the DHS’s inspector general. But the problems at Irwin are hardly limited to the alleged sterilizations. The women interviewed by Project South reported horrifying conditions at the detention center as well as widespread medical neglect. In the interviews, “we found evidence of sexual abuse, inadequate medical care, lack of prenatal care for pregnant women, a lack of clean drinking water, and rampant use of solitary confinement at the facility,” said Azadeh Shahshahani, Project South’s legal and advocacy director. “Detained immigrants who have spoken out about the conditions have faced retaliation.” A Southern Poverty Law Center report noted that an Irwin detainee was placed in solitary confinement for three days for helping another complete a grievance form.

Wooten and several of the immigrants also claimed that the facility failed to follow best practices to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. In the complaint, Wooten stated that Dr. Howard McMahan, the medical director at Irwin, pleaded with warden David Paulk in March to halt all transfers of individuals in and out the facility after it recorded its first Covid-19 case. Yet McMahan’s pleas went unheeded: People
with Covid have been entering the facility, which has also transferred immigrants out who were Covid-positive or had been tested but had not yet received their results. Wooten and various people detained at Irwin have reported that entire dorm units are placed under quarantine for 14 days after one individual is suspected of having or is confirmed to have Covid. The staffers mix new transfers with people who are under quarantine, resulting in greater vulnerability and risk. Representative Raul Ruiz, a California Democrat and an emergency physician, toured the center with other legislators after the allegations became public and said he saw, among other horrors, black mold in the shower stalls, which can cause or exacerbate serious pulmonary diseases.

The Irwin County Detention Center is run by LaSalle Corrections, a private corporation contracted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. LaSalle operates seven immigration detention facilities in four states; Irwin, which houses about 800 people, has long been known for its unsafe conditions. In 2017, ICE’s own review of the center found that certain areas were unsanitary and that “floors and patient examination tables were dirty.” LaSalle receives $60 a day from the federal government for each immigrant it houses, a sum intended to cover food, shelter, and medical care, according to a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In response to the recent revelations, Project South and other local groups—including Georgia Detention Watch, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, and the South Georgia Immigrant Support Network—are gathering signatures for a petition to close the facility and to seek redress for those harmed inside it. Meanwhile, the US House of Representatives has passed a resolution condemning the medical abuse and calling on the DHS to pause the deportation of people who experienced any medical procedures at Irwin and to hold the individuals involved in the procedures accountable.

The United States has a long history of reproductive violence against people who have been incarcerated or institutionalized or are otherwise seen as unfit to have children. In 1899, Harry C. Sharp, a physician at the Indiana Reformatory in Jeffersonville pioneered a program to sterilize incarcerated men. At that point in Indiana’s history, a number of social upheavals—including industrialization, urbanization, and a fear that people of color and poor white Kentuckians were encroaching on homogeneous communities—worried the state’s middle and upper classes. His solution was to sterilize those considered dangerous, particularly those with a mental or physical illness. In 1907, Indiana passed the country’s first sterilization law, intended “to prevent [the] procreation of confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists.” Though the law was struck down as unconstitutional in 1921, the state government estimated that approximately 2,500 people were sterilized through 1974, before the practice ended.

These sterilizations of incarcerated people were only the beginning of many similar efforts to sterilize members of other groups, including people of color and people with disabilities, as a public health intervention. From 1919 to 1952, California sterilized approximately 20,000 institutionalized people because they were deemed “unfit” or “defective.” From 1929 to 1974, at least 7,500 people were sterilized in North Carolina, most of them without their consent, because the state Eugenics Board claimed they were unfit to reproduce. Many of them were poor Black or Indigenous women, though records show that children as young as 10 were sterilized. Nor are these abuses confined to decades past. In 2013, Reveal reported that from 2006 to 2010, at least 148 inmates in two California prisons were sterilized without proper state approvals or oversight, and there may be 100 more such incidents dating back to the late 1990s.

Knowing this long history of state-sanctioned eugenics policies is the first step in understanding the significance of the allegations by Wooten and the women detained at Irwin. As Dorothy Roberts, a professor of law and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, explains in her seminal text Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty, the idea of population control as a social good is part of the fabric of US public health policy. Roberts argues that the American project of eugenics is rooted in the enslavement of African people and the complete denial of reproductive control. For Amari Sutton, an organizer with Project South, the abuses alleged at Irwin “must be understood as the result of fascist state control and abuse of Black and brown bodies [and] the historical capitalist interest in incarceration and detainment that mirrors chattel slavery.”

Representatives Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, and Ilhan Omar are calling on international agencies to conduct investigations. “Holding the Department of Homeland Security accountable for its long history of abuses is a human rights, reproductive justice, and public health imperative—one that has been put on the backburner at the expense and detriment of our immigrant neighbors,” Tlaib said in a statement.

Like prisons, immigration detention centers are often isolated spaces, hard to reach and to monitor by design. These activists and detainees are taking great risks to expose what they know. Speaking to The Nation from Mexico in October, Floriano Navarro was distraught. “I wish I was back home in South Carolina with my daughters,” she said. “It’s like I can’t breathe. The mental abuse and the depression I go through is so hard. When I’m alone and I drift into my thoughts, I think about how it felt to be there. I want you to write about the depression. It’s so hard.”

She added, “When you are inside there, it’s like you have no control of your life, it’s like they can do whatever they want to you.”

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The Trauma Presidency

Trump has intentionally leveraged psychological pain and mental terror.

There was never a way to understand the forcible separation of migrant parents and their children as anything other than a program to intentionally inflict widespread punitive psychological harm. Even as Trump administration officials publicly claimed ripping apart families was an unforeseen consequence of begrudging compliance with existing immigration law, they privately promoted the policy as one that would create mental anguish to deter migrant arrivals.

In May 2018, one month before falsely claiming the administration had “never really intended to” separate families, then–Attorney General Jeff Sessions reportedly gave border prosecutors their marching orders, declaring, “We need to take away children.” Rod Rosenstein, the deputy AG at the time, ordered US attorneys who had declined to pursue cases involving toddlers to make “no categorical exemption” in prosecutions merely “because of the age of a child,” despite a secret 2017 pilot of the family separation policy in which prosecutors determined children younger than 12 would likely be unable to relocate their parents. That trial run reportedly saw immigration authorities “taking breastfeeding defendant moms away from their infants,” according to one government prosecutor.

At least three Trump administration officials were warned that callously breaking up migrant families “entails significant potential for traumatic psychological injury to the child,” according to testimony from Public Health Service Commissioned Corps Cmdr. Jonathan White. The Trump team plowed ahead with the policy anyway, led by Stephen Miller—whose white supremacist ideology has defined this administration’s anti-immigration stance—without even bothering to develop a tracking system to reunite families. (Federal lawyers recently admitted that more than 540 children remain in custody alone because the government doesn’t know where their parents are.) “Miller made clear to us,” one Department of Homeland Security official told The New Yorker, “that if you start to treat children badly enough, you’ll be able to convince other parents to stop trying to come with theirs.”

Trauma isn’t an unforeseen byproduct of Trumpism; it is the intentional policy strategy of this administration and the hateful man who leads it. The president consistently acts on this country’s ugliest and most dangerous impulses, leveraging psychological pain and mental terror to push us further toward white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Family separation is one of the most extreme such examples, and there are many more. The Muslim travel ban, devised by Miller and then–Trump strategist Steven Bannon and signed by Trump just seven days after taking office, was a precursor to child separation, serving essentially the same purpose: to emotionally devastate families torn apart by the law as it stemmed Muslim migration flows. Trump’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, both threatened and carried out, knowingly create a toxic atmosphere of fear and anxiety for unauthorized migrants.

Meanwhile, this administration’s unstinting efforts to roll back LGBTQ rights, from pushing a rule that would allow shelters to deny space to unhoused transgender people to scrubbing all mention of LGBTQ rights from the White House website, have served to not only oppress and erase but also demoralize and mentally fatigue. And Trump’s repeated calls to his self-dubbed “army” of racist supporters, whom he is now urging to “go into the polls and watch very carefully” for nonexistent fraudulent “thieving and stealing and robbing,” were an open incitement to violence as well as a mental poll tax levied against Black voters.

Trump’s calls to his “army” of supporters to watch for nonexistent voter fraud are a mental poll tax levied against Black voters.

Thousands of Americans not directly targeted by these policies have also been justifiably shaken by Trump’s election and presidency. The ascension to the Oval Office of a sexual predator who boasted about being able to “do anything” to women, including “grab ’em by the pussy,”
retraumatized survivors forced to grapple with living in a country where many, including a plurality of white women, appear to be largely indifferent to sexual assault. The sight of Trump mocking a disabled reporter to the approval of his rally attendees served as a deeply emotionally unsettling reminder of who is unwelcome in Trump’s America. It’s no wonder that on election night 2016 and in the following months, suicide and crisis hotlines reported a precipitous rise in calls from people who specifically reported distress over Trump’s win. Likewise, mental health practitioners developed a whole series of unofficial diagnoses—Trump anxiety disorder, post-Trump stress disorder—to give name to the widespread negative mental health impacts they observed as a result of his election. These were the psychological wages of merely bearing witness to Trumpism’s celebration of casual abuse, its reflexive and rabid cruelty.

Were they less invested in the politics of white racial resentment and revenge, Trump’s followers might take notice of how easily he also traumatizes them, with increasing frequency and intensity as we close in on the election. He is fawning among his base and demonizing his perceived opponents—deeming Black Lives Matter “a symbol of hate,” calling for “retribution” against anti-racist activists who deface Confederate monuments, insisting the suburbs will fall to antifa throngs under Joe Biden—to sow discord and chaos, inflaming anxieties all around. Trump’s use of trauma as his defining reelection tactic, after four years of sustained mental abuse, guarantees the psychological wounds of Trumpism will persist long after he exits office, and those scars will take doubly long to heal among those most directly targeted. Even with a Biden win this November, we still face years of undoing the profound breaches of trust we’ve suffered.

Were they less invested in racial resentment, Trump’s followers might take notice of how easily he also traumatizes them.

### The Liberal Media

**Eric Alterman**

#### The Plot Against America

We must thwart Trump’s plan to destroy our democracy.

Major reason Donald Trump has gotten away with all his lies and crimes as president has been the contextless coverage he receives. Some excellent investigative reporting aside, the avalanche of Trump’s outrages against law, decency, and common sense has had the paradoxical effect of burying the big picture. One reporter who manages to avoid this syndrome is CNN’s Daniel Dale, who, on the presidential lying beat, has somehow kept his cool, his sense of humor, and most crucially, his focus on what really matters. After Trump’s and Joe Biden’s dueling town hall meetings, Dale tweeted something that should underlie all election coverage: “One of the differences between Trump and Biden from a fact check perspective is that Trump regularly says or amplifies claims that are like completely banal, as, entirely detached from known reality, while Biden does not.”

This column has room for about a thousand words—nowhere near long enough to list the reasons Trump belongs not in the White House but in a prison psych ward. There’s his incompetence and malevolence vis-à-vis the coronavirus; his encouragement of the unhinged, anti-Semitic, and possibly terrorist QAnon; his racism; his sexism; his history as an alleged sexual predator and likely rapist; his bizarre foreign policy, especially on Israel/Palestine but, really, everywhere; his corruption self-dealing business arrangements; his attacks on our health care system and the environment, his extremist court picks; his tax cheating; his promotion of fascist violence against peaceful protesters; his policy of child kidnapping; his paranoia; his fealty to Vladimir Putin, his nepotism; his ignorance; his vulgarity; his cruelty; his narcissism; his childishness. This list isn’t close to exhaustive. (McSweeney’s has the best catalog I’ve seen so far, enumerating 940 of “Trump’s worst cruelties, collusions, corruptions, and crimes.”) Like all decent people, I hope for a Biden landslide, but we must also grasp, sooner rather than later, with the heart of darkness in this country that has inspired tens of millions of fellow citizens to support this evil miscreant.

What’s most important right now, however, is for Trump and company to be thwarted in their plot to steal the election. He has clearly been preparing to do this since the moment the last one ended. In my new book, *Lying in State: Why Presidents Lie—and Why Trump Is Worse*, I focus on Trump’s November 27, 2016, tweet in which he said, “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” When pressed to provide evidence, Trump answered that “the very famous golfer Bernhard Langer” was waiting to vote in Florida on Election Day and was refused but some people “who
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Over 150 years of truth-telling journalism
We must grapple with the heart of darkness in this country that has inspired tens of millions of fellow citizens to support this evil miscreant.

Cost Him Popular Vote” (CNN) and “Trump Continues to Insist Voter Fraud Robbed Him of Popular Vote” (The Hill). Today, however, it is the substance of the lie that matters most. On some level, Trump had to know how lucky he was to win three crucial states by a total of fewer than 80,000 votes after losing the popular vote by nearly 3 million. He had to know that he could not depend on this next time, and as an alleged money-laundering, tax-cheating, fraud-executing rapist, he must also have been aware that if he lost reelection, he could end up behind bars. So stealing the election based on phony claims of voter fraud will be his play.

Again, remember it’s not just that Trump lied about 2016 but rather that the entire notion of widespread voter fraud is itself fraudulent. And yet a recent report by eight authors associated with the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard analyzed 55,000 online media stories, 5 million tweets, and 75,000 posts on public Facebook pages that attracted millions of engagements and found that “Donald Trump has perfected the art of harnessing mass media to disseminate and at times reinforce his disinformation campaign by using three core standard practices of professional journalism.” They pinned the blame on the media’s relentless “elite institutional focus (if the president says it, it’s news); headline seeking (if it bleeds, it leads); and balance, neutrality, or the avoidance of the appearance of taking a side.” Moreover, the study continued, “The efforts of the president and the Republican Party are supported by the right-wing media ecosystem, primarily Fox News and talk radio functioning in effect as a party press. These reinforce the message, provide the president a platform, and marginalize or attack” those who try to tell the story accurately.

