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The Nation

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Protest works. If not for the demonstrations over DAPL, it is likely that Biden wouldn’t have opposed Keystone.

The digital version of this issue is available to all subscribers April 17 at TheNation.com

The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is printed 26 times a year (two issues in January, February, March, April, June, July, August, September, October, and December; and three issues in May and November by The Nation Company, LLC © 2021 in the USA by The Nation Company, LLC, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018; (212) 209-5400. Washington Bureau: Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 546-2239. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Subscription orders, changes of address, and all subscription inquiries: The Nation, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505; or call 1-800-333-8536. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to Bleuchip International, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement No. 40642608. When ordering a subscription, please allow four to six weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. Back issues available online for $6.99 plus S&H from shop.thenation.com. If the post office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. The Nation is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Nation, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505. Printed in the USA.
NE OF JOE BIDEN’S FIRST ACTS IN THE OVAL OFFICE WAS TO HANG A PORTRAIT OF Franklin Roosevelt, removing Donald Trump’s choice of Andrew Jackson. Then—against all expectations—he set out to meet the challenges of this FDR moment. In his first 100 days, Biden has shown he intends to marshal the resources of government to address the “cascading crises” we face with the most ambitious agenda in half a century.

Biden began with a barrage of executive orders reversing some of Trump’s follies—ending the Muslim travel ban, rejoining the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accord, pulling the plug on the border wall. He also moved aggressively to take on the pandemic and to address the climate crisis, naming John Kerry as special envoy for climate with a seat on the National Security Council and announcing an April climate summit.

Biden’s $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan was passed by Congress under the arcane reconciliation process with no Republican votes. Hailed by Bernie Sanders as the “most significant piece of legislation to benefit working families in the modern history of this country,” the package provides $1,400 in direct payments, as well as extended unemployment benefits, support for rapid vaccination, resources to help open schools, aid for state and local governments, and a dramatic expansion of health insurance subsidies. It also creates a universal basic income for poor and middle-class families with children, which would cut child poverty in half. At about 9 percent of current GDP, it dwarfs FDR’s and Obama’s stimulus packages and will supercharge the recovery.

Next up for passage is the $2.25 trillion, eight-year American Jobs Plan, which Biden described as a “once-in-a-generation investment in America,” with billions of dollars for electric vehicles, broadband, clean water, housing, and the largest investment in nondefense research and development ever. With interest rates low, infrastructure investment will more than pay for itself, but Biden’s plan also boosts the corporate tax rate and imposes a minimum global tax on multinationals.

That will be paired (and is likely to be combined) with a $2 trillion American Families Plan to support the care economy, including childcare, eldercare, paid family leave, and more, which would also be accompanied by raising taxes on the rich.

Promising a trade policy that works for working people, Biden has ordered a review of supply chains and has extended “Buy America” provisions on federal contracting. Announcing “I am a union man,” he made an unprecedented appeal on behalf of the unions trying to organize Amazon.

While Biden’s cabinet appointments have largely been establishment figures, strong reformers have been chosen for several key subcabinet positions, pointing to a potential revival of consumer and environmental protections and antitrust enforcement. On judicial appointments, Biden has promised diversity not only in race but in professions, looking to draw from legal aid, civil rights, poverty, and criminal defense lawyers.

If enacted and strengthened—a big if—Biden’s agenda would represent a profound break with the conservative era of the past 40 years. As a career politician with a history of tacking to conservative winds, Biden is a most unlikely captain to chart this course.

The crises forced his hand—just as the Great Depression forced FDR’s. The calamitous failure of the conservative era also left an opening. With labor unions weakened, progressive movements—Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the Poor People’s Campaign, 350.org, the Dreamers—pointed the way. Sanders won the battle of ideas, if not the nomination. Progressive policy institutes provided ammunition for the debate and alternative ideas, and progressive legislators in Congress have growing clout.

It helps that the agenda of the Democratic left—Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, a $15-an-hour minimum wage, curbing Wall Street, strengthening labor unions, ending police brutality—is broadly popular, as are Biden’s early initiatives.

Trump also helped by exposing the bankruptcy of the conservative establishment. His indictment of America’s failed trade strategy and
his own $2 trillion pandemic recovery plan set the stage for Biden, just as Jimmy Carter’s embrace of deregulation, privatization, military spending, and fiscal austerity presaged the Reagan era.

Will Biden’s intentions come to fruition? The obstacles are formidable. The biggest question is whether he can build support by helping people understand the fix we are in: how we got here, who is to blame, and what must be done.

In his first inaugural address, FDR laid out a clear case for action and claimed the authority to act on his own should Congress fail to move. Ronald Reagan used his inaugural address to announce that “government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.” His staff deployed his acting experience to stage events that captivated viewers.

Biden, in contrast, has been notable mostly for his absence. He has yet to schedule a joint address to Congress and has had just one press conference and scant social media presence. Yet it’s hard to drive a change in direction without repeatedly making a compelling case for it.

Roosevelt was elected with a sweeping mandate—and large majorities in Congress. Reagan took out an incumbent president and picked up a majority in the Senate. In both cases, the election results intimidated any opposition.

Biden comes to office having racked up more votes than any president in US history and the greatest margin ever over an incumbent, but Democrats lost seats in the House and barely eked out a tie in the Senate. Republicans’ gains at the state level position them to pass voter suppression laws and draw gerrymandered districts to help them take back both chambers. Meanwhile, the mighty right-wing media Wurlitzer continues to blast out propaganda.

The result is an opposition emboldened to obstruct. Republicans didn’t give Biden a single vote for his pandemic rescue plan. Mitch McConnell dismissed his infrastructure bill as a “liberal wish-list.” Republicans will torpedo anything that can’t be done with 51 Senate votes—and if they do take back the House or the Senate, Biden’s bold agenda will be dead in the water.

Moreover, one of the most exciting parts of his American Rescue Plan—the universal basic income for poor and middle-class families—expires after a year. It needs to be made permanent. Biden’s green investments—by far the largest ever proposed by any president—fall far short of what he promised during his campaign. Without structural changes, the massive subsidies for the Affordable Care Act are simply multibillion-dollar handouts to the insurance companies.

Biden’s foreign policy also impedes any transformation. While the president wisely moved to extend the New START nuclear weapons treaty with Russia, this has been overshadowed by military posturing in the South China Sea and on Russia’s borders. Biden promised to end the forever wars, but he is backing away from Trump’s commitment to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan on May 1. A US return to the Iranian nuclear deal is stalled, even as Biden authorized a strike against an alleged Iranian-backed militia in Syria.

In his first budget, Biden made no significant reductions in military spending—now greater in comparable dollars than at the height of the Cold War. Inevitably, our global commitments will generate unexpected crises, consuming even more attention and resources.

Progressives have witnessed false dawns before. For the promise of Biden’s early days to be fulfilled, activists and movements must drive the change. Progressive leaders in Congress are already pushing the administration. But they will need help to educate Americans about the failures of the conservative era and the rigging of the economy. Systemic change will be sustained only if movements continue to grow and mobilize.

The argument is joined. This time, progressives must make certain we win it.
We invite journalists everywhere to join us. The climate emergency demands nothing less.
"The truth is," wrote Lord Byron to his publisher in 1821, "that in these days the grand 'primum mobile' of England is cant; cant political, cant poetical, cant religious, cant moral; but always cant, multiplied through all the varieties of life." In the United States in 2021, we have a great deal of cant, but the word itself isn’t well-known. Cant is the false coin of sincerity.

In a country where few literate persons can name three living poets, “cant poetical” will hardly be thought a major annoyance. On the other hand, we have plenty of “cant religious.” From the rafters of 1,500 megachurches and across the AM dial in the Bible Belt, it draws out everlasting prayers for your soul (“Jesus is your personal friend”), but religious cant has never been the comfort food of the respectable persons who guide the culture of CNN and NPR, The New York Times and The New Yorker. It is chiefly with them that we are concerned.

Cant words or phrases are close neighbors of cliché. They offer a reassuring patter, somewhere between sound and sense, mild exhortation and sing-along, the audible cement of agreeability. You may define cant by relation to its obverse, rant. When, after riding down the Trump Tower escalator in 2015, Donald Trump said of Mexican immigrants, “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists,” what he was doing was rant. When, the year before, President Barack Obama told the graduating class at West Point, “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being,” that was cant.

Samuel Johnson’s third listed meaning of the word, in his Dictionary of the English Language, captured the relevant mood: “A whining pretension to goodness, in formal and affected terms.” No matter how trite and saccharine, the words go down easily, but they are not innocent. Between cant and hypocrisy, said William Hazlitt, there is a family resemblance. If hypocrisy means professing to believe what you don’t in fact believe, cant is affecting to admire a thing a great deal more than you actually do: “the voluntary overcharging or prolongation of a real sentiment.” A few specimens follow:

§ Narrative. “Democrats will lose control of the narrative if the numbers at the border keep growing.” The descendant of “story” and “scenario,” “narrative” came in when the handlers caught a far-off suggestion from literary theory; another source was the therapeutic conceit that your life can only be understood as a narrative. “The narrative” may now apply to every angle or approach of a partisan strategy, conferring on it the sort of fictive unity that guides an epic poem, a novel, or a historical “grand narrative.” The usage claims sophistication for the user and blurs the line between truth and sophistry.

§ Conversation. The word has by now almost supplanted “discussion,” “argument,” “disputation,” and “debate.” A soft insinuation protects it—if it’s just a conversation, why would anyone avoid taking part? But you can’t raise a challenge without tipping it toward argument or disputation. On political, moral, educational, and civil-society subject matter, “conversation” supports the serial return to a limited range of topics or emphases; the propaganda element is justified by the democratic feel of the word itself. The conversation is always open.

§ Silo. Over time, this has picked up a pejorative sense, maybe from school-of-management usage. Sectors of a corporate organization shouldn’t be “siloes,” their knowledge segregated from one another. Marketing has a lot to learn from employee relations; so does HR from tech. The academic prestige of interdisciplinary work brought contempt to the idea of departmental silos that hoard their expertise (“All culture is political, and all politics is cultural, so why do we put them in separate silos?”). Relevant association: granary silos, in which foodstuff is preserved rather than shared with the needy.

§ Weaponize. “The Republican Party has weaponized free speech.” That would be literally true if all defenders of the First Amendment became apologists for the wildest expansions of the Second Amendment. Otherwise, it is a cheap of way of saying that speech I don’t like constitutes a physical assault. “Weaponize,” in other contexts, works as shorthand for a rhetorical analysis that would require many words; it obviates the necessary explanation by assuring readers that the thing is very wrong. After all, it’s a weapon.

§ Toxic. Another word whose sense migrated from the literally poisonous to the metaphorically unpleasant (“like poison”) and then back to the literal (“I’m sorry, that whole way I went there”). Exit the debate, enter the conversation.

§ Reckoning. Drawn from agonistic pop fiction and film—was there an Exorcist 7?: The Reckoning?—and imported to activist journalism in the Trump years, this word for the bill at a restaurant was initially transferred to
The debt of a guilty nation to an oppressed race; it is now applied in smaller settings, often with help from “collective.” An authoritative and somber word; the mainstream media won’t give it up lightly.

§ Existential threat. Popularized by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to raise the stakes and the temperature (without fact or argument) in his campaign to get the US to destroy the military capabilities of Iran. Now applied to budget cuts.

§ Who we are as a people. Cant in the old sense—religious, moral, political, and poetical, all at once. Equally at home in the speeches of Obama and the obiter dicta of the JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon.

§ The right side of history. A cheer for the home team, as if history were your personal friend. Precedently favored by the instigators of the Thousand-Year Reich and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

Why should any of this trouble us? The reason is that these slack verbal indulgences only pretend to serve as innocuous filler. They create a tacit prejudice, a vaporous presumption of instant concurrence, in an area where honest thinking would have to pursue the subject much longer. They signal inclusiveness and a cost-free conformity, while brushing aside every plausible objection to the suitability of a metaphor, the justice of a comparison, the hyperbolic nature of a given claim.

You may say the examples above don’t deserve the name of cant, which wants whole sentences and paragraphs to breathe in. That is an honorable purist objection, true as far as it goes. Still, these atomic particles illustrate the verbal medium of the chattering class in one important subspecies, the jargon of knowingness. Consequential meaning-markers in the high corporate world, they are rarely blocked from the discourse (“discourse”! We almost forgot you!) of the social sciences, the div schools, and the law schools—those shiny, slippery word-fruit that we pluck, eat, and send into the world without a second thought.

Justice for George Floyd?

Despite the extraordinarily clear evidence of police misconduct, a conviction in this case is far from assured.