Trump has enlisted much of his cabinet, the judiciary, the Republican Party, and the conservative media in his quest to destroy our democracy. But if he succeeds, he will also owe a considerable debt of gratitude to the so-called enemies of the people in the “fake news” media. He certainly could not have done it without them.
A concerned law enforcement source provided *The Nation* with this Department of Homeland Security intelligence report about alleged violent threats associated with this summer’s protests against police brutality and mass incarceration. Its use of counter-terrorism terminology shows the DHS’s tendency to see terrorism threats where they may not exist.

**“TTPs” (tactics, techniques, and procedures)**

This term is common in counter-terrorism and refers to patterns of behavior characteristic of certain terrorist groups. Use of a term associated with terrorism so prominently in this document is noteworthy, since many suspects, as it points out, may not even hold violent extremist beliefs.

**“VOs” (violent opportunists)**

This document later states that the DHS defines VOs as “illicit actors who may or may not hold violent extremist ideological beliefs, but seek to exploit opportunities in non-violent protests to engage in unlawful violence.”

**“protestors in Hong Kong”**

Since 2019, Hong Kong residents have demonstrated against mainland China’s attempts to impose its extradition laws on them. US law enforcement often looks for foreign ties in domestic protest movements, which allows them to take greater liberties in surveillance.

**“JRIC” (Joint Regional Intelligence Center)**

One of the many fusion centers established by the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11 to respond to terrorism threats. Fusion centers are designed to facilitate intelligence sharing between federal agencies and local law enforcement.
Philip Guston didn’t want his work to go down easy—with others or, above all, with himself. He felt himself to be one of those who, as his friend Willem de Kooning put it, was “too nervous to find out where they ought to sit. They do not want to sit in style.” Having once, like many of his generation, tossed aside figurative art and found success in abstraction, he was still unhappy. Toward the end of the 1960s, “sick and tired of all that Purity,” he betrayed abstraction (so most of his colleagues thought) and forged a new approach to painting: funky, demotic, blunt. A critic in The New York Times dismissed him as a mandarin masquerading as a stumblebum. Among the paintings he made in this later phase were images of hooded Ku Klux Klansmen. Sinister yet unfrightening, these stumblebумs were reminiscent of the Klansmen that Guston saw and painted as a young man. He remembered how, in the Los Angeles of his youth, they were deployed to break unions in an alliance with the police.

So for Guston, who died in 1980, painting the Klan was a gesture of protest, though when he turned to the theme as a mature artist, it was also a kind of self-portraiture. “I perceive myself as being behind a hood,” he said and referred to one of his favorite writers. “Rather like Isaac Babel who had joined the Cossacks, lived with them and written stories about them, I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. What would it be like to be evil?” I think of something that Paul Gauguin (an artist who was not a reference point for Guston, however) wrote in his journal: “We never really know what stupidity is until we have experimented on ourselves.”

That brings us back to the National Gallery, which announced that it and three other museums would postpone a long-planned Guston retrospective “until a time at which we think that the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the center of Philip Guston’s work can be more clearly interpreted”—that needful time being foreseen as 2024. The gallery’s director, Kaywin Feldman, could not quite bring herself to articulate why this delay was necessary or what use it would serve, but mortification over Guston’s Klan imagery was evidently the reason.

I probably shouldn’t put the onus on Feldman. Directors serve at the pleasure of their boards, and among the leading members of hers is Darren Walker, the head of the Ford Foundation, with its $13 billion endowment—a foundation that does much good, and it had better if it’s going to keep making up for its cofounder Henry Ford’s terrible legacy of anti-Semitism, which he eventually recanted. Walker has been the most vocal proponent of the exhibition’s postponement. Strange irony: The caretaker of the legacy of the young artist’s enemy becomes the opponent of his posthumous exhibition.

Never mind that Walker cannot distinguish between racist imagery and imagery depicting racists. The real tell is that in a statement he said that to mount the exhibition now would have been “tone deaf.” That’s the language of corporate image control. To many of the people who run our museums—not art people but the bean counters—art is merely branding for the institution.

That indifference to art and therefore to the sometimes difficult and contrary people who make it was made clear in the museums’ haughty unwillingness to acknowledge the call by many of the country’s leading artists for the Guston show to open next year as scheduled. That letter, drafted mainly by me, with advice from several others and precious editorial input from Adrian Piper, was posted by The Brooklyn Rail on September 30, with some 90 signatories, including critics, curators, historians of art, collectors, dealers, choreographers, poets, and above all, some of the most renowned artists at work today: Matthew Barney, Mel Chin, Nicole Eisenman, Charles Gaines, Ellen Gallagher, William Pope.L, Martin Puryear, Amy Sillman, Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Stanley Whitney, and of course, Piper, to name just a few. More than 2,600 people have subsequently signed the letter.

One artist who didn’t sign it is Cauleen Smith. Her response to the letter was sympathy with pointed questions: “Are all white artists going to hide behind Guston now? A more urgent and pressing question is why is there so little work like this? Work that addresses white culpability in sanctioned violence against non-whites?… Why is dismantling whiteness and its violations so hard for white artists? Can one painter dude really redeem all ya’ll? I do not think so.” Me neither. No more than we hide Guston away should we hide behind him.

Feldman said we don’t need “a white artist to explain racism.” She’s right. Giving explanations is not what paintings are for. More to the point, do we need white museum directors—especially ones who can’t even bring themselves to mention the KKK when it’s what they want to talk about—to explain it?

Guston saw his Klansman as “dumb, melancholy, guilty, fearful, remorseful, reassuring one another.” Sounds like the scene inside the National Gallery right now.
SNAPSHOT/SARA HYLTON

Along the Keystone

Dena Hoff searches for the proposed Keystone XL pipeline crossing near her land in Glendive, Mont. The pipeline, expected to be operational in 2023, would send 830,000 barrels of crude oil per day from Canada’s tar sands in Alberta to refineries on the Gulf of Mexico. Environmentalists believe that should it succeed, the project will set the stage for America’s energy future and its continued investment in fossil fuels.

By the Numbers

On October 8, tens of thousands of people in Nigeria occupied streets, demanding the abolition of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit accused of unlawful arrests, extortion, murder, and the targeting of sex workers and trans and queer people.

82
Documented cases of torture, ill-treatment, and extrajudicial execution by SARS between January 2017 and May 2020

69
People killed in the protests, according to President Muhammadu Buhari on October 23

5
Times SARS has supposedly been reformed or disbanded in the past five years

60%
Share of Nigerians who say they are not satisfied with how democracy is working in their country

545 of the Children Separated From Their Parents at the Border

The parents of these kids have not been found. De facto orphans now, their lives are blighted.

A question that we really need to ask:
Why haven’t those who did this been indicted?

—Taliah Mancini

5 Times SARS has supposedly been reformed or disbanded in the past five years

60% Share of Nigerians who say they are not satisfied with how democracy is working in their country

5 People killed in the protests, according to President Muhammadu Buhari on October 23

82 Documented cases of torture, ill-treatment, and extrajudicial execution by SARS between January 2017 and May 2020

$1.9B Amount Nigeria allocated to its military in 2019, making it the second-largest spender in the region

1.9B
Fallujah’s Children

By Laura Gottesdiener
Years after the US invasion, the greatest medical mystery of the Iraq War remains unsolved—and children are still dying.

Three years after American soldiers besieged her city, Iraqi pediatrician Samira Alani began to see a problem in the maternity ward. Women were bearing infants with organs spilling out of their abdomens or with their legs fused together like mermaids’ tails. Some looked as if they were covered in snakeskin. Others emerged gasping, unsuccessfully, for air. No one knew what was wrong with the babies, although almost no one was trying to find out, either. It was 2007, the height of the political and sectarian violence unleashed by the US invasion and occupation. Fallujah, where Alani lived and worked, was considered one of the most unstable and inaccessible cities on earth.

The news about the babies spread from the hospital corridors to the inner courtyards of the city’s homes, whispered among female relatives and neighbors. Entisar Hussein, a housewife in Fallujah, learned about the deformities after a cousin returned from the maternity ward. “One woman, she had a child with a tail, and one, she had a child with a rabbit’s face,” Hussein recalled her cousin telling her. The sickness crept into Hussein’s family, too, she said: One of her sisters-in-law delivered an infant without skull bones to protect the brain tissue; the baby died at birth. Another sister-in-law had two miscarriages and then gave birth to a child with an enormous, bloated head. He died, too.

Soon Fallujah’s children became a topic of concern at tribal meetings and in the provincial doctors’ union. Many residents suspected that the major American offensives against the city might have had something to do with the deformities. The second offensive, which began in early November 2004, was the deadliest battle of the entire US war in Iraq—a six-week siege that killed thousands of Iraqis and dozens of Americans and left much of the city in rubble. But these suspicions were kept quiet. Outside people’s homes, just beyond the iron front doors, US Marines patrolled the streets, and residents said they feared the United States wouldn’t respond kindly to insinuations of having sparked a public health crisis. Moreover, the Americans weren’t the only actors that Fallujans had to consider. The Shiite-led national government in Baghdad, which many viewed as a puppet of Washington and Tehran, was engaged in a campaign of arrests, torture, and political retribution against its critics, particularly in Sunni-majority areas like Fallujah. In Fallujah, various Iraqi parties and militias were
jockeying for political power, and they, too, sought to control the spread of information for their own agendas.

But even if people hadn’t been afraid, doctors and residents said it didn’t seem there was much anyone could do about the birth defects in those days. All across Iraq, the US invasion had unleashed a wave of violence against doctors, whose relative wealth and high profiles made them easy targets amid the country’s growing sectarian strife. By 2007, when Alani began to notice the birth defects in Fallujah, the Iraqi Medical Association estimated that half of registered doctors had been forced to flee the country. Those who remained, like her, risked not only arrest, kidnapping, and assassination but also the reality of straitened working conditions, brought on by shortages of drugs, medical equipment, and both water and electricity.

“Of course, they were wrong. Through our documentation, we have had something to do with the deformities.”

Alani’s ad hoc registry was the beginning of a yearslong, unfinished quest to document and investigate the most controversial medical mystery of the Iraq War: an alleged increase in birth defects that, local doctors say, began after the United States invaded the country in 2003 and plagues the city to this day. At stake is the question of whether US military activities in Fallujah contributed to these congenital disorders—an explosive possibility that has transformed this local public health concern into an international political and scientific controversy. For years, the fierce debate over the increase in birth defects has centered on questions about the use and impact of potentially toxic material in US weapons, particularly depleted uranium. The discussion has largely overlooked, however, broader and perhaps even more troubling questions about the long-term public health effects of urban warfare on civilian populations and the dangers of politicizing science and medicine in times of conflict.

The Department of Defense did not respond to most of the questions posed by <i>The Nation</i> about allegations of rising numbers of birth defects in Fallujah resulting from the war. It did share its “Policy for Environmental Remediation Outside the United States,” which states that “DOD has no general authority or funding to engage in environmental remediation outside of the United States.” The policy also states that the Department of Defense “takes no action to remediate environmental contamination resulting from armed conflict.”

For its part, the Iraqi government said the United States has provided invaluable resources in addressing the country’s environmental and health concerns in the years since the invasion. “The United States support[s] us…not only in the field of radiation but also in the field of climate change and the pollution of the water resources,” said Jassem Abdulaziz Humadi Alfhay, Iraq’s deputy minister of health and the environment.

Still, more than 17 years after the US invasion, the mystery of Fallujah’s children continues to haunt Iraq. Nearly every aspect of the story of the city’s birth defects remains contested. And although accounts and images of Fallujah’s maimed and ailing children have traveled from the halls of the World Health Organization and the pages of medical journals to the text of internal Pentagon memos and the posters of anti-war marches, Alani and her colleagues continue to operate in a tiny and underresourced birth defects center, now treating children whose parents were children themselves when the United States invaded Iraq.

On a hot September morning in 2019, more than half a dozen women waited outside a squat building at Fallujah’s maternity hospital on the banks of the Euphrates River. Some sat alone, holding their children or grandchildren on their laps. Others milled around, greeting each other with kisses on the cheek. Among them was Samira Ahmad, who said her infant granddaughter, Maram, had been struggling to breathe since the family took her home from the hospital a few months earlier. She said that Maram is her daughter-in-law’s first child after two previous pregnancies ended in miscarriages. Later that day, the pediatric cardiologist discovered a small hole in Maram’s heart.

Alani, meanwhile, was driving from her house in the center of Fallujah to the hospital. As she drove, she passed clothing stores and vegetable shops, a shiny new burger joint, and
roadside tea stands where old men kept watch over boiling kettles and dainty *istikân* glasses. Late summer is date season in Iraq, and platters piled high with the sweet fruit were perched on nearly every street corner. Scaffolding surrounded some of the famed mosques, whose minarets were punctured with bullet holes.

Alani’s daily commute hadn’t always been this smooth. In 2005 and 2006, after US forces occupied Fallujah, the streets were so choked by US military checkpoints that she had to travel the two miles from her home to the hospital on foot. In early 2014, she anxiously drove past masked fighters with the Islamic State on her way to work. Her home and her hospital have been bombed repeatedly. And yet then, as now, Alani was undeterred.