EN MONTHS AFTER GEORGE FLOYD DIED WITH DEREK CHAUVIN’S KNEE ON HIS NECK, JURORS IN CHAUVIN’S MURDER TRIAL WERE TOLD THAT THE FORMER MINNESOTA POLICE OFFICER KNELTED ON FLOYD’S BODY FOR NINE MINUTES AND 29 SECONDS—43 SECONDS LONGER THAN PREVIOUSLY REPORTED. PROSECUTOR JERRY BLACKWELL NOTED THAT DURING THE FIRST FOUR MINUTES AND 45 SECONDS, FLOYD SHOUTED 27 TIMES THAT HE COULD NOT BREATHE; IN THE 53 SECONDS THAT FOLLOWED, FLOYD WENT “COMPLETELY SILENT AND VIRTUALLY MOTIONLESS” AS HE EXPERIENCED SEIZURES; AND FOR THREE MINUTES AND 51 SECONDS, DESPITE ONE OF HIS OWN OFFICERS INFORMING HIM THAT FLOYD HAD NO PULSE, CHAUVIN REMAINED ATOP HIS UNRESPONSIVE BODY. FOR THE ENTIRETY OF THE NINE MINUTES AND 29 SECONDS THAT THE DEFENSE AND PROSECUTION AGREE THAT CHAUVIN KEPT FLOYD PINNED BENEATH HIS KNEE, FLOYD WAS NOT ONLY UNARMED BUT HANDBARRED. “HE WAS COMPLETELY IN THE CONTROL OF THE POLICE,” BLACKWELL SAID IN HIS OPENING STATEMENT. “HE WAS DEFENSELESS.”

Chauvin’s defense team is, essentially, charged with making the unjustifiable seem justified. By convincing jurors that the near 10 minutes Chauvin spent leaning his full weight into Floyd’s neck was a “reasonable use of force” applied by a “reasonable police officer,” it hopes to create reasonable doubt about his guilt. Defense attorney Eric Nelson and a dozen cocounsel are being paid more than $1 million by Minnesota’s largest police union. (Chauvin was fired by the Minneapolis Police Department after footage of Floyd’s killing spread across social media, and several officers are testifying on behalf of the prosecution.) Their apparent strategy? To put witnesses, first responders, and Floyd himself, rather than Chauvin, on trial.

Nelson’s case leans into the fallacy of superior Black strength and what the neuroscientist Carl L. Hart labels the “drug-crazed Negro” myth. In his opening statement, Nelson compared Floyd’s 6-foot, 3-inch frame with Chauvin’s “5-foot-9” height, a contrast meant to paint Chauvin as helplessly dwarfed by Floyd. Because of that discrepancy in size, in tandem with Floyd’s “ingestion of methamphetamine and fentanyl,” Nelson claimed, “three Minneapolis police officers could not overcome the strength of Mr. Floyd.”

Studies show that white people believe Black people are inherently more aggressive, larger, more threatening, and less susceptible to pain than white people, stereotypes that make victimhood off-limits to Black people. Researchers have found that white Americans believe Black folks are “more aggressive, larger, more threatening, and less susceptible to pain than white people, stereotypes that make victimhood off-limits to Black people. Researchers have found that white Americans believe Black folks are “more aggressive, larger, more threatening, and less susceptible to pain than white people,” Nelson wrote. (Chauvin was fired by the Minneapolis Police Department after footage of Floyd’s killing spread across social media, and several officers are testifying on behalf of the prosecution.) Their apparent strategy? To put witnesses, first responders, and Floyd himself, rather than Chauvin, on trial.

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GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION
WITH BILL MILLER

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

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

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we are quite literally superhuman. What choice did the Minneapolis Police Department have but to dispatch four officers with guns to arrest one man accused of paying for cigarettes with a counterfeit $20 bill? What choice, we are supposed to ask ourselves, did Chauvin have but to apply the full weight of his body against Floyd?

Chauvin invoked this fable himself. “We’ve got to control this guy because he’s a sizable guy,” he told a witness. “Looks like he’s probably on something.” His words echo those used nearly three decades ago by a member of the Los Angeles police gang that brutally beat Rodney King. “In my mind, he had exhibited this hulk-like strength,” Sgt. Stacey C. Koon informed a jury, “which I had come to associate with PCP.” (A drug test later showed no signs of PCP in King’s bloodstream.) Darren Wilson, the officer whom a jury declined to charge in the 2014 murder of Michael Brown, described himself as feeling “like a 5-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan” in his court testimony. “That’s just how big he felt and how small I felt.” Betty Shelby, the ex-Oklahoma cop acquitted in 2017 after fatally shooting Terence Crutcher as he walked away from her with his hands up, focused on the PCP found in Crutcher’s system and what she labeled his “zombie-like” state. “In the end, he caused his own [death],” she claimed in a TV interview. “This is the exact same playbook they used in my brother’s trial,” Tiffany Crutcher recently told CNN about the Chauvin defense. “You can have police killings on video and they still get away with it.”

Nelson is using other outlandish claims against those taking the stand for the prosecution. He suggested that the crowd of witnesses to Floyd’s murder, who grew so “upset” and “angry” that they were “screaming” at the officers to release him, caused the police officer “to divert the attention from the care of Mr. Floyd to the threat growing in front of him.” He again evoked the image of the threatening Black man by implying that witness Donald Williams, a mixed-martial-arts fighter who told jurors he warned Chauvin that he was using a “blood choke” on Floyd, had contributed to Floyd’s death by growing “angrier and angrier” at the incident unfolding before him. “Police know what to say and what to tell a jury and what to tell a judge to make those folks believe that they were reasonably in fear,” Kate Levine, a professor at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, told The New York Times last year. “Even if there are other witnesses, those witnesses just don’t get the same amount of credibility determination from prosecutors, judges, juries.”

The case being made is that the fault for Floyd’s death lies anywhere but with his killers: Derek Chauvin and the three cops charged with aiding and abetting in Floyd’s murder. The witnesses include four teenagers who testified that they felt guilty about being unable to stop Floyd’s murder and a 9-year-old who described being “sad and kinda mad” at seeing cops “hurting” Floyd. But it is Chauvin and his seemingly remorseless codefendants alone who are culpable for ending Floyd’s life. The defense is taking victim-blaming to literally unbelievable levels. And yet, if only one juror buys the defense’s line, Chauvin and the other officers may walk. We’ve seen this before. And it rarely ends with justice.

“For most of American history, killing Black people was not considered a criminal act,” Madiba K. Dennie, a racial and gender justice attorney, told me. “Things get difficult when we ask the criminal legal system to do something it wasn’t meant to do. Justice would require a fundamental transformation of that system.”
At the end of March, US Representative Mark Pocan got into a pissing match with Amazon about restroom breaks and availability for workers—a contentious issue in the Alabama union-organizing drive the corporation eventually thwarted. After Pocan criticized Amazon, the company attacked the former Congressional Progressive Caucus cochair, claiming his facts were wrong. Actually, it was Amazon that was wrong, and it had to apologize. Pocan immediately refocused attention on working conditions in Amazon’s warehouses. That’s typical of how the Wisconsin Democrat—a dues-paying member of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades who recently spearheaded an effort to form a House labor caucus—fights for worker rights. I interviewed Pocan about battling Amazon and working to pass the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act of 2021.

JN: How does your union membership inform your service in Congress?

MP: About half of my colleagues in Congress are millionaires. I am not. And I think coming from a working-class background growing up, and being myself someone who did the work in my business and with my hands and did the printing and everything else, I appreciate and understand the actions that the federal government can take and how they affect workers.

JN: You often take on corporate power. Were you surprised that Amazon was so aggressive in attacking you—and the union cause?

MP: For them to argue about whether or not some of their workers have to urinate in bottles because of the schedules they’re put on, to fight on a point like that—which could so easily be disproven—was really a huge miscalculation. It shows the arrogance of corporations that get too big.

After a week of them getting pummeled by both their workers in the warehouses as well as their drivers—showing pictures of bottles with their urine, talking about the fact that they can’t take bathroom breaks, talking about the conditions—they finally had to cave. But rather than caving to their employees and admitting they have to improve the working conditions, they decided to apologize to the policy-maker, which again showed the tone-deafness of a giant megacorporation.

Really, in many ways, it’s a sign of the future. If you’re going to have a continued consolidation of industries, you’re going to have continued Amazon-like behavior unless there’s the appropriate pushback.

“Clearly their efforts were successful in taking away workers’ voices.”
Americans are itching to pack up and set off. Enduring Covid-19 lockdowns and quarantines has been arduous for many would-be globetrotters. After all, it has starved their Facebook pages of content and denied them opportunities to boast about where they’ve just been and where they’re heading next. Sure, Covid-19 may have killed some people’s loved ones, but spare a thought for the Instagram influencers without a means to convey their worldliness.

It is no surprise, then, that even though the pandemic hasn’t ended, the easing of travel restrictions has long-suffering American tourists jumping back into cramped airplanes to alight in distant destinations. The numbers testify to this: Easter weekend saw an 800 percent increase in air travel over the same time last year.

But what is good for the American tourist is terrible for the planet. At the height of the pandemic, the grounding of air travel in 2020 led to a 60 percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions from aviation. One round-trip flight across the Atlantic emits about as much carbon dioxide as heating an average American home with natural gas for a year. And Americans are disproportionately to blame. Prior to the pandemic year, the United States, with just over 4 percent of the world’s population, was responsible for 24 percent of all emissions from passenger flights. And within the US, just 12 percent of adults take 68 percent of the flights. With planes once again ferrying Americans to ostensibly exotic locales, tourists are back to mucking up the planet in the middle of a climate disaster.

One way to prevent this is to stigmatize needless air travel. Several climate activists, including Sweden’s Greta Thunberg, have decided to forgo flying as a selfish activity that worsens the very crisis they’re trying to avert. In Sweden, the hypocrisy of traveling frequently by air while also claiming to care about the planet has birthed the flygskam (flight shame) movement, which uses peer pressure to embarrass those who gratuitously board planes.

America needs its own flight shame movement. A recent survey shows that 88 percent of Americans intend to travel in the next six months. Despite the ravages of Covid-19, only 33 percent say that the coronavirus will significantly impact their travel decisions—the lowest number since the pandemic began. While the elite tourist should be the primary target, even those who aren’t racking up frequent flier miles should avoid unnecessary air travel.

To justify their jaunts, American tourists will go on and on about the opportunity to experience new cultures, meet new people, and contribute to the local economy of waiters, cab drivers, and tour guides. But none of these benefits cancel out the impact that the emissions from their flights are having on the environment. There are better ways to help people in other countries. It is no small irony that even as the cavalier American tourist can burn jet fuel to dash off to this place or that, US borders remain shut to the refugees who have walked thousands of miles from homes and habitats destroyed by climate change.

Once upon a time, when people traveled infrequently and stayed at places for long periods of time, it made more sense to think of tourism as a moral good, as something that could actually accomplish its stated goals of meeting people and learning about new cultures without unduly harming the earth. In those days, nobody zipped off to Vail for a weekend of skiing or to Paris for a four-day birthday trip, the sort of travel that’s common among today’s wealthy cosmopolites. As climate change foments weather disasters and threatens to make one in three plant and animal species extinct, the planet can no longer accommodate such indulgent sightseeing.

All of this is a reason either to consider experiencing other places and cultures remotely or to use alternative, if slower, means of travel. In Sweden and elsewhere, people have turned to trains, even for overnight journeys. Thunberg’s much-touted boat trip across the Atlantic to the United States was undertaken to demonstrate the feasibility of such alternatives. Pre-pandemic travel habits must never be allowed to return. American tourists who fly on a whim and imagine that their recycling efforts and use of cloth bags make up for the huge costs they impose on the climate should be taken to task. Saving the planet requires that we stop gazing and gawking at travel blogs and vacation selfies. Instead, everyone who cares about the environment should shame those who clamber onto an airplane every chance they get.

Rafia Zakaria is the author of The Upstairs Wife: An Intimate History of Pakistan (Beacon, 2015), Veil (Bloomsbury, 2017), and Against White Feminism (W.W. Norton, forthcoming).
People cycle past a burning barricade that protesters erected during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon’s Tamwe Township in Myanmar on April 3. A Thailand-based human rights group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, reported that the military has killed at least 550 people since overthrowing the civilian government on February 1.

Matt Gaetz

We don’t know yet what fate awaits The MAGA warrior, young Matt Gaetz, Who’s had a few unusual dates That, proudly, he corroborates With nudie shots to show his mates. As DOJ investigates If minors came from other states, Matt Gaetz’s pal cooperates. Matt’s party’s silence indicates That hating Gaetz predominates In Washington, which celebrates The sight of Gaetz in dire straits.

Smoke Signals

**By the Numbers**

- **44%** Portion of both Latino and Black renters who reported housing insecurity from April to December 2020, up 11 percentage points for Latino renters and 7 points for Black renters since 2019
- **1 IN 3** Proportion of renters who were housing insecure during an average week of the pandemic
- **47%** Portion of renters who were behind on rent who said it was very or somewhat likely that they would be evicted in the next two months
- **31%** Portion of households in Mississippi that experienced housing insecurity during the pandemic, the highest state-level rate in the nation
- **26** Average number of months families wait for rental assistance

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**Calvin Trillin**

**DeadlinePoet**

María Jesús Mora
American journalism’s role in promoting racist terror.