Shortly after 8 AM, Alani parked in front of the birth defects center. A tiny, angular woman, she tilts forward as she walks, giving her the perpetual appearance of being impatient to arrive. She unlocked the clinic and then hurried with short, deliberate steps across the yellowed grass, past the men smoking cigarettes while awaiting news of their wives, and into the neonatal ward, where she bent over a child named Muhammed.

He had been born two weeks earlier with a large sac containing part of his brain protruding from the back of his skull, according to a hospital photograph. This defect, called encephalocele, has a high fatality rate, but the doctors on duty said he was recovering from the surgeries that removed the sac and drained the excess spinal fluid. Alani bent over the incubator, lifting Muhammed’s arms and legs and examining his short neck and misshapen ribs. “He will be crippled,” she said matter-of-factly. He was one of four babies with congenital disorders delivered in the facility on August 28, according to hospital records and interviews with doctors. Two were twins—one with a bloated head and the second with distorted limbs and abnormal genitals. The fourth baby had fully blocked nasal cavities; days earlier, she lay in an incubator next to Muhammed, crying as she struggled to breathe.

Alani cast about the crowded room for Muhammed’s grandmothers, who had stayed by his hospital bedside since his birth. “There are four babies and one, two, three… eight women in here,” Alani muttered to herself with a frown. “It’s not good for the babies.”

Alani has a brusque bedside manner that’s exacerbated by her various pet peeves—too many women crowded into a neonatal ward, doctors who hawk baby formula on behalf of milk companies, and worst of all, colleagues who refuse to participate in her beleaguered birth defects registry. Two decades earlier, she had fallen in love with pediatrics during her medical school training in Baghdad, and she has dedicated her life to the profession ever since, working five days a week in Fallujah’s public hospital. Still, after more than 20 years on duty, she occasionally wishes she’d chosen to specialize in dermatology or radiology or anything other than caring for children in a city seemingly plagued by unexplained birth defects.

After examining Muhammed, Alani headed to the hospital’s
Since Hiroshima, the potential of so-called modern warfare to deform future generations has sparked unparalleled attention and controversy.


“We’re afraid of the next pregnancy. Can this happen again?” Aghul wondered.

Alani didn’t have an answer, and soon she was summoned back to the neonatal ward to examine a newborn whose spine protruded from a blood-red hole in his back. His mother was still in the delivery room, and she didn’t yet know about the infant’s condition. His grandmother hovered over the incubator and worried aloud about not having the money to pay for the baby’s treatment. Mohammed Namiq, another pediatrician, peeked into the room from the hallway.

“We have many cases like this,” he said.

This was his first year in this hospital, after stints outside Baghdad and in the country’s north and southeast. He said he has seen more birth defects in Fallujah than anywhere else he has worked. He pulled out his phone and showed a picture of an infant born in the hospital that year, according to records from the birth defects clinic. The child had no nose—an extremely rare condition known as arhinia.

Namiq said he performed surgery on the patient, but it didn’t work. The child died.

Over the past century, veterans and civilians across the world have voiced recurring fears about the health impacts of war on future generations. Conflict, of course, always posed risks to public health. But the rise of industrialized warfare in the 20th century, with the introduction of chemical weapons and the threat of nuclear attacks, brought new toxic exposures and the possibility of terrifying genetic consequences. In August 1945 the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing more than 200,000 people and thrusting the world into the nuclear age. In the wake of the bombings, “public concern focused more on the genetic consequences than any other untoward health outcome,” observed the geneticist William Schull, a member of the US government’s Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission. “Many individuals had visions of an epidemic of births culminating in misshapen monsters or infants condemned to early death.”

Since then, modern warfare’s potential to deform future generations has sparked unparalleled attention and controversy, even as the science has rarely been conclusive. The largest longitudinal study of Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors and their children was undertaken by the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission and its successor, the US-Japanese Radiation Effects Research Foundation. After examining more than 75,000 newborns in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, RERF concluded that “no statistically significant increase in major birth defects or other untoward pregnancy outcomes was seen among children of survivors”—a conclusion reinforced by the agency’s subsequent studies. Despite these findings, the fear of mass genetic distortions sent shock waves through the scientific world and inspired epidemiologists to establish some of the first major registries of congenital disorders.

That fear radiated into the broader population as well. In the decades that followed, US veterans who participated in the Pentagon’s mustard gas experiments during World War II raised concerns about infertility and birth defects among their children. So did veterans sent to the Marshall Islands in the late 1970s to clean up the toxic waste from the Pentagon’s relentless nuclear testing, as well as Marshallese civilians who say the radioactive fallout from 67 nuclear bomb explosions has produced so-called jellyfish babies. In all three cases, the US government does not consider there to be sufficient evidence to link these tests with birth defects.

Then, in the late ’70s, the US public was confronted with prime-time television exposure to these nightmarish visions, as veterans of the Vietnam War began to report birth defects in their children. They blamed the disorders on their wartime contact with the herbicide Agent Orange, which the US Air Force sprayed across swaths of South Vietnam. “We’re not the veterans,” former Green Beret John Woods testified at a 1979 congressional hearing. “Our kids are the veterans.” The Vietnamese Association for Victims of Agent Orange says as many as 3 million civilians across four generations have suffered from cancers, neural damage, reproductive problems, and other illnesses linked to the toxic chemical.

As in the earlier instances, the US government has dis-
puted these claims, arguing “there is inadequate or insufficient evidence of birth defects...resulting from tactical herbicide exposure.” But a number of US and international studies have suggested a link between the chemical and some types of birth defects, helping fuel decades of debate.

Part of the challenge is the complexity of the science. “They [birth defects] are so damn hard to study and to understand and to get causal mechanisms,” said Leslie Roberts, an epidemiologist at Columbia University who has worked with the WHO. “And this makes them uniquely inflammatory and unresolvable. Sometimes we’ll have an issue like Agent Orange where we can actually measure chemical markers of exposure, but usually not.”

Compounding these scientific challenges are the sweeping financial and legal implications of any conclusive evidence. “We have enormously sophisticated propaganda machines that are trying to avoid any liability issues,” said Roberts. In the case of Agent Orange, US veterans sued the chemical companies that manufactured it, including Dow and Monsanto, and won a $180 million settlement in 1984. They also pushed the VA to cover health care for their children born with spina bifida and, in certain instances, a number of other birth defects, even as the agency maintains they are not related to Agent Orange exposure. Meanwhile, US veterans who were exposed to the herbicide and their children, as well as Vietnamese civilians and their descendants, continue to demand additional recognition and compensation for damages.

In 2008 a US court dismissed a class action lawsuit filed on behalf of Vietnamese civilians, after Seth Waxman, who served as solicitor general under Bill Clinton, argued on behalf of the chemical companies that the case could have far-reaching political implications. “This does affect our ongoing diplomacy,” he said. The diplomacy he was referring to was not abstract but was related to a specific conflict that was being fought some 6,000 miles away, with its own controversial weapons: the war in Iraq, during which the US was rumored to have used depleted uranium.

In Fallujah, more than a decade after Alani set up the hospital’s birth defects registry, the issue of congenital disorders remains politically controversial and scientifically disputed. As Fallujah’s doctors see it, on one side of the debate are Alani and her colleagues as well as doctors from across Iraq, most notably in Najaf, Nasiriya, and Basra, who all contend they are facing a crisis of birth defects; on the other are the world’s most powerful medical and military institutions—the WHO and the Pentagon.

Alani and her colleagues maintain that the prevalence of congenital defects in Fallujah has been troublingly high in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. To prove that this is more than just anecdotal observation, she set out in 2009 to track every birth defect case referred to one of the three pediatric clinics at Fallujah General Hospital over 11 months. Her study, published in the Journal of the Islamic Medical Association of North America, found that an estimated 14 percent of infants delivered at the hospital had congenital disorders—more than twice the global average.

It became one of Alani’s most widely cited studies, despite limitations in the data. As she acknowledged in the paper, she lacked precise information for the number of cases referred to the clinic, forcing her to estimate. Bernadette Modell, an emeritus professor of community genetics at University College London and a longtime WHO researcher, said Alani’s study suffered from a challenge facing most clinicians working in resource-strapped or conflict settings: a lack of reliable epidemiological data. “This is a sincere effort, but it does not provide definitive evidence,” said Modell.
Still, Alani’s findings were supported by other small studies conducted by her colleagues, including one by Alwani. And former Iraqi government ministers and top health and environmental officials told *The Nation* that Fallujah has experienced a disconcerting increase in the prevalence of birth defects since the US invasion (although they did not provide government studies corroborating their statements).

In 2013, however, a national survey conducted by the Iraqi Ministry of Health and supported by the WHO reached a dramatically different conclusion than Fallujah’s doctors did. Based on interviews with residents in 18 of Iraq’s more than 100 districts, the survey concluded, “The rates for spontaneous abortion, stillbirths and congenital birth defects found in the study are consistent with or even lower than international estimates.” In Fallujah, it determined, the prevalence was half that of rich countries.

The discrepancy between Alani’s findings and the Health Ministry’s WHO-backed survey ignited a scientific firestorm that continues to smolder.

Modell said she thought the 2013 study was well conducted, given the challenges in carrying out large-scale epidemiological studies in conflict zones. “When I looked at the methodology, it was very, very impressive,” she said. But other experts—both Iraqi and international—criticized the survey for being prone to a number of flaws, including recollection bias, since it was based on parents’ memories of stillbirths, miscarriages, and birth defects, rather than hospital records. (The study recognized the “possibility of recall error” as a limitation in the methodology.)

“There must be underreporting. That’s quite clear,” said Jon Pedersen, an independent consultant who has worked on infant mortality surveys with the United Nations and other international agencies, particularly in the Middle East. (Modell and Pedersen participated in a 2013 meeting with Iraqi officials in Geneva to review the survey’s data before the report’s publication.) The debate garnered such heat it spilled into the pages of *The Lancet*, one of the most prestigious medical journals, where a number of doctors, including Alani, criticized the study for everything from its methodology to its scope to failing to meet the standards of peer review.

The controversy was as much about politics as about science. When Alani and other Fallujah hospital doctors questioned the study’s methodology before its release, Alani said, they were accused by members of the US-backed Iraqi government of manipulating the medicine to manufacture anti-American sentiment. For their part, the city’s doctors and several local and national government officials claimed the Iraqi Ministry of Health had rigged the survey or skewed the data in an effort to kowtow to Washington.

“I’m sure either the work wasn’t precise or there was pressure to change the numbers,” said Dr. Chasib Ali, a high-level official in the Iraqi Health Ministry at the time the WHO-backed survey was conducted. “What I am sure about is that the data is not correct.” (The Iraqi Ministry of Health did not respond to requests for comment on Dr. Ali’s allegation.)

A few former WHO officials questioned whether the agency—caught between its mandates to serve the public health and to serve its member nations—could ever be a truly neutral party. “The WHO is a bureaucratic organization, and it has certain political influences upon it from its member states,” said Keith Baverstock, a former head of the radiation protection program at the WHO’s regional office for Europe.

The WHO declined to comment for this story. In 2013, however, the former WHO head of mission in Iraq, Jaffar Hussain, responded in *The Lancet* to critiques of the study. He said its data had been “extensively” reviewed by international experts and that its methodology was based on practices “renowned worldwide.”

As the medical debate continued to swirl, the mystery surrounding Fallujah’s children was deepened by yet another riddle: the potential reason for the spate of congenital defects. This question was always bound to be fraught, and what made it particularly so was the legacy of the United States’ use of depleted uranium during its two wars in Iraq. Depleted uranium is an extremely dense and mildly radioactive heavy metal that was first used during the 1991 Gulf War, when the US military sprayed approximately 1 million depleted uranium rounds across Iraq. While it serves mainly to reinforce tank armor and give bullets extra armor-piercing force, depleted uranium is perhaps better known for the harms some people fear it causes after battle: cancers, kidney diseases, neurological disorders, and birth defects.

The Pentagon has long said that depleted uranium does not pose serious health risks, yet concern about these harms ramped up almost as soon as the Gulf War ended. As doctors in the region began to report shocking increases...
in rates of birth defects and cancers, some Iraqi specialists attributed this rise to civilians’ exposure to depleted uranium. Others inside and outside the country pointed to additional factors, such as consanguinity (marriage between relatives, which is common in parts of Iraq) and improvements in diagnosing and tracking birth defects. The White House categorically dismissed the possibility of a connection between the diseases and its weaponry. Yet some of the Pentagon’s own research in the 1990s suggested links between depleted uranium and cancer and congenital disorders. In fact, prior to the Gulf War, a US Army report warned of “health risks to natives and combat veterans” from depleted uranium, including “potential radiological and toxicological effects.”

In the years that followed, the focus on depleted uranium intensified. Throughout the ’90s, the Iraqi government broadcast images of children with birth defects on national television and in major newspapers, blaming the US military’s use of depleted uranium for the disorders. “Look what their bombs have done to the children of Iraq,” read one newspaper article accompanied by a picture of a horrifically disfigured child. “They have turned Iraq’s children into target[s] of their [depleted uranium] weapons.” At the same time, as Gulf War veterans became sick with the collection of cancers and unexplained illnesses that came to be known as Gulf War syndrome, some in the United States began to point the finger at depleted uranium as well. Across the international stage, activists and experts organized symposia, demanded investigations, and called for a ban on the suspect metal.

Amid these calls, the scientific community conducted a number of studies to try to pin down just how toxic depleted uranium is. This remains an open and contested question. The Pentagon said its ongoing monitoring of Gulf War veterans exposed to depleted uranium has found “no adverse clinical effects” in the former troops and no birth defects in their children. The International Atomic Energy Agency also concluded the metal poses little threat in small amounts. But other studies continue to raise alarms, including some that found in vitro exposure to depleted uranium can cause genetic damage or mutations. (In these instances, the metal’s chemical toxicity, not its radioactivity, is believed to be the cause of harm.)