BY CHANNING GERARD JOSEPH
FOUNDED MY GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER ON MY MOTHER’S side listed for sale in an old newspaper advertisement: “Stephen, 50, sawyer and sail.” The announcement, headlined with the word “SLAVES” in bold capital letters, stated that he was to be auctioned off at Maspero’s Coffee-house in New Orleans on February 3, 1820, along with the other property that had belonged to Francis Cousin, a wealthy white plantation owner in St. Tammany Parish. Cousin died the previous year, and the executor of his large estate placed a paid announcement in the January 4, 1820, edition of the Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser that all of the planter’s earthly possessions would be sold to the highest bidder: the 4,000-acre farm, the furniture, the two sailing ships, and the 760 heads of horned cattle. Among the “moveables and immoveables” in the estate’s inventory were more than three dozen Black human beings—children, women, and men—including my ancestor, Stephen (or Etienne, as he was most often called in French-speaking Louisiana).

For the benefit of potential buyers, the ad provided a short description of each of the enslaved people in Cousin’s estate. They included: “Hector, a black lad of 14 and very sprightly,” “Charlottine, a black wench of about 32, and her three children, Cora, 6 years, Delphina, 3 years, Corma, 11 months old,” and “Friday, 40; woodcutter,” who “has had his thigh broke when he was young, but he can work.”

Stephen and the people sold with him spent their lives laboring without compensation from sunrise to sunset six days a week, solely for the economic benefit and comfort of their masters. They risked whippings or death if they attempted to escape, yet as they stepped up to the auction block before potential bidders, each of them knew—if they were old enough to be aware of what was happening—that they could be sold to a master who would permanently separate them from their loved ones. Prospective buyers looked in their mouths, felt their bodies—even gropped the breasts of women and girls—as they inspected the “merchandise.”

Like most Black Americans, I trace my lineage to people who were kidnapped from Africa and forced to serve white masters, generation after generation. Over the years, I have made innumerable trips to parish courthouses and archives, and I have spent countless hours poring over records. Because of this work, I am fortunate to have been able to track down the forgotten names of a few of my shackled forebears. Stephen is one I have confirmed because he was the patriarch of a family of sailors in southern Louisiana, but in all likelihood several of the others listed in Cousin’s inventory were Stephen’s relatives—and thus also my ancestors.

As both a journalist and a descendant of slaves, these historical injustices are personal for me. I want my forebears to receive their proper respect at last. I also want my profession to acknowledge and atone for its racist roots. Yet of the 20 companies I reached out to for this piece, representing dozens of newspapers, only a handful saw fit to even acknowledge—let alone apologize for—their complicity in America’s racial terror.

Racism in the Media

THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON PRINT JOURNALISM, FOR SEVERAL REASONS. FIRST, ALTHOUGH SCHOLARS BELIEVE THAT EARLY US RADIO JOURNALISTS ANNOUNCED THE TIME AND LOCATION OF LYNCHINGS, FEW RECORDINGS OF THOSE BROADCASTS HAVE SURVIVED. IN 1936, THE OMaha station WOW sparked protest when it broadcast the slavery-era song “Run, Nigger, Run” for six weeks each Saturday after midnight (presumably to terrorize Black motorists on the streets after dark). We know of the incident now in large part because of its coverage in the newspapers.

Second, although there are countless instances of racism in broadcast media—from Amos ‘n’ Andy and Mickey Mouse to the white supremacist TV ads for Democratic US Senate candidate J.B. Stoner in 1972—the most numerous and egregious examples come from the print press, which in many cases profited not only from offensive or condescending language and depictions but also from the traffic in and murder of human beings.

Profting From Slavery

There were a handful of long-lived newspapers that did not publish ads for slaves. But many of them championed racist violence in other ways.

Anti-Blackness has been at the heart of American society since this nation’s founding. It was codified in the original US Constitution, which stated that an enslaved person would count as three-fifths of a white person for the purposes of taxation and representation. Two decades into the 21st century, more than a century and a half since the legal abolition of slavery, Black Americans continue to experience the long-term impact of slavery and other forms of racist terror—much of it promoted and perpetuated by the news media.

Newspapers Defended Slavery

There are a few examples, mostly in the North and West, of long-lived newspapers that, as far as I can tell, did not publish ads for slaves, including The New York Times. But even many of those papers championed racist violence in other ways, including defending the legality of slavery, encouraging mob lynchings, advocating racial inequality, celebrating segregation, and characterizing Black people and other people of color as brutes, rapists, and other types of criminals. Disgracefully, these publications include some of the country’s most revered: The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Cincinnati Enquirer, The Courier-Journal (Louisville, Ky.), The Post and Courier (Charleston, S.C.), The Birmingham News (Ala.), and The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, to name just a few.

In a September 24, 1851, editorial, The New York Times condemned the white abolitionist William L. Chaplin as a man “of diseased sympathies” for helping two enslaved people in Washington, D.C., escape from their master, Robert Toombs, a Georgia congressman and future Confederate secretary of state. The editorial stated, “This man, Chaplin, through some process of reasoning or other, believes it to be his duty to aid slaves in gaining their liberty; and addicts himself, therefore, to enticing them to run away.” It concluded, “His offence is clearly theft, for they are the legal property of their masters.”

Lynch Mobs Encouraged

When I was a boy, my grandmother told me the story of a Black man who had been dragged through the center of Slidell, La., the town where we lived. It was a story she had overheard her parents talk about in hushed tones. Years later, I found the news accounts. On August 6, 1914, The Times-Picayune published an article that described how an angry mob “of unknown persons” had tied a Black murder suspect to the back of a car and dragged him until he was dead. The headline of the article, “Tie Negro to Auto, Then Throw on Speed,” sounds like a command to readers. Town officials conducted no investigation to discover the identity of the killers.

Three years earlier, the same paper reported that “a mob of 200” had lynched Sam Cooley, a Black suspect in an attempted rape in the nearby town of Pearl River, La. According to the 1910 census, the white population of Pearl River was only 238, suggesting that nearly every white resident had turned out to seek vengeance on Cooley.

Papers not only reported on lynchings in a manner that implied or explicitly indicated approval, they even published ads from racial terror groups. In March 1868, during the Reconstruction era, the Richmond Dispatch, the predecessor of today’s Richmond Times-Dispatch, accepted paid advertising from the Ku Klux Klan, which it ran on its front page.

In some cases, journalists traveled with mobs to the scene of imminent lynchings and wired back observations as the crime took place. On November 16, 1900, a Colorado mob of 300 white people executed a Black teenage murder suspect who appeared to have a mental disability. “Boy Burned at the Stake in Colorado,” The New York Times announced on its front page the next day. “A number of reporters and telegraph operators with portable instruments were with the lynching party. The
wires were cut, and reports of the lynching, in the form of bulletins, were telegraphed direct from the scene of the occurrences,” the article stated. It then provided graphic details of the killing: “What agony the doomed boy, who was only sixteen years old, suffered while the flames shriveled up his flesh could only be guessed from the terrible contortions of his face and the cries he gave from time to time.” The account ended with a summary of what the writer clearly considered the enlightened point of view: “The general sentiment expressed approves the execution of the negro, but deprecates the method adopted.” Similarly lurid reports, which would have attracted curious readers and meant greater profits from newspaper sales, were also published and reprinted nationwide by the Associated Press, the Los Angeles Times, The Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, the San Francisco Examiner, and dozens of others.