The competing studies contributed to the aura of conspiracy, and by the late 2000s, when Alani and other Iraqi doctors began to notice the birth defects, depleted uranium had become one of the most controversial substances on earth. Its notoriety was such that in Iraq and internationally, many were quick to view the reports of congenital disorders as evidence that the United States had used depleted uranium in Fallujah during the US invasion and its aftermath.

The challenge for those studying the issue was that the US military refused to disclose information about where and how much depleted uranium it had used during the war. It withheld these details even as some people in the Department of Defense became aware of the growing firestorm and warned of the dangers of failing to respond. As one Pentagon memo obtained by The Nation cautioned, “DoD has yet to acknowledge or publish any information regarding the quantity and locations of depleted uranium used during [Operation Iraqi Freedom]. In some ways this has been working against us.”

The Department of Defense did not respond to questions concerning why it had not publicly released this material. But critics say Washington’s silence only fueled the speculation—and, in the case of the Iraqi doctors looking to help their tiny patients, the desperation.

In 2013, Alani took her desperation all the way to the United States, to a conference organized by the Carter Center in Georgia. “On behalf of the women of Fallujah,” she begged, “I would like to call on the U.S. and U.K. governments to disclose information regarding all types of weapons used during the occupation and to take the measures necessary to protect the right to life and health of the local people if a pollution problem is indicated.”
The US and UK governments never responded to Alani. But over the next few years, the Pentagon provided answers of sorts to Wim Zwijnenburg, a project leader at the Dutch peace group Pax who has spent nearly a decade investigating the US military’s use of depleted uranium. In 2014 he joined with the New York–based Center for Constitutional Rights to file Freedom of Information Act requests with 10 US government agencies regarding this country’s use of the metal during the Iraq War. Most of the agencies did not respond—some because they said they did not have such records, others for no disclosed reason. But with the help of documents released by the Air Force in 2015, as well as documents shared by the National Security Archive, Zwijnenburg was able to begin piecing together a picture of where depleted uranium had been fired. Then, in June 2019, Zwijnenburg and the CCR received a batch of documents from the US Central Command that helped color in the picture.

The Centcom documents, which the CCR and Zwijnenburg shared exclusively with The Nation and which the Department of Defense authenticated, offer an essential, if not definitive, look at the range and extent of depleted uranium use during both of the wars in Iraq. They consist of some 200 pages of memos and reports along with maps showing where depleted uranium munitions were fired as well as the quantities. Still missing from the documents are 28 pages that were redacted or withheld on national security grounds. Moreover, the documents themselves acknowledge that it was “difficult to quantify exact DU use or exact DU locations.” But the revelations they contain are nonetheless significant, challenging long-held assumptions even as they raise new questions.

At the crux of the documents is the revelation that the United Stated deployed notably less depleted uranium in and around Fallujah than in other areas of the country. Specifically, the documents reveal that in March and April of 2003, the US military fired about 4,000 30-millimeter rounds, or 1.3 tons, of depleted uranium munitions in Fallujah—only a small fraction of the 69 tons the US military fired across Iraq that year. Most of that 1.3 tons was fired outside Fallujah’s residential areas. The documents also state that after April 2003, the US military did not use any depleted uranium in Iraq and that depleted uranium was not used during the fiercest battle in Fallujah in 2004. The documents also say that no depleted uranium was used in Fallujah during the 1991 Gulf War, when the US military fired 322 tons of it across Iraq.

For Zwijnenburg, who is an outspoken critic of the use of depleted uranium munitions, the documents offer a compelling case against the theory that the metal is to blame for the crisis of Fallujah’s children. Of note, he said, was that areas of Iraq that saw higher exposures did not have as many reported birth defects. “Considering the limited use, I find it difficult to link depleted uranium with the birth defects in Fallujah at the moment,” he said.

Douglas Brugge, the chair of the department of public health sciences at the University of Connecticut and an expert in environmental health, arrived at similar conclusions even as he cautioned that the documents could not reveal the full picture. (For that, he said, a case control study would be necessary.) “If you take the documents on face value, then specifically with regards to Fallujah, the amount of [depleted uranium] rounds that are actually fired and detonated seems modest to me,” he said.

“We get solely focused on depleted uranium because it’s associated with something that is so compelling and frightening,” he added, referring to the metal’s radioactivity, however weak. “But I would be surprised if it was the most widespread exposure and the most toxic exposure in a war like that.”

This new information, Zwijnenburg said, is not the end of the story but only the beginning of a much more complicated mystery. He said the absence of large amounts of depleted uranium does not absolve the United States or any other military actors from their possible roles in a health crisis in Fallujah. Instead, he said, the lack of transparency fueled fears about a specific substance, distracting from the need for a broader scientific inquiry for well over a decade.

“A larger focus on toxic remnants of war beyond munitions is needed to understand the environmental health risk,” Zwijnenburg said.

In interviews with The Nation, a slew of scientists, doctors, and anti-depleted-uranium activists concurred with Zwijnenburg, saying that the narrow focus on the metal has precluded an analysis of the overall public health and environmental effects of the conflicts in Fallujah and how they may be linked to birth defects. Alwani, the fetal medicine specialist who began photographing and recording the cases along...
with Alani, echoed this concern. “I know every journalist concentrates on one point, which is the weapons.” Alwani said. “Weapons are not my issue. The problem is bigger than this.”

On the eve of the 2003 invasion, Iraq was already in the grip of a public health crisis. The military conflicts of the previous two decades had combined with the economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council to wreak havoc on the country’s environment and infrastructure. During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Iraqi government manufactured and deployed chemical weapons, exposing military factory workers and some of its civilians to toxic gases. The 1991 aerial attacks by the US-led coalition destroyed the energy and sanitation systems. And the UN sanctions, imposed in 1990, hampered the reconstruction of essential electrical plants and sewage treatment facilities. The ban on importing chlorine rendered water purification next to impossible.

The sanctions also devastated the country’s health care system, which was regarded as among the best in the region. The system’s budget was cut by 90 percent during the 1990s as the embargo crippled the economy. Although medicine was ostensibly exempt from the ban, expired or untested medicines flooded the black market. As food grew scarce, the per capita caloric intake for Iraqis plummeted to as low as 1,093 per day in 1995, according to a brief by UNICEF and the WHO, leading the health agency to observe in a 1996 report, “The vast majority of the country’s population has been on a semi-starvation diet for years.”

“The quality of health care in Iraq, due to the six-week 1991 war and the subsequent sanctions imposed on the country, has been literally put back by at least 50 years,” the WHO concluded.

Omar Dewachi, an Iraqi doctor and medical anthropologist who has been documenting the health impacts of conflict in the country for decades, witnessed the effects of the sanctions while he was working at a public hospital in Baghdad in 1997. “We had much higher cases of malnutrition, which had been eradicated in the ‘60s,” said Dewachi, whose book Ungovernable Life traces the history of the health care system in Iraq.

The government’s food rationing system, imposed in response to the sanctions, staved off a potential famine but left people deficient in several vitamins and minerals, including nutrients essential to fetal development. According to the 1996 WHO report, the availability of folic acid—which helps prevent serious congenital disorders known as neural tube defects—decreased more than 77 percent. The ration diet more than halved the availability of zinc and riboflavin, deficiencies of which are linked to some birth defects, as well as thiamine, a deficiency of which can increase the risk of stillbirth. By 2003, UNICEF said, nearly 60 percent of the Iraqi population was fully dependent on food rations, meaning that these nutritional deficiencies affected more than half of the population. The Ministry of Health recorded a national rise in congenital heart disease, one of the most common types of birth defects, between 1991 and 1998.

“Nutritional factors are known to cause congenital anomalies and defects, and that has been a very understudied pathway for birth defects in Iraq,” said Dewachi.

In Fallujah the US invasion and its aftermath severely exacerbated these underlying health and environmental problems. In 2004 the city was the site of the bloodiest battles of the US war in Iraq. In November and December, nine US Army and Marine battalions laid waste to Fallujah, destroying or damaging tens of thousands of homes, multiple water treatment facilities and power plants, and the city’s sanitation system. The battle killed thousands of Iraqis and 82 Americans. Raw sewage flooded the streets. Dogs mangled bodies that were strewn across the city. US troops deployed white phosphorus, a chemical weapon capable of burning skin and muscle down to the bone. It was a battle the US forces fought with a spirit of vengeance because, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other top US leaders saw it, “Fallujah had become a symbol of resistance” to the US occupation of Iraq.

Liqaa Wardi, a former parliament member from Fallujah, recalled how her husband, an engineer, was flown into the city on a military helicopter and tasked with surveying the damage in the siege’s aftermath. “He told me the city was flooded by water, bodies were everywhere, and there were a lot of obstacles and challenges to reconstruction,” she said. Over the ensuing months, displaced residents—including Alani and her family—returned to Fallujah and set about rebuilding their city.
But the precarious security situation at the time made it impossible for members of the environmental ministry or the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to study the damage firsthand.

A slew of factories, chemical warehouses, and military industrial buildings in and around Fallujah posed hazardous risks to nearby residents. The UNEP highlighted many of these sites in three reports published between 2003 and 2005. One of the country’s largest chemical warehouses, in Khan Dhari, about 20 miles from Fallujah near Abu Ghraib, was ransacked in the aftermath of the US invasion. (The report does not identify which parties looted and set aflame parts of the complex.) Hundreds of tons of hazardous materials at these warehouses were spilled, burned, or stolen, including the highly toxic chemicals tetraethyl lead, furfural, methyl ethyl ketone, and sodium hydroxide. Other sites were not destroyed but nevertheless posed pollution risks. A military manufacturing site near Fallujah contained cyanide and heavy metals, and a cement plant spewed pollution, possibly including arsenic and dioxin (a chemical in Agent Orange), both of which have been linked to birth defects. (The Department of Defense did not respond to questions about these reports of widespread environmental contamination.)

All these chemicals potentially mixed with pollutants left from earlier conflicts. In 1991 and 1998, for example, the US bombed a chemical weapons complex and pesticide production factories in the area—collectively known as Fallujah I, II, and III—polluting the soil at the site. In the 1980s, residents of Fallujah may have been exposed to serious toxins by serving in the Iraqi Army or working at military factories where health and safety measures were scant.

Such pollution was not unique to Fallujah. In 2005 the UN estimated that Iraq was littered with several thousand contaminated sites. Five years later, a Times of London investigation revealed that the US military had generated over 10 million pounds of toxic waste and that it was abandoning hazardous material in dump sites along main roads. The same year, an Iraqi government study undertaken by the environment, health, and sciences ministries discovered more than 40 locations across Iraq, including at least one site in Fallujah, that were contaminated with radiation or dioxin. Hassan Partow, the program manager of the UNEP’s crisis management branch, was part of the environmental assessment team in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. “Iraq’s environmental contamination is one of the more serious cases of conflict pollution that UNEP has investigated,” he told The Nation, pointing to “chronic, multiple, and widespread causes of pollution.”

Yet even amid the nationwide environmental crisis, Fallujah’s toxic legacy stood out. “Fallujah was the city in Iraq with the highest contamination,” Abdul Kareem Al-Samari, the Iraqi minister of technology and science from 2010 to 2014, told The Nation. Alarmed by the reports of rising rates of birth defects and cancer in Fallujah, he said he sought to establish local centers to study diseases and contamination during his time as minister, but the initiatives were never completed. Health-related funding, he said, always seemed to disappear amid corruption or was diverted to the military budget.

The Iraqi government did not respond to questions about why the research centers aimed at studying birth defects and cancers in Fallujah were never completed. However, Jassim Abdulaziz Humadi Allahy, Iraq’s deputy minister of health and environment, said in an interview that, in general, years of conflict, including the 2014-2017 war against the Islamic State, have compelled the government to siphon resources away from social programs.

Allahy also said the alleged increase in birth defects in Fallujah could be linked to this broader environmental crisis, although he was careful not to draw a causal conclusion. He, like other officials, said improvements in the diagnostic and registration system for congenital abnormalities explained part of the reported rise. “But sometimes we might—and we insist on ‘might’—relate it to the pollution: air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution with heavy metals, radiation, chemical pollution, because as I said, we are facing decades of war,” he added.

Dewachi explained that the challenge of studying birth defects in Fallujah and across Iraq comes down to this fact: The disorders cannot be easily linked to a single cause. “You are dealing with a complex ecosystem of toxicity and interactions,” he said. “I think there is a kind of obsession of finding a magic bullet to explain the birth defects in Iraq…. People have been trying to attribute it to a specific weapon like depleted uranium—everyone wants depleted uranium to be the culprit—and it’s the search for the culprit that I feel has been missing the forest for the trees. We’re missing the bigger picture of how, over decades, there has been a systematic production of toxicity in the everyday life of Iraqis.”

For Dewachi and others, this bigger picture doesn’t preclude the question of culpability. But it does, at least in the case of Fallujah, force one to reconsider the search for a single toxic substance and instead grapple with the possibility that 21st century urban warfare, in and of itself, might unleash intergenerational damage that we are only beginning to understand.

“This is a part of the unresolved mystery of these birth defects,” he said. “It makes us ask: How do we move forward? How can you really think about accountability for these kinds of questions?”

**IRAQ’S ENVIRONMENTAL CONTAMINATION IS ONE OF THE MORE SERIOUS CASES OF Conflicts that UNEP HAS INVESTIGATED.**

—Hassan Partow

**SEVENTEEN YEARS AFTER THE UNITED STATES INVADED THEIR COUNTRY, ALAN AND HER COLLEAGUES STELL STILL DON’T KNOW EXACTLY HOW OR EVEN IF THE CONFLICT IS RELATED TO THE BIRTH DEFECTS SHE SAYS SHE WITNESSES IN THE HOSPITAL DAILY. ON ANOTHER HOT SEPTEMBER MORNING LAST YEAR, SHE SAT IN HER SMALL, DIMLY Lit OFFICE BEFORE HER ROUNDS IN THE MATERNITY WARD. SHE WAS EXASPERATED BY THE MORNING TRAFFIC, AND SHE SEEMED TIRED. OVER THE YEARS, SHE HAS AUTHORED OR COAUTHORED MORE THAN A DOZEN STUDIES, CHALLENGED THE WHO, AND TRAVELED TO THE UNITED STATES TO APPEAL TO THE FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE US-LED BATTLES IN HER CITY. SHE HAS SURVIVED AIR STRIKES AND TWO FOREIGN MILITARY OCCUPATIONS. AND HER FAMILY MEMBERS HAVE LOST CHILDREN TO THE VERRY BIRTH DEFECTS THAT SHE HAS SOUGHT TO TREAT.**
She pulled out a copy of a letter that, she said, the hospital sends to the Health Ministry in Baghdad each month to request new equipment, including a gamma blood irradiator, a Cobas E 411 analyzer for in vitro diagnostic tests, and a newborn screening system to identify genetic and metabolic disorders. So far, she said, the equipment hasn't arrived, but she intends to continue requesting it. “We are looking to find solutions for these families,” she said.

As Alani prepared to see her patients, Alwani entered the office. They recalled when they began to record cases about a decade ago, with Alwani taking photographs with a camera because they didn’t have smartphones yet. Alwani said she never intended for the images to be used as political symbols. “I don’t like to transmit the tragedy of the people,” she said. “I was thinking to solve the problem, not to reproduce the problem.” Over time, however, the images of Fallujah’s dead and deformed babies transformed into emblems of the war’s long-lasting and gruesome consequences. Plastered on poster boards and anti-war websites, the photos became symbols of the irreversible and intergenerational impacts of a war that most Americans now call a mistake. But the city’s children, Alani and Alwani said, are still suffering with little fanfare.

A few weeks later, Alani published another case study in the *Asian Journal of Case Reports in Medicine and Health*. In the peer-reviewed paper, she analyzed twins born in the Fallujah hospital with two different severe disorders. She wrote that the second child, a boy, was dead when he emerged with his blue intestines heaving out of his abdomen. The first infant entered the world alive. But the child wouldn’t survive long, Alani knew, not with the two tiny legs fused together. Both children reminded her of other deformations she’d seen and recorded in her hospital, but never had she seen the two rare syndromes in the same pregnancy.

Alani concluded her case study with a dry observation. “The high prevalence of birth defects in Fallujah is impairing the population’s health and [its] capacity to care for the surviving children,” she wrote. She added that the problems were exacerbated by limited prenatal care, lack of support for families with birth defects, and “the absence of clear serious future plans for improvement of the health system or taking serious measures to clean the post wars contaminated environment.”

What she didn’t write about was how the father of the twins became hysterical after the delivery and refused to let her perform X-rays or ultrasounds on them. He simply took the first child out of the hospital to die at home, leaving Alani to write down the limited information she was able to collect, hoping that the record, even if incomplete, would someday benefit her patients.

“This is a part of the unresolved mystery of these birth defects. It makes us ask: How do we move forward?”
— Omar Dewachi

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David Opdyke's
This Land
An epic mural uses snippets of vintage Americana to prophesy large-scale climate destruction.

A possible future:
The project camouflages itself as a landscape but reveals various ecological catastrophes.
New York–based artist David Opdyke had already been addressing climate change, among other political issues, by way of semi-monumental sculptures and bas-reliefs for a good decade and a half when, in the mid-2010s, he began to shift the polarities of his practice. He took vintage postcards of the American pastoral from the early 20th century (hand-tinted black-and-white photographic vantages celebrating local court-houses, highways, parks, dams, recreation areas, forests, or agricultural vistas) and injected them with trenchant contemporary political commentary by means of subtly compressed painterly interventions. Then for a year, starting in 2017, he reverted to the monumental, gradually unfurling *This Land*, an epic gridlike mural, more than 16 feet long by eight feet high, consisting of over 500 such individually treated postcards.

What from a distance at first presents itself as a single bird’s-eye view of a vast alpine vista (mountains, lakes, sunrise), upon close examination, sure enough, proves to be fashioned out of hundreds of those postcards celebrating the American dream as conjured up at the turn of the last century. But when you advance closer still, Opdyke’s myriad sly interventions within and between cards begin to reveal a harrowing nightmare vision of the potentially rampaging effects of global warming: fires, floods, droughts, tornadoes, plagues of locusts, murders of crows, butterflies adrift in the snow, a cacophony of political responses, panicked traffic jams, pipelines run amok slathered with livid graffiti, immiserated homeless encampments, Alcatraz Island given over to high-rise luxury apartment buildings (secure prisons for the rich), even an actual ark under construction. “During the months I was working on the piece,” Opdyke recalls, “I figured I was portraying the way things could well get in two or three decades if cli-
mate change continued to go unaddressed. But two years on and it's pretty obvious the timeline has proved much, much tighter: The fires out west, the pandemic, hurricanes barreling in one hot on the next—they're all already here now."

Opdyke's piece, which has been touring the country (Ann Arbor, Mich.; Grand Forks, N.D.; Chicago), will remain on view until well after an election that may constitute our very last chance to confront that looming future. This Land appears through January 15, 2021, at the Mana Contemporary arts center in Jersey City and will receive wider exposure in the form of a lavishly illustrated monograph, out this month from Monacelli/Phaidon. Lawrence Weschler

Lawrence Weschler, a director emeritus of the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU, has published over 20 books of narrative nonfiction on topics cultural and political.
Opdyke’s premonitions of climate peril far too closely resemble images that are already here.
A Thing or Two About Life

The education of Michael Apted

BY SUSAN PEDERSEN

MICHAEL APTEO’S GREAT UP SERIES, ABOUT a cohort of English children, wasn’t conceived as a series at all. In 1963, fresh out of Cambridge and as a trainee at Granada TV, Apted was asked to find a group of talkative 7-year-olds for a 40-minute special about the children who would be Britain’s barristers and businessmen, factory workers and housewives, at the century’s turn. Directed by Paul Almond and screened in 1964, Seven Up! was to have been a one-off. But when someone at Granada suggested revisiting the children at 14 and again at 21, Apted jumped at the offer to direct. Even after his career took off and he moved to Hollywood, he made time to make a new installment every seven years.
With the release of *63 Up* last year, the series spans nine films and six decades. It is Apted’s most important work and one of the most revelatory documentaries about social change ever made. It has attracted imitations, scholarly articles and comment, and hordes of passionate fans—though perhaps this is the case as much in spite of as because of Apted’s direction.

From the outset, he imagined the project as an indictment of class inequality. He wanted to make, as he put it, “a nasty piece of work about these kids who have it all, and these other kids who have nothing.” Drawn to children (mainly boys) at the sharp ends of the class divide, he recruited five of the 14 children from elite private schools and six from London’s working-class primary schools and care homes but only two from a middle-class Liverpool suburb and one from rural Yorkshire. In their interviews in *Seven Up!* these 7-year-olds unselfconsciously performed the hierarchies of class—theater all the more devastating for its actors’ innocence. Who can forget the now-canonical clip of Andrew Brackfield, Charles Furneaux, and John Brisby (the “three posh boys”) obligingly recounting their reading material (“I read the Financial Times”), their plans (“We think I’m going to Cambridge”), and their view that the public (that is, private) schools were a very good thing indeed, since otherwise, their schools would be “so nasty and crowded”?

Riveting cinema, yes, yet troubling, too, and not only for the attitudes it exposed. Watching, one can’t help but wonder about the adults behind the camera, who, after all, orchestrated the performances and chose the scenes most likely to arouse our empathy, laughter, or even scorn. Not surprisingly, by the time of the first sequel, *7 Plus Seven*, some of the children had become twitchy and resentful, and by *21 Up*, they bristled at Apted’s patronizing manner and leading questions. Sue Davis, Lynn Johnson, and Jackie Bassett (three of only four women subjects) were interviewed together, as if their shared working-class background outweighed any individuality they might have. He went on to ask: Were they angry about their straitened opportunities? Didn’t they resent that they would go nowhere in life? It is unclear whether Apted could see that he was enacting the very class relations he deplored, but his subjects stoutly rejected his analysis. They had plenty of opportunities, they told him, more than enough. They intended to have the lives they wanted, thank you very much.

Is it possible to fall in love with a work of art but be appalled by the artist? In “What Do We Do With the Art of Monstrous Men?” the essayist Claire Dederer dissects her complex feelings about Woody Allen. She can’t help loving his films, even while recoiling from their narcissism and sheer creepiness—the plotlines about men kill-

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*From the outset, Apted imagined his project as an indictment of social inequality in Britain.*

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he lesson began after *21 Up*, and it first took the form of abstention. In 1964 no one thought to seek the children’s permission to ask intrusive questions, but by the early ’80s some of the interviewees had wised up. Charles, one of the three posh boys, went to Durham rather than Oxford or Cambridge. At 21, his stringy hair, jeans, and green sweater signaled his dissent from the values of his clipped and suited peers. By 28, unwilling to serve as a poster boy for class privilege any longer, he pulled out of the series. Apted called him up to remonstrate, but the conversation went badly, particularly after Charles announced that he had decided to become a documentary filmmaker, too. By his own admission, Apted “went berserk,” poisoning the relationship to the extent that Charles never appeared in the series again and even tried to force Granada to remove all footage of him from the series. The defection still rankles: Apted told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2018 that Charles had “a rather undistinguished career with the BBC.” Cross him who dares.

The defections continued. John, another of the posh boys, also refused to take part in *28 Up*, and three of the series’ participants skipped *35 Up* (1991)—among them Peter Davies, a middle-class suburban Liverpool boy who had become a teacher and, after expressing sharply critical views of Thatcherite policies in *28 Up*, was pilloried by the right-wing press. Traumatized, he refused to take part in the next three films, but like other participants, he eventually discovered that he had leverage and could bargain. He returned for *56 Up* (2012) on the condition that he could promote his new band. John returned in *33 Up* to promote his charity, Friends of Bulgaria.

The concessions made to keep John in the films provide, in themselves, a lesson in the workings of social class. The most opinionated and seemingly slobbish of the posh boys, he insisted at 21 that well-paid autoworkers could easily send their children to university if
only they valued education more. But he clearly felt that he had been set up and in later films insistently revised the record. Though he was chosen to exemplify privilege, he said that when he was 9, his father died, leaving his mother hard up. She then worked to support the family, and he worked through his school vacations, spent a year in the army, and attended Cambridge on a scholarship. “I don’t regard myself as particularly typical of the type that I was no doubt selected to represent,” he said in 56 Up—not least because “apart from anything else, I’m three-quarters foreign.” John, it turns out, is a great-great-grandson of Todor Burmov, the first prime minister of an independent Bulgaria, and with this revelation, his charity work and his marriage to Claire, the daughter of a former UK ambassador to Bulgaria, suddenly fall into place. John, of course, reaped the benefits of his elite education. He is a barrister and a queen’s counsel, the top rank of lawyers, and enjoys a very comfortable and culturally rich life. This gave him the training, status, and confidence to set his own terms. But his irritated objections to the series’ pieties have become one of its pleasures.

Apted’s less-privileged subjects started pushing back, too. Take the two boys he found in a children’s home in 1964, Paul Kligerman, who was there because of a custody battle (he was later taken with his father’s new family to Australia, where he still lives), and Symon Basterfield, the only Black child in the series. Both were anxious and diffident children, and both drifted into manual labor. In the early films, Apted quizzed them about their seeming lack of ambition: Why didn’t Paul try for qualifications? Was driving a forklift really the best Symon could do? Very gently, both let Apted know that their priorities lay elsewhere. Both married young and put their energy into their families. By 28, Symon had five children, and those children, he told Apted, “have what I never had.” Which is what? Apted asked. Symon looked at him in disbelief. “A father, in fact?” he replied.

Apted had centered his films on class, but another narrative was fast displacing it. Family, it seemed, was society’s bedrock and the individual’s haven. That focus on family suffused the later films, with subjects from modest backgrounds expressing great pride in their children’s accomplishments and bristling at any implication they might have fallen short. Lynn, for example, asked if she was disappointed with her children’s academic accomplishments and bristling at any implication they might have fallen short. Lynn, for example, asked if she was disappointed with her children’s academic accomplishments and bristling at any implication they might have fallen short.

Apted had centered his films on class, but another theme soon displaced it: the family.
University and was living in a squat and working on a building site. When Lewis tracked him down for 28 Up (a task that took her three months), she found him in a camper in North Wales; when filmed, he was tramping in the Scottish highlands and was in obvious psychological trouble. Articulate and philosophical but rocking slightly to and fro, Neil voiced open doubts about his sanity and almost laughed when Apted asked him, inevitably, about having a family. “Children inherit something from their parents,” Neil said. Even if the mother were high-spirited and normal, “the child would still stand a very fair chance of not being full of happiness because of what he or she inherited from me.” Viewers everywhere were relieved to find Neil alive at 35 and, remarkably, serving as a Liberal Democrat councilor in the London borough of Hackney at 42 and in rural Cumbria at 49. (He still does this work and is now a lay minister as well, something that he says “delights me inside.”) If we value social commitment, Neil’s is commendable if painfully achieved life. But, the films hasten to remind us, he is still living alone.