From the post-slavery period until the early 20th century, sensational accounts of Black suspects being taken from local jails by white mobs and shot, hanged, burned, or dragged through town were a regular feature of the popular press. Most often the suspects were Black men accused of raping white women, but the lynching victims also included Black women and children, who were charged with a variety of crimes or misbehavior, including stealing livestock and “insulting whites”—or sometimes nothing at all.

Prominent voices pointed out the newspapers’ complicity in lynchings as far back as the 19th century. “The American press, with few exceptions…has encouraged mobs, and is responsible for the increasing wave of lawlessness which is sweeping over the States,” the famous Black investigative reporter Ida B. Wells wrote in a letter published in The Washington Post on July 3, 1893. Wells had written to the paper in response to a Post editorial criticizing her anti-lynching campaign.

Such coverage helped to justify and to glorify racial terror lynchings—a fact recognized at the time. In 1920, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch published a letter from a reader who remarked, “Through your columns I wish to ask the reporters on the daily papers if they do not recognize the responsibility that rests upon them when…they point suspicion toward negroes in cases where white women are involved?”

American papers typically assumed that the victims of lynchings were guilty and deserved their fate, publishing boldface headlines such as “NEGRO BRUTE LYNCHED” (The Washington Post, August 2, 1899); “A FEARFUL RIDE OF DEATH. SPEEDY JUSTICE METED OUT TO A KANSAS BRUTE” (The New York Times, January 31, 1887); and “DESERVED HIS FATE. A Worthless Negro Shoots a Young Man, and Is Riddled With Bullets by the Crowd” (The Cincinnati Enquirer, August 8, 1882).

Aside from being morally bankrupt, these news stories were often inaccurate. Mobs regularly lynched the wrong person, as was discovered in many instances after the real culprit confessed. Yet even in such cases, it was uncommon for Lynchers to receive punishment of any kind.

“In practice, Lynchers enjoyed immunity from state or local prosecution,” David Garland, a professor of sociology at New York University, wrote in 2005. Lynching “was usually regarded with broad approval by large sections of the communities in which the Lynchings occurred, and it was tolerated (and often applauded) by local politicians and law officers.”

“Local newspapers (and later radio stations),” Garland observed, “would announce that a lynching was imminent, stating the likely time and place.”

On March 18, 1886, to cite one example, The Atlanta Constitution announced, “WILL BE LYNCHED TONIGHT. A Fiendish Crime Reported From Tennessee.”

A 2017 study by the Equal Justice Initiative documented “4,400 racial terror lynchings in the United States during the period between Reconstruction and World War II.” In an 1894 speech, Wells said that according to her own investigations, “less than one-third” of lynching victims had been charged with sexual assaults. “Only charged, mind you,” she added, “and in many cases the real culprits were white people, who found their poor colored brothers convenient scapegoats upon whom to saddle their misdoings.”

Responding to her activism, The New York Times lambasted Wells as a “slanderous and nasty-minded mulattress” in an editorial that year. In addition, the paper described rape as a “crime to which negroes are particularly prone.” To be fair, the Times more recently published essays by Brent Staples and Charles Seguin criticizing its history of supporting lynchings. However, it has never issued an official apology for its previous coverage or editorial views.

Of course, media culpability for racism goes far beyond slavery and lynching. In the 1960s, The Birmingham News was
Theater Under Covid

The art form has been forced to reinvent itself.

BY ALISA SOLOMON
ERIC TING REMEMBERS THE CHILL THAT PASSED THROUGH THE ROOM when someone coughed during the California Shakespeare Theater gala in March of last year. The annual fundraising event—essential to the theater’s $5 million budget—was celebrating a turning point for the 47-year-old company, where Ting became artistic director in 2015: He would announce that Cal Shakes was planning to move its offices and shop from Berkeley to downtown Oakland, showing that “where we make our home reflects our priorities,” and he would describe ways the company would be collaborating with community partners. “It was kind of a seminal moment,” Ting says.

Ting had visited Wuhan, China, only a couple of months earlier to celebrate the 103rd birthday of his great-uncle, and amid the gala’s live music, decked-out guests, and raffles for trips to Tuscany and Paris, he sensed a coming calamity, glinting like the bottles of hand sanitizer arrayed along the hors d’oeuvre tables. Indeed, the March 7, 2020, event, he says, turned out to be “the last big party in the Bay Area before everything shut down.”

A few days later in New Haven, Conn., Jacob Padrón hosted a kickoff for the new season of the Long Wharf Theatre, the first one he had planned since taking the reins as artistic director in early 2019. Featuring five plays written and directed by women and benefiting from new partnerships with some local organizations, the season, he hoped, would “mark a new era.” Within 48 hours he had to call it off.

Meanwhile, in Missouri, Hana Sharif was overseeing the final rehearsals of Dreaming Zenzile, a musical about the South African singer and anti-apartheid activist Miriam Makeba, at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, where Sharif had begun as artistic director in June 2019. The show—one of 12 planned for the season at a company that typically operates with an $8.5 million budget—was slated to begin performances on March 18. The week before opening, “the middle of America was not experiencing that typically operates with an $8.5 million budget—was slated to begin performances on March 18. The week before opening, “the middle of America was not experiencing the reality of what was happening and how large it was came crashing in.”

National media breathlessly covered the closing of the 31 shows that were on Broadway last March—an unprecedented rupture in an industry that supports 96,900 jobs and pumps $14.7 billion into the New York City economy annually, according to the Broadway League. Scant attention was paid to the scenes unfolding across the country at the hundreds of nonprofit theaters like Cal Shakes, the Long Wharf, and St. Louis Rep, which, taken together, employ far more artists than Broadway.

A Brookings Institution analysis published over the summer estimated that the performing and fine arts industry had by that point—four months into the pandemic—lost 1.4 million jobs and $42.5 billion in sales. It’s difficult to generalize about the nearly 2,000 professional nonprofit theater companies in the United States given their disparate sizes, missions, locations, and aesthetics, but in interviews with The Nation, some 40 artistic directors, actors, playwrights, administrators, funders, board members, and technicians around the country unanimously agreed that the losses could be more than twice as bad now. Cal Shakes had to slash its budget by half and its staff by two-thirds; Long Wharf let half of its staff go; St. Louis Rep made a steep reduction in its budget and still operated at a $2 million deficit and the entire company went on furlough for a period.