One might have expected more chafing against this sometimes cloying familialism, but perhaps because Apted chose so few girls, no middle-class girls, and none who would go on to university (and, frankly, because he had so much trouble listening to the ones he selected), the films slide through the ’70s without really marking the transformations inaugurated by feminism. By the ’80s, however, critics and audiences alike found the skewed gender ratio shocking, and while the filmmakers passed it off as just a reflection of earlier social attitudes (although the last time I looked, boys didn’t outnumber girls 10 to four in the 1960s), Apted and Lewis scrambled to respond. Their solution—to bring the male subjects’ wives more fully into the story—helped. Andrew’s wife, Sue, who was often more perceptive about her shy husband than he was; and Debbie, the wife of East End lad turned London cabbie and bit-part actor Tony, have for decades brought much-needed ballast to the series. Their presence, though, is a distinctly wifely one: They explain, encourage, and occasionally correct or chide their husbands. Debbie especially, who had to put up with Tony’s on-camera confession of extramarital “regretful behavior” in 42 Up, has a look of mixed indulgence and exasperation that I wish I could patent. Tellingly, the wives who are what used to be called career women (Bruce’s wife, Penny, a busy head schoolteacher; and Nick’s second wife, Cryss, an academic) don’t play this mediating role, and Nick’s first wife, Jackie, the one woman who strongly defended an ideal of egalitarian and dual-career marriage, felt so bruised by the reception of 28 Up that she refused to appear in the films again.

And yet feminism came for Apted whether invited or not, from a direction he clearly never expected. Lynn, Sue, and Jackie, his three working-class girls, in some ways conformed to the series’ norm of family-centered life. All three married by 25, and while Sue and Jackie divorced quite young, all were attentive and caring parents to children raised with long-term partners, although Sue, interestingly, has not remarried and described her now two-decades-long relationship with Glenn as “the longest engagement known to man.” And yet she and Lynn also voiced the series’ strongest defense of the value of work, both for their own happiness and for its social purpose. Lynn worked for years in East London as a children’s librarian. “Teaching children the beauty of books and watching their faces as books unfold to them, it’s just fantastic,” she said in 28 Up. She spent decades battling to maintain children’s services in the face of the country’s austerity measures (by 56 Up, her job had been cut) and insisted, in film after film, that the work was profoundly worthwhile. Sue did various office jobs while raising their children—“I worked all my life, I can’t imagine not working”—and then took an administrative job at Queen Mary University of London. There, clearly talented, she flourished. By 49 Up (2005), though having never gone to university, she had become the principal administrator for the school’s postgraduate courses. Did she like the responsibility? Apted asked. Sue laughed and said, “I was born for the responsibility.”

Despite the limits of Apted’s focus, class and social change do form the films’ important backdrop.

Jackie, too, helped drag the series toward a more serious engagement with women’s aspirations and rights. On the face of it, perhaps next to Neil, she had the hardest life. Married at 19 and divorced soon after, she later had a “short, very sweet relationship” and a son, Charlie. Not wanting him to be “an only,” she then had two boys with Ian, with whom she amicably coparented even after their cohabitation ended. But Ian, tragically, was killed in a traffic accident, and Jackie, diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and unable to work, was forced to rely on (and be subject to the terrible indignities of) the benefit system. Yet it was Jackie who, in 63 Up, called Apted out for his decades of unthinking sexism. “When we were younger,” she told him, “I kept asking myself, ‘Why’s he asking me questions about marriage and men? Why’s he not asking me questions about how the country is?’ I felt you treated us, as women, totally different, and I didn’t like it.” His questions in 21 Up, she remembered, were especially obtuse and enraging. True, “when we started at 7… there weren’t many career women. But when we hit 21, I really thought you’d have had a better idea of how the world works, shall I say. But you still asked us the most mundane, domestic questions.” Jackie had had enough; in 21 Up she got so angry with Apted that he had to turn the cameras off—an intensely revelatory moment of the subject striking back, and one that Apted, to his credit, let Jackie revisit and explain much later, with the cameras rolling.

So is the message of this remarkable series really that social class matters less and personality, family, character, and accident matter more? Not entirely. Yes, some of the working-class children (Tony, Sue) did better than expected, but none became rich or famous, whereas all of the upper-class children (John, Andrew, Charles, Suzy) enjoyed very
Before All of This

And as usual, early summer seems already to hold, inside it, the split fruit of late fall, those afternoons we'll soon enough lie down in, their diminished colors, the part no one comes for. I'm a man, now; I've seen plenty of summers, I shouldn't be surprised—why am I?

As if everything hadn't all along been designed—I include myself—to disappear eventually.

Meanwhile, how the wind sometimes makes the slenderest trees, still young, bend over

makes me think of knowledge conquering superstition, I can almost believe in that—until the trees, like

fear, spring back. Then a sad sort of quiet, just after, as between two people who have finally realized they've stopped regretting the same things. It's like they've never known each other. Yet even now, waking, they insist they've woken from a dream they share, forgetting all over again that every dream is private...

Whatever the reasons are for the dead under-branches of the trees that flourish here, that the dead persist is enough; for me, it's enough.

The air stirs like history

Like the future

Like history

CARL PHILLIPS

comfortable private (and in the case of the boys, professional) lives. What is striking instead is that the subjects resisted the simple social determinism that the series tried to foist on them at first, insisting that they were, in spite of it all, the authors of their lives.

As a result, the films do tell us much about the nature of class and social change in Britain across the past half century. Film reviewers treat the Up series as an entirely original endeavor, a unique attempt to document the relationship between individual aspiration and social change across a lifetime. But in fact, sociologists and ethnographers have been tilling this furrow for decades. The most creative such project is, perhaps, Mass Observation, which since 1937 has episodically enlisted ordinary Britons in constructing an ethnography of everyday life, including by writing diaries. Social scientists took up the challenge also through cohort studies that tracked the health, educational, and career outcomes of children born in 1945, 1958, and 1970 and through studies that interrogated thousands of subjects about community life at midcentury, the move from slums to new towns in the ’50s, the rise of commercial culture and affluence in the ’60s, and the impact in later decades of deindustrialization, political polarization, and new social movements.

In the last few years, historians have returned to those records, trying to free them from the conclusions that the interviewers (much like Apted) drew before the subjects could even open their mouths. In Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England, Jon Lawrence goes back to the interview notes from 10 postwar community studies to see whether people really had abandoned solidarity for individualism. Unsurprisingly, the truth is more subtle. People often supported what we might call social democratic values—the belief, for example, that the state should ensure that prosperity lifts all boats—while embracing aspiration (especially for their children) and the post-’60s view that they ought to be able to think and live as they please. Economic crisis and, still more, neoliberal policies hit that consensus hard: Cuts and privatization created winners and losers, even as social safety nets were shredded. And yet the cultural changes wrought by the ’70s were deep enough and profound enough that no one quite wanted to see the clock turned back. Women in particular did not mourn a past in which their horizons were sharply constrained.

As Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite argued in Class, Politics, and the Decline of deference in England, 1968–2000, although class continued to matter—even as inequality worsened—people resisted labeling themselves by class; the very word seemed snobbish or blinkered. Most preferred to say they were ordinary, and yet they were still able to define complex identities for themselves. In a recent article, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and three other historians (Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, and Natalie Thomlinson) trace how the social movements of the ’70s underwrote that shift in identification. Race and gender, they argue, had become as generative of social identities and social politics as class. The divergent trajectories but shared optimism of Sue, Lynn, and Jackie make sense in this framework. Much
The Up series has now been with us for a lifetime. Countless viewers have identified with its subjects’ trials and triumphs—especially, judging from the letters that pour in to the newspapers after each episode, if they are of the same generation. I am close in age to Apted’s subjects, which made watching 63 Up a rather melancholy affair. Having raised children and (often) buried parents, this cohort has become sharply aware of its own mortality. John’s law practice seems to be winding down, and Andrew, who had a demanding career at a major international firm, has retired early. He regrets not spending more time with his family, and he and Jane want to have some good years together while they still have their health. Bruce has cut back his teaching, happy to let Penny’s career take precedence. He worries about his weight and dreads not old age but the “disabling, degenerating conditions linked with [it].” So, with reason, does Neil, who has lived most of his life in the rural areas where he feels more comfortable and who has, as he says, “relied upon my body very much.” Over the decades, we’ve watched wiry Neil tramp through Scotland or Cumbria. Now he bicycles to the nearest village from the cottage he acquired, with a small inheritance after his mother’s death, in rural France.

There is sadder news, too. Nick, still teaching at the University of Wisconsin, has developed throat cancer. He isn’t frightened for himself, he tells Apted, but he dreads the effect on those close to him. And Lynn, who had what she thought was just a minor accident—a bump from a swing when taking her grandson to the park—went to a hospital and suddenly and incomprehensibly died. With her rock-solid marriage and close family, she had always been a bit irritated by Apted’s endless questions. “I’m happy with the way my life has gone,” she told him shortly in 56 Up. Five years after her death, her daughters dissolve into tears when speaking of her. Lynn is remembered for her dedication to the East End’s children. St. Saviour’s primary school, where she was a governor for over 25 years, named its refurbished library after her. “I don’t think I quite realized just how much she was adored by the wider community,” one of her daughters confesses.

Other participants are thinking about their lives and legacies, too. Revealingly, both of the middle-class boys are now doing what the aspirant and educated do when they want to leave a mark: writing. (Neil has an unpublished autobiography and Peter an unpublished novel.) But the difference between the world they faced as young adults in the late ’70s and the one facing their children and grandchildren has driven a few to an understanding—which the previously mentioned historians could not better—of how the collectivist entitlements and values of the ’70s cushioned their early difficulties and underwrote their later successes. Sue’s divorce didn’t derail her, she tells us, because she had “wonderful support from the council.” It helped her get and then later buy her flat, a bit of good luck that changed her life. With council housing now scarce and the National Health Service underfunded, she worries that the young face a much more precarious future than she did.

Peter, who so offended Thatcheries in 1984, agrees. Stuck in low-paying jobs in hospitality or call centers and with no hope of acquiring property, those in the next generation, he says, might be the first to have things worse than their parents. Even self-made Tony, who dreamed of owning a sports bar in Spain, has felt neoliberalism’s hard edge, with Uber and other ride-share apps cutting his and Debbie’s cabby earnings by a third. A Leave voter during the Brexit campaign, he says he will never vote Tory again.

This reflectiveness is surely a byproduct of the project itself. One can’t be turned into a historical subject without it having some effect. Apted’s “children” have been forced to live examined lives, and this changed them in profound ways. Understandably, some have regretted ever getting caught in the net. In 35 Up, John memorably called the series “a little pill of poison” inserted into his life every seven years, and in 42 Up, Suzy said the films stir up “lots of baggage.” (She opted out of this last installment.) But most remain loyal to the project, to one another, and thereby, in a strange sense, to the social whole they are collectively meant to represent. Sue, for example, is happy to take part precisely because she thinks of herself as quite ordinary and hence useful. “The things we’re going through, everyone’s going through,” she says. And a few seem to love it. One is the ebullient Tony, who was once driving the astronaut Buzz Aldrin in his taxi when someone stopped them to ask for an autograph—Tony’s, he was shocked to discover. Another, more surprisingly, is Jackie. Asked how she could enjoy appearing in the series so much, given her often acrimonious relationship with Apted, she replies, “I told him off. I didn’t kill him!” Indeed, she, like several of the other “children,” has grown protective of Apted, who, however old they may be now, is older still. (He turns 80 next year.)

An unspoken question thus hangs over 63 Up: Will there be another installment? I am not sure that matters. Apted’s series is already a masterpiece and one that will last. Despite all the backtalk his subjects gave him and the way the series adjusted to credit their views, the project has much to say about the power of social class, even if people now insist on their right to contest its strictures and to define its meaning for themselves.

“For me, it’s still them and us,” Tony says. Asked how she sees herself, Sue replies, “Oh, working class, always working class”—a moving acknowledgment that while now-vanished social entitlements (and not just her drive) enabled her to prosper economically, it has not eroded her core identity and loyalties. And even though Jackie insists that despite everything (Ian’s death, her disability), she’s been “lucky,” she now concedes, more than 40 years after she blew up at Apted for implying that she had no opportunities, that she should have stayed in school. She’s proud of her three sons (one in the army, another working in a warehouse, and the third “chefping”), but she is determined that her granddaughter will have more chances. “You’re going to uni,” she recalls telling the little girl. “What’s uni?” the child asked. “University,” said Jackie. “You’re going.”
Hari Kunzru’s Red Pill has the trappings of a thriller you might buy at an airport. It involves a chase of sorts, one that starts in the suburbs of Berlin, moves back in time to Stasi-controlled East Germany, and then trapezes around from Paris to the highlands outside Glasgow and, finally, to Brooklyn. There are spies, intrigue, Peeping Toms, conspiracy, and violence haunting the many corners of his novel, and yet the sensibility of the book is much more digressive, cerebral, and torturously self-conscious. That’s because at its core, Red Pill is a novel of ideas, probing seemingly disparate poles of thought: the conception of the self, the creation of whiteness in European Romanticism, and the threat of the Internet—the way it has destroyed our sense of privacy, circulated fringe ideas, and popularized the alt-right.

Much of Red Pill’s action happens in the head of a stock character familiar to anyone who has read contemporary fiction. The narrator is a guilt-ridden, neurotic, middle-aged writer who lives in Brooklyn and spends more time doom-scrolling than writing. Like Kunzru, he is a South Asian British expat, but unlike his creator, he’s not a fiction writer but a cultural essayist—the kind you might recognize in the liminal space between the academy and the general interest magazine. He is also in the throes of a midlife crisis, but one of a more philosophical nature.

Kunzru’s protagonist has just been awarded a prestigious fellowship at a Berlin arts foundation called the Deuter Center, an haute and vaguely libertarian residency based on ideas of collaboration. Yet on the eve of his departure for Europe, he admits the only thing on his mind is the dire state of world affairs—the upcoming 2016 presidential election, the global refugee crisis, and the images of war and death that litter his computer screen. No amount of distance and time spent writing will resolve any of the feral dread his news feed produces. Instead our hero spends the sleepless nights before his trip in tears and in the company of his glowing laptop. He’s crying not out of empathy but out of fear, mostly directed toward his own soft, doughy uselessness: “If the world changed,
would I be able to protect my family? Could I scale the fence with my little girl on my shoulders? Would I be able to keep hold of my wife's hand as the rubber boat overturned? Our life together was fragile. One day something would break.”

These primal impulses toward preserving the family unit and, by extension, the status quo are constantly on his mind, and his worry begins to fester into obsession once he is in Berlin. For our narrator, the first sign that things will not go well is the prospect of working in an open office at the center. His discomfort with the arrangements—an invasion of privacy, in his opinion—eventually grows into paranoia as he begins to believe the staff is keeping an eye on his comings and goings. Passing his time eating Chinese takeout, walking around the lakeside near the center, reading Heinrich von Kleist, and binge-watching a violent and baroque police procedural called Blue Lives, he does everything but complete the project he went to Berlin for.

Here we can sympathize with him. I don’t think many would want to finish his book, a broad and, by his own admission, pedantic study of the history and “construction of the self in lyric poetry” (i.e., a book about how poets through the ages have used the word “I”). It is precisely the pointlessness of this work, smashed up against his sense of dispossession, that propels him to find new purpose, one he stumbles upon in a chance encounter at a gala and a kebab shop, where he meets an avatar for everything wrong with the Western world—white supremacy, the Internet, and bad television. From here, the chase begins as our narrator sets off on a mock-tragic quest to root out the wicked forces he thinks are hurting us toward a hellish future.

On its face, this premise and the style in which it is packaged are transparently ridiculous. But ridiculousness is also the motor for much of our world, especially the banter among self-serious people like our narrator. If there is a lasting value to Red Pill, it is in its clever and thoughtful critique of the urge of many creative and purportedly progressive people to make themselves heroes—or at the very least historical subjects—at a moment in which they clearly have so little agency or role to play. To Kunzru’s credit, he recognizes how far this kind of fatalist comedy can take us and makes the most of it. Red Pill, after all, is a bleak novel about how writers aren’t going to save anyone—including themselves.

Born in London in 1969, Kunzru began his career as a novelist tackling topics befitting a Gen X: identity, globalization, and the end of history. His first book, The Impressionist, was a magical-realist-inflected historical novel about British colonialism, and his second, Transmission, was a comedy of errors about tech and immigration. In his 2008 My Revolutions, he began to move toward the recurring themes of his more recent work. A brainy romp about the failures of the British New Left, it marked the beginning of the form his novels now take: frenetic and cinematic high/low hybrids that chart a path through a wide-ranging ideological debate and historical inquiry.

Since the release of My Revolutions, Kunzru has lived in the United States, and his novels have become even more antic, roving, and ambitious. Gods Without Men (2011) was a systems novel set in the dusty locales of the American West that explored many of the taboos and canards in American culture: UFO cultists, meth lab tweaking, sensationalist TV news networks, the mysticism of the stock market, and helicopter parenting. Through his exploration of these realms, Kunzru showed the interconnected yet contradictory nature of belief—secular, extraterrestrial, and spiritual—that sharpened the paranoid style of 2010s America, where anti-vaxxers and free market evangelists existed in the same body politic as progressive liberals.

In his 2017 follow-up, White Tears, Kunzru continued to mine these paradoxes, telling the story of a young white audiophile haunted by a blues song as old as recorded music who ends up on a journey to the South to absolve himself of the sins committed by previous generations of culture vultures. Like Gods Without Men, the book looks at the invidiousness of obsession and spins a sprawling yarn that in this case examines cultural appropriation, the prison-industrial complex, and the racism of the American music industry.

The project of Kunzru’s American novels was to animate and satirize the highly interconnected alienation of life in the United States. In following the foibles of people who strain to find meaning or make positive changes to their lives and families, he illustrated the way many of his new neighbors find themselves at the mercy of forces that individual actors can’t fix. Be it a devilish trading algorithm or a cursed vinyl record, a child lost in the desert or a patrician family that builds prisons, he created networks—through narratives as well as characters—to make a point about the social and economic conditions that crush his narrators’ abortive attempts at more meaningful lives. We are, indeed, all connected, but not necessarily in ways that we like.

Red Pill picks up many of the themes of Kunzru’s American novels. In it he scrutinizes the malignant influence of the Internet on solidarity, love, and care. Though its protagonist lives in America, the novel also represents something of a return to Kunzru’s Europe. This is true in the book’s setting as well as in its interest in finding the place where the freneticism of American digital culture and Old World European racism, nihilism, and apocalyptic thought meet.

Red Pill is perhaps Kunzru’s most overtly political novel. It not only engages the world of electoral politics but also offers an unsparring study of the flaccid state of 21st century liberalism and the intellectual and creative types who hold on to its false promise of order and reason. Kunzru’s narrator disdains reactionaries, but like many good bourgeois writers, he also spurns what he sees as the coarseness of the politics that might be needed to challenge them. “The only political slogan that had ever really moved me,” he tells us, “was Ne travaillez jamais and the attempt to live that out had run into the predictable obstacles.” In conversations with his wife, Rei, he also shows how willing he is to escape into worn-out historical analogies rather than confront the present. “Have you been online lately?” he asks her. “I think this is what Weimar Germany must have felt like.” Then, predictably, he compares himself to Walter Benjamin.

Like many in his milieu, our narrator sees the political and the intellectual as separate strands of
Kunzru offers us a cunning and damning portrait of many of his peers.

If Kunzru were simply to follow his unnamed narrator, the novel would likely crumble under the weight of the latter’s dreary inactivity and proclivity for clichéd pronouncements. But Kunzru also uses the story as a vehicle to explore the world around his protagonist. Through him, we meet ex-Stasi spies, gun-toting porters, alt-right television show producers, and dumpster-diving migrants, and we are given a sharp and desolate picture of 21st century Berlin. Like many of its peer cities, it is a metropole consumed by the contradictions and violence of the powerful—a place where, throughout its history, power has been exerted by the state and where mass media has created a more atomized way of life.

Monika, a maid at the Deuter Center, helps bring this theme to the fore. She and the narrator first meet when she is cleaning his apartment and finds him passed out in the bathroom. He sees her as someone who might have the answers about the dark forces he senses within and outside the walls of the center. She sees him for what he is: an addled writer in the midst of a nervous breakdown. Yet she agrees to have dinner with him at the Chinese restaurant he frequents, where she tells him her life story.

Monika, it turns out, was once a punk drummer and denizen of East Berlin’s bohemian set. In those years, she ran away from home and school and worked in a textile factory, but she soon found herself beset by boredom and anger. She refused to join Free German Youth or to acquiesce to the needs of the “piss schnapps” functionaries who paid for her manual labor. Then she fell in with the punks of Fried- richshain and began huffing paint thinner and moshing at secret shows. Eventually she joined a band led by two women she met and moved into their squat. Just as she was settling into her new life, a Stasi agent tried to coerce her into keeping tabs on her friends. Monika refused, so the Stasi sowed seeds of doubt about her among her social set, planting items at her workplace and in her apartment to make it appear she had become a snitch after all. Left with no other options after her friends turned on her, she became an informant, traveling around East Germany and snooping on punks and dissidents in other cities, until she was abandoned by the Stasi once her usefulness had run its course.

Our narrator sits in the restaurant and takes in the story with as much empathy as he can muster, trying to salvage from this bleakest of lives some kind of connection with his less-bleak but still sad-sack peers—to destroy a person’s sense of self and solidarity, which contrasts with the narrator’s. (“You’re soft and selfish,” she tells him. “The world will chew you up and spit you out.”) Here, Kunzru gives us a real historical subject, an ordinary person whose hardship comes from her attempt at creating community in the face of a state and culture hostile to it.

Agency, probably, is a myth for every-one, writer or regular citizen. But unlike our narrator, Monika long ago has come to terms with this. Meanwhile, the narrator tries to do everything he can to resist this realization. He sees evil everywhere—in television shows, in online forums, at the ballot box—and in the wake of her story, he struggles to overcome it. He’s just as ensnared in a system that wants him to be...
74,000 Acres of Forest Burning

The kids go out for coffee. They arrived at 3 AM and we only have decaf.

They’ve left chimneys in the rubble. Contorted washers and driers.

The blistered street sign. The flaming heart of the redwood.

Even here, the air hangs umber-colored, smoke-thickened.

Ash falls, flaking the bench, the path. It gathers in the veins of leaves, in the spiders’ webs.

Sally carries photos and notebooks from the car and the lace wedding dress she still hasn’t worn.

Max brings a big bowl of heirloom tomatoes and his knives.

Janet bakes an apple galette and cries.

Here we tunnel into the day. Here we shovel the hours.

I walk the neighborhood, crushing a thin crust.

A man sleeps in his car, seat tilted back.

A woman stands at the open door of her van. Inside chickens flutter in cages. She gives them water.

Back home, kibbles in the dog’s bowl.

The sun is neon orange on our kitchen wall.

I pack a tinted photo of my mother, Janet’s silver bracelets, the ceramica we schlepped the length of Italy.

Sally vacuums.

Now she thinks she feels the baby move.

We strain toward the next briefing. The fire’s moving on the ridge. It’s .8 miles from their house.

I cut parsley from the garden, wash off the greasy film.

Bees keep on nuzzling into the blossoms.

An ant carries a broken ant across the patio.

A fire truck. Four men in profile through the windows. They look straight ahead, jaws set.

The dahlias nod their big flame-heads in the breeze that’s picking up.

Breeze is what we don’t want. The maple leaves rustle.
alone and powerless, but he still holds on to a notion of defiant selfhood. For both the narrator and Monika, the institutions that should take care of people have not only failed but participate in perpetuating this lack of care. Our narrator is convinced he can change this.

Monika’s story is one of the rare sections of Red Pill that is more or less earnest and humorless, a kind of step back before the book’s gears of absurdity begin to grind again. When Monika exits from the novel, the narrative moves into overdrive, and the villain is revealed: Anton, the creator of the violent cop show that our narrator has become obsessed with during his time in Berlin. Like him, Anton is a stock character but in a different sense, a composite of the loudmouthed, reactionary cultural ideologues who are hawks salesmen for new tech and fringe ideas—a kind of cross of Richard Spencer, Elon Musk, and Joe Rogan. Anton’s television show, our narrator observes, is “very conventional, but something else was at work, a subtext smuggled into the familiar procedural narrative.” In a twist that strains credulity, that subtext is reactionary philosophy, ranging from the Counter-Enlightenment to nihilism. Blue Lives’ characters quote passages from figures like the French monarchist and counterrevolutionary Joseph de Maistre and the Romanian philosopher of pessimism Emil Cioran, and the show’s creator, we later discover, is an evangelist for a garbled mix of tech-bro accelerationism and old-fashioned race science. Before meeting Anton, the narrator sees Blue Lives as “just an elaborate illustration of some point of view of the writer, something to do with the world’s hopelessness.” After they meet, he sees a darker agenda. Anton could reach millions of people with his work, whereas the narrator could hope to influence only a cloistered few. And while the novel’s title appears only once in the text, its meaning should be pretty obvious by now. The narrator worries that Blue Lives is a gateway drug for the alt-right.

At a gala in a Tony part of West Berlin, the narrator, still reeling from his encounter with Monika, is introduced to Anton, and after a clumsy conversation about Blue Lives, the two end up having dinner at a kebab restaurant, where Anton reveals what he really is: a high-powered troll, a conservative “chad” counterpart for our “lib” narrator.

For the rest of the novel, this reactionary doppelgänger haunts our protagonist. He “lives rent free,” as Anton puts it, in the narrator’s head; Anton torments him in real life, too, stopping by for a visit at the center, where he poses as an acquaintance obsessed with Naziarcana, and later as a shadowy figure in a sprawling, QAnon-style conspiracy theory the narrator imagines taking place in online forums. While the narrator’s life was obviously falling apart before he met Anton, this introduction to his nemesis tilts him toward madness. As someone tasked with interpreting culture, he becomes fixated on the idea that Anton’s show is a primary organ for the violent and callow conditions the narrator sees emerging around him. He is so disturbed by this realization that he abandons his writing and commits himself to combat with Anton and his ideas, following him first to Paris and then to a final showdown in the highlands of Scotland.

“Things don’t go well from the outset. In Paris the narrator attends a speech during which Anton presents his unvarnished vision of the automated future. This new world “belonged to those who could separate themselves out from the herd, intelligence-wise.... Everything important would be done by a small cognitive elite of humans and AIs, working together to self-optimize.” Our now-unhinged narrator blurts out during the Q&A section, “Why are you promoting a future in which some people treat others like raw material? That’s a disgusting vision.” Anton, of course, just shrugs him off:

“I’m sorry it gives you sad feels, but I think it’s how it’s going to be. Some people will have agency and others won’t.... Despite your outraged tone, all you’re doing is describing your own preference, which, when you think about it, is more or less
irrelevant when assessing the truth or falsity of a prediction.