Larger theaters have taken larger hits. The dynamic Children’s Theatre Company (CTC) in Minneapolis saw its budget plummet from $13.5 million to $4 million and its staff from 80 to 25. At the renowned Public Theater in New York City, the budget plunged from $60 million to $29 million as revenues declined by two-thirds and the staff of 270 dropped to 70—and that doesn’t include the additional 2,500 people the Public employs as independent contractors in an average year. Just about every theater relies heavily on freelancers but could do little to help them financially; Payroll Protection Program funds—if a theater is able to secure them—cannot be used to pay independent contractors.

Most theaters at least paid out the artists’ contracts for runs that began but couldn’t be completed. And some, particularly small, agile companies, have redirected resources to new programs that give work to artists. “We wanted to shift the dynamic,” says Soho Rep’s Sarah Benson, describing Project #1, an initiative that pays eight artists a salary—$1,250 per week for a year, with health insurance—rather than a fee for a product, to come up with whatever emerges. “How we’re making things right now is speculative and abstract, and pushing into the question: How can this be theater?” says Benson. “That is so exciting.”

Indeed, imagination is one resource still in ample supply. The past 12 months have seen an explosion of new forms: podcast versions of Shakespeare plays, interactive web dramas, an epis tolary love story unfolding in a series of letters sent to audiences by snail mail, a Chekhov adaptation for The Sims 4 video game, one-acts designed to be performed by audiences in their homes, site-specific Zoom works in which the plot involves the characters themselves connecting through the platform.

Imagination is one resource that’s still in ample supply. The past 12 months have seen an explosion of new forms.

Alisa Solomon, director of the Arts & Culture MA concentration at the Columbia Journalism School, is the author of Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof.
The nonprofits, officially driven by missions, not by moneymaking, can be called to account more pointedly and readily than Broadway. By challenging theaters in the terms of their own admirable ideals—to “serve and engage a diverse community” (Williamstown), “give[e] full voice to a wide range of artists and visions” (Goodman), or “advance a more diverse and inclusive future” (Berkeley Rep), to cite just a bit of three major theaters’ stated raison d’être—WSYWAT lit the long-smoldering fuse of the regional theaters’ legitimacy crisis. How can theaters live up to such promises when only those who can afford to take unpaid internships can chart a path into the industry? Or when plays by BIPOC writers are deemed “risky” and relegated to a theater’s smaller stage, which comes with smaller paychecks for all involved, thus perpetuating an ever-widening structural inequality?

These sorts of inequities are built into the nonprofit theater. “We have known for many years that the model is broken,” notes the Long Wharf’s Padrón, one of a new generation of artistic directors along with Sharif, Ting, and others installed within the past half-dozen years—many of them BIPOC or, Sharif is quick to point out, white allies. They inherited—and are tacitly being counted on to dismantle—that dilapidated, discriminatory structure. “We have been waiting for our turn to lead and try some bold ideas,” Sharif says. “Covid has catapulted us five to 10 years into the future.”

Still, a full year has gone by with America’s theaters dark, and they—along with the tens of thousands of gig-economy folks who act, design, choreograph, stage-manage, build sets, run tech, and direct in them—are hanging by fraying financial threads.

Strangely, the pandemic is providing theaters the opportunity to confront the racism embedded in their standard operating procedures. Many responded to the uprising that followed the murder of George Floyd by posting statements of solidarity with Black Lives Matter; some opened their otherwise dormant buildings as bathroom and snacks stations for protesters or as staging areas for distributing provisions to food-insecure neighbors ravaged by the pandemic. Theaters of color—there are several hundred of them, long beleaguered by what much of white America was just awakening to—did more: The queer trans Theater Offensive in Boston offered bailout support to arrested protesters; the 45-year-old Penumbra Theatre, an African American company in Minneapolis, began to reshape itself into the Center of Racial Healing.

On June 8, a letter hit the in-boxes of thousands of producers, artistic and managing directors, and other theater leaders, signed by more than 300 theater makers who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). Titled “We See You, White American Theater” (WSYWAT), it put the industry on notice: “We have watched you exploit us, shame us, diminish us, and exclude us. We see you. We have always seen you. And now you will see us.” A month later, the group followed up with a 29-page list of demands, among them: “a bare minimum of 50 percent BIPOC representation in programming and personnel, both on and off stage,” a Native land acknowledgment at the start of events, and an end to the six-day rehearsal week. The manifesto has amassed more than 104,000 signatures of support. And as a February “accountability report” attests, more than 100 institutions have been taking steps toward “naming and addressing the tenets of white supremacy ingrained in our culture,” according to Kelvin Dinkins Jr., the assistant dean at the Yale School of Drama and the general manager of the Yale Repertory Theatre.

The issues called out by WSYWAT are hardly new. Various organizations have tracked the field’s feeble diversity record for years. According to the most recent surveys, more than 70 percent of writers whose work is produced on US stages are white men; 23 percent of acting contracts go to performers of color; 85 percent of directors at New York theater nonprofits are white—and on Broadway, 94 percent.

“We’ve been having these conversations for so long,” asserts Adrian Budhu, the deputy director of Theatre Communications Group, a national organization for some 700 nonprofit theaters. New formations like Broadway for Racial Justice and Black Theatre United, which focus specifically on African American concerns and the commercial stage, share the exasperation. “We’re beyond ready for change,” says BTU cofounder LaChanze. “Those that aren’t ready will have to catch up.”

The pandemic, strangely, is providing the opportunity. “The hiatus has given us a chance to wrestle within ourselves,” explains Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater, which revamped its leadership structure over the summer, promoting three artistic staff members to a team that joins Eustis in decision-making. “I don’t think we could have done that while producing 20 shows a year.”

The before times: it’s unclear when theaters will be able to resume business as usual, like this dress rehearsal for Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya at Cal Shakes.
number of theaters in the US mushroomed. Notwithstanding some important, scrappy exceptions, these theaters cemented the foundation for what has become an entrenched institutional order: a single charismatic leader; a building that is expensive to keep up; reliance on wealthy donors, some serving on theaters’ governing boards; a slew of administrative and managerial staff on the full-time payroll, but few artists; an aging, white subscription audience; and a timid repertoire that doesn’t risk scaring that audience away.

The seasons Ting, Padrón, Sharif, and their cohort were set to launch last March aimed to dislodge that old model on more than an ad hoc basis. Now the demands of WSYWAT and the upheaval of the pandemic are pushing more sluggish theaters to follow their lead toward radical, sustainable change with two entwined goals: One strand of that is, as Theater Offensive’s Harold Steward puts it, creating “anti-racist multicultural institutions, not better white-dominate ones,” and the other is what Dina Janis, the artistic director of the Dorset Theatre Festival in Vermont, describes as “centering artists and centering community, and asking, how do you make theater anyone can come to and would want to come to?”

This shift has become possible not least because, in the words of Stephanie Ybarra, the artistic director of Baltimore Center Stage, enough theater leaders have come to share “a spirit of abundance rather than scarcity and competition.” Over the past year, they have been attending various virtual meetings with their peers in the theater or other spheres. For instance, in Minneapolis, the CTC’s artistic director, Peter Brosius, participates in weekly national calls among colleagues in youth theater, local ones among heads of Twin Cities youth organizations, and another with all kinds of local arts organizations. Such meetings are fostering a new sense of solidarity and a recognition that all these institutions inhabit the same ecosystem. And they are helping to mobilize theater makers to organize for government support like never before.

They have reason to feel optimistic. For one thing, the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Package enacted on March 11 includes funding increases for the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities. For another, a coalition of about 40 nonprofit theater leaders helped win a critical victory to bring nonprofits into the $15 billion Save Our Stages Act, signed into law in December and expanded in President Joe Biden’s Covid relief package. It’s not perfect—it gained traction only because it was initiated by commercial music venues, and accessing the funds involves confusing bureaucratic processes and costly delays. Nonetheless, the Senate lobbying campaign landed powerful arguments about the needs of arts workers.

“Workers” is the operative, nonpartisan word among a number of grassroots efforts gaining ground on Capitol Hill. “There’s a myth that artists are either choosing to starve for their art or they are out-of-touch celebrities, and we are trying to change the conversation,” explains actor Brooke Ishibashi, a cofounder of Be An #ArtsHero, which she and some colleagues formed “out of our own desperation” to press for relief funds. With volunteer labor, they have put together a slick website where you can read hundreds of passionate letters from theater artists to President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris as well as access a kit for writing one of your own, and they have been drafting bills and lobbying representatives by the dozens, calling for, among other things, $43.85 billion to sustain arts institutions—5 percent of what the arts add to the economy, and proportionate to the $50 billion given to airlines.

Meanwhile, the call for the appointment of a cabinet-level secretary of arts and culture has been gathering force. Ignited by an open letter to Biden written by stage directors Rachel Chavkin and Jenny Koons, the campaign quickly garnered 10,000 signatures.

There’s clamor, too, for a 21st century version of the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project, the massive jobs program established in 1935 under the Works Progress Administration that supported theater troupes all over the country, including 17 “Negro Units” that produced formally and politically radical plays, as well as units for vaudevillians, children’s theater, and productions in Yiddish, Spanish, and other languages. Congress defunded the FTP in 1939 for its allegedly “un-American” activities, among them its calls for racial equality. Though short-lived, the program enabled cultural achievements, not least the development of the still-vital form of the Living Newspaper, a theatrical genre that dramatizes current events. A safer, decentralized, less easily politicized paradigm, some artists suggest, is the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program of the 1970s, which disbursed federal monies to state and local governments to use as they saw fit to hire workers for public services—including in the arts. Brosius, the CTC director, paid his New York rent in the late ’70s — (continued on page 30)
The Trump presidency accelerated the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation. Can anything rein them in?
Going

The Trump presidency accelerated the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation. Can anything rein them in?

BY ZOE CARPENTER

On the night after the November 3 election, hundreds of supporters of Donald Trump filled the parking lot of an election center in Arizona’s Maricopa County, where officials were still counting ballots. Although most networks had yet to call the state for Joe Biden, Fox News had declared him the projected winner shortly before midnight on election night. The Trump voters in Phoenix were furious. “Count the votes,” they chanted. “Fox News sucks!”

To Trump and his supporters, the network’s call in Arizona was a rare betrayal: In the previous four years Fox had become so enmeshed with the Trump administration that it functioned effectively as a mouthpiece for the White House. But Trump loyalists could easily confirm their belief that the election had been stolen from the president elsewhere, in more rabidly partisan outlets like Newsmax TV and One America News Network, which declared Fox a “Democrat Party hack” in the wake of its Arizona call. A whole web of right-wing influencers and outlets amplified conspiracies about ballots stuffed in suitcases and counterfeit mail-in votes.

At the Maricopa County rally, some protesters carried long guns. Others waved Sharpie pens, in reference to a rumor that had spread wildly online in the preceding hours and quickly became known as “Sharpiegate.” Sharpiegate was based on an unfounded claim that the votes of Trump supporters who’d been given Sharpies to fill out their ballots would be disqualified. The conspiracy theory appeared to originate with a conservative radio host in Chicago, who tweeted early on Election Day about felt-tip pens bleeding through ballots. Within a few hours, right-wing communities online were discussing claims that scanners couldn’t read Sharpie-marked ballots.

According to the Election Integrity Project, a partnership among several research institutions tracking misinformation throughout the election, the Sharpie conspiracy quickly became a popular explanation for why Biden was pulling ahead in swing states like Arizona. “Poll workers in Maricopa County AZ were handing out sharpie markers knowing full damn well that the machines register ONLY ink ballots. FRAUD IN ARIZONA,” read one tweet. A video featuring two women claiming that poll workers in Maricopa tried to force voters to use Sharpies went viral on Facebook, then spread quickly on YouTube, Twitter, Rumble, TikTok, Parler, and Reddit. Conservative influencers and media shared the conspiracy theory, as did Donald Trump’s son Eric and Arizona Representative Paul Gosar, whose district includes a portion of the area, was reportedly responsible for helping organize the January 6 “Stop the Steal” rally in Washington that resulted in the deaths of five people. Mark Finchem, a Republican who represents part of Pinal County in the statehouse, was also in Washington on January 6.

The Capitol insurrection threw into relief the real-world consequences of America’s increasingly siloed media ecosystem, which is characterized on the right by an expanding web of outlets and platforms willing to entertain an alternative version of reality. Social media companies, confronted with their role in spreading misinformation, scrambled to implement reforms. But right-wing misinformation is not just a technological problem, and it is far from being fixed. Any hope that the events of January 6 might provoke a reckoning within conservative media and the Republican Party has by now evaporated. The GOP remains eager to weaponize misinformation, not only to win elections but also to advance its policy agenda.

A prime example is the aggressive effort under way in a number of states to restrict access to the ballot. In Arizona, Republicans have introduced nearly two dozen bills that would make it more difficult to vote, with the biggest lie about election fraud as a pretext. “When you can sell somebody the idea that their elections were stolen, they’ve been violated, right? So then you need protection,” Bock says, explaining the conservative justification for the suite of new restrictions in her state. Voting