As a character, Anton at times feels hollow, stitched together from the catch-phrases that a hectoring online conservative might lob in a Twitter thread. He’s a bit of an overdetermined symbol, a stand-in for how politics, the economy, and the dark corners of the Internet and entertainment are intertwined. But there is a deeper problem with Anton as a character: We learn very little about his world. While it is true that belief in conspiracy theories is a powerful part of everyday life (QAnon’s growing influence on electoral politics should indicate that), the narrator’s inability to respond effectively to Anton tells us only about the fecklessness of well-intentioned but often daft liberal intellectuals; it tells us very little about why people end up taking that red pill.

Behind each alt-right forum post is a person, but these people go entirely unexamined in Kunzru’s novel. Its discussions of race also seem underdeveloped. Race exists as a theme and is central to Anton’s bizarre articulations, but we learn very little about how the experience of race shapes the narrator’s life. All we know is that Anton holds abhorrent views, that the narrator has mostly admirable liberal ones, and that Anton always wins.

Our narrator doesn’t catch up with Anton in the end. The next time we see his nemesis is on a television screen, in a MAGA hat on election night, when the narrator is back home in Brooklyn. He’s watching the returns with his wife and friends. They’re there to celebrate Hillary Clinton’s impending victory—until, obviously, the unthinkable happens. Here, too, Kunzru twists the knife. While Anton has ridden the right-wing wave to the doorstep of power, our narrator is even more anxious and useless than he was at the book’s opening.

After their friends leave the party dejected, the narrator and his wife spend a sleepless night on their phones. Just as at the start of the novel, the narrator fixates on his family and the world that awaits them. He understands that coping with the present will entail learning something he didn’t understand at the beginning: that agency cannot come through the self in its isolated state. “We must remember,” he tells us, “that we do not exist alone.”

Georgia Anne Muldrow (Priscilla Jimenez)
of such empowerment. Long before being woke was trendy, she and Erykah Badu coined the term in the song “Master Teacher,” from Badu’s 2008 album New Amerykah Part One (4th World War), in which they sang about finding utopia (and themselves) in times of madness. In the early 2000s, as a student at the New School in Manhattan, Muldrow and her friend the saxophonist Lakecia Benjamin talked about wokeness as a way to understand how they could contextualize their music within the political battles of their everyday lives. “Most of the conversation in our friendship was about putting our struggles in our music because that was all we could do,” Muldrow told Pitchfork in 2018. “[We spoke about] trying to find points of power: in your soloing, in your composing. Most of our conversations were about things situated around African liberation all over the world.” To that end, Muldrow, who had been releasing rap and soul music under her own name, has long encouraged Black people to fully embrace their heritage and fight systemic oppression. “We play nice while they stack ’em up kills,” she proclaimed on “Blam,” from her Grammy-nominated 2018 album Overload. “How much we gotta grow before we can learn to defend ourselves?” On “187,” from 2019’s Black Love & War, a collaboration with the rapper Dudley Perkins, she declared, “Death to all oppressors.”

As Jyoti (“light” in Sanskrit), a name given to her by family friend Alice Coltrane, Muldrow creates a wistful mélange of spiritual jazz indebted to the work of the jazz greats. Through contemplative piano and organ solos, thick bass lines, and electronic drums, she crafts a sound equally informed by the past and the present, as if she’s trying to imagine how legends like Coltrane and Nina Simone would fit within the scope of modern-day jazz. Her music is also decisively West Coast; listening to it, one hears the lush Afrocentric influences of Los Angeles stalwarts Horace Tapscott and Charles Mingus.

There’s a certain ease to Muldrow’s work as Jyoti; she borrows and riffson the textures of Coltrane, Tapscott, and Mingus in her jazz-centered arrangements with panache. While she pays homage to her influences, she doesn’t center them to the point of diminishing her own sound. Muldrow remixes two Mingus songs on Mama, You Can Bet! For “Remoanable Lady Geemix,” she brightens his moody arrangement with big electronic drums and darting synths, turning the down-tempo original into a glossy hypnotic thump. On “Fabus Foo Geemix,” she quickens the original with an upbeat drum loop and electric bass, turning the old Mingus cut into a funk-infusedbreakbeat. Equally spacious, scenic, and forward-looking, Mingus and Muldrow use traditional jazz as the basis for something remarkably new and vibrant.

Muldrow was born in Los Angeles to an accomplished musical family, and her current creative direction is rooted in her biography. Her father, Ronald Muldrow, was an acclaimed funk and jazz guitarist known for his work with the saxophonist Eddie Harris. Her mother, Rickie Byars Beckwith, is an experimental vocalist who specializes in New Thought music and used to sing with the jazz musicians Pharoah Sanders and Roland Hanna. Muldrow started composing music at the age of 10. In 2006 the LA-based Stones Throw Records released her first full-length album, Olesi: Fragments of an Earth, a dense collage of hip-hop, Black liberation soul, and free jazz that foreshadowed her work as Jyoti.

Her first two Jyoti albums, the free-jazz-focused Oocotea and the more straight-ahead Denderah, were released in 2010 and 2013, respectively, before the jazz resurgence of recent years. In 2015, amid a nationwide reckoning over the police killings of Black people, the music of certain artists took on a darker, more political tone: Rappers like Kendrick Lamar and musical collaborators like the saxophonist Kamasi Washington responded to the moment with jazz-centered protest music that thrust the genre back into vogue. Muldrow predates Lamar and Washington, even though her Jyoti work was never appreciated to the same extent. “I don’t care how that shit happens. We need breakthroughs,” she once told me. “I’m very thankful that people are making jazz their own and making it live in a unique way for them.” Still, she should be applauded for releasing such resonant jazz at a time when few were looking. Whether it’s bringing the term “woke” to public view or helping shape the current state of jazz, Muldrow’s work represents thinking ahead, waiting for people to catch up with her.

Mama, You Can Bet! is livelier than her previous Jyoti records, leapfrogging swing, ambient, and hip-hop through shorter instrumentals that don’t linger too long. Across the 15-song album, Muldrow doesn’t just nod to the past. On “Ancestral Ducks,” she summons her ancestors through meditative chants. On “This Walk,” in particular, she sounds weary yet resolute, lamenting state violence and how it takes a toll on mental health. Overall, Mama feels more like a beat tape resembling the instrumental projects she’s released under her own name. Whereas those albums display Muldrow’s love of electronic funk and West Coast hip-hop, her Jyoti work reaches back even further, to the late 1960s and early ’70s, when jazz musicians like Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock broadened their sound to include traces of funk and psych-rock. Jyoti celebrates the music of her youth while honoring the relatives and artists who have died. “Black improvised music is my foundation for life,” she told Afropunk’s Timmhotep Aku. “The Jyoti stuff is the root. It’s the square root of my sound.”

That explains “Ra’s Noise (Thukum-bado),” a brassy cut featuring Benjamin, with its rhythmic scatting dedicated to the cosmic jazz pioneer Sun Ra. Its suanting pace and vast arrangement are more restrained than Sun Ra’s sprawl compositions, but I can still hear parts of him in the track, from Benjamin’s shrill saxophone wails to Muldrow’s shouts of “Interplanetary!” in the background. Sun Ra believed that Black people would never find peace on this planet and should find refuge elsewhere in the universe. “Ra’s Noise,” in turn, seems to score a voyage to deep space. “Orgone” similarly finds Muldrow longing for another place, far from America’s systemic racism. “How I dream of living in Africa,” she sings over sparse piano chords. “I wanna go back, way back to the time when I was free.”

Of course, a declaration like this isn’t surprising from her: She’s long sought this kind of liberation for herself and her people. Now that social unrest and police brutality have reached a feverish clip, Muldrow’s calls for Black freedom ring louder than ever.
Letters

L’Union Fait la Force

Thank you for the stunning article about Haiti and the Bahamas [“After Dorian: No Exit” by Sonia Shah, October 5/12]. Haitians deserve to be acknowledged as great revolutionaries, miraculously kicking out the French, and—until conquered by our own “great country”—leading egalitarian lives close to the land. Along with climate justice, we desperately need working folks to stick together; that is what it will take to turn the world upside down, because we cannot live without labor.

Michele Marlowe

A Familiar Playbook

Re “Swamp Thing” by Bob Moser [October 5/12]: Please, this will be a Mitch McConnell wipeout.

Funny how the Democratic National Committee funded Amy McGrath before the Kentucky Democratic primary, with solicitations as if she were the only one to take on “Moscow Mitch” and ignoring Charles Booker and Mike Broihier, two progressives espousing policies similar to Bernie Sanders’s.

Support another DINOcrat neoliberal candidate like before? Those worked out so well. The same playbook is being used in the presidential campaign. Marvelous.

Edward Thompson

The Fine Print

I’m a subscriber of 71 years, and this is the best design in a long time [“Not Just a New Look” by D.D. Guttenplan, October 5/12]. Thanks for scrapping the TMI look in favor of more penetrating analysis.

Gloria Sparrow

As a longtime reader, subscriber, and occasional contributor, I find the print too small to read, so I missed out on reading new pieces by Michael Kazin and Katha Pollitt and one on Orlando Patterson. Make it more legible, or I quit the journal, with much regret.

Jules Chametzky

Congratulations on the new look. I like it a lot better than the old one. But I am disappointed that, having gone to all the trouble to change your style, you chose to maintain the tiny point size for normal text. As a 75-year-old who has been a steady subscriber for decades, I am probably typical of your print audience. My eyes can no longer easily read the small print without fatigue. Your younger readers probably do their reading online on their device screens and can adjust the text size as they please. We older print readers don’t have that luxury. Couldn’t you increase the size? I canceled my subscription to Jacobin because the point size is too small. The sleek layout and imagery don’t matter to me if I can’t read the articles. I hope I don’t have to cancel The Nation as well.

David Schonfeld

Please Don’t Go!

Editor’s note: Our redesigned pages have the same main font and type size (Janson, 9.5 points) as before. If reading online is an option for you, a digital version of all stories in our print edition is available to subscribers at TheNation.com.

Comment drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

Why real climate justice is so hard.

Drowned Saved

The and the

DANIEL JUDT

SONIA SHAH

ORLANDO PATTERSON’S

DANIEL JUDT

MITCH’S

BOB MOSER

PITCH

MITCH’S

PITCH

Bob Moser

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Melissa Harris-Perry & Dorian Warren

Lights are blinking. Alarms are blaring. The dashboard of our democracy is warning us that it is time to check our systems. That’s exactly what Melissa Harris-Perry, the Maya Angelou presidential chair at Wake Forest University and a longtime Nation contributor, and Dorian Warren, the president of Community Change and a Nation board member, are setting out to do with their new Nation podcast, System Check.

Unapologetically rooted in Black culture, politics, and intellectual traditions, System Check is a weekly show that asks important questions, offers provocative commentary, and welcomes insights from unexpected sources. Subscribe wherever you get your podcasts for new episodes every Friday.

MHP: Do you remember when we met?

DW: It was 1999, and we were both attending the American Political Science Association annual meeting in Atlanta. I was in the midst of my PhD at Yale, and you had just finished up at Duke. We had a heated discussion about whether it was possible to use the academic field of political science as a justice tool in Black communities.

MHP: That was 21 years ago, which means our friendship is now old enough to legally drink.

DW: We have been doing that since Day One!

MHP: We have been drinking, talking, writing, and arguing for a very long time, which is what has made this friendship such an enjoyable journey. It is why I am thrilled to be cohosting a new podcast with you.

DW: There’s nobody else with whom I’d want to cohost System Check. It’s going to do what we do best: bring together layered political analysis, a unique roster of guests, and meaningful cultural connections—all with the freedom that comes with our own unfiltered podcast.

MHP: Of course, even this freedom is relative. Did we ever get final word about whether we can say “fucked up”? We are still part of systems with rules. And those systems are exactly what motivates this new project of ours. Checking the system is not just an intellectual exercise. It’s about how it feels to try to live and breathe and be and thrive inside of broken systems.

DW: Wait, are the systems broken? Or are they working exactly the way they were designed?

MHP: Fair point. We can say our system of criminal punishment accomplishes what it was designed to do: create a permanent Black underclass subject to constant surveillance and control.

DW: Right, and our systems of market-based health care and child care or segregated public schools or monopolistic labor markets are all designed in ways that deepen inequality and limit access. So if inequality is designed, we can reimagine and redesign systems of freedom. But this doesn’t just happen.

MHP: Right. We can’t forget the long history of these powerful systems being put in check by the very people they were designed to crush. Ida B. Wells checked the system of lynching, Fannie Lou Hamer checked the system of disenfranchisement. John Lewis checked the system of Jim Crow.

DW: The Movement for Black Lives is checking state violence. The Dreamers are checking an unjust immigration system. Mothers of color are checking an inadequate child care system. Young climate justice activists are checking the rapacious fossil fuel companies.

MHP: Not “rapacious”! You are still such a nerd. Are you going to use big words on the podcast, too?

DW: More important than big words, let’s commit to finding big ideas, the ideas that help us find a little more freedom, a little more space, a little more humanity within the systems and that allow us to dismantle and—dare I say it?—reconstruct them.

MHP: I feel like this is where we started 21 years ago—trying to find the big ideas that matter and can be useful. And the best part is, because we are having this conversation together, I know it will also be a lot of fun.
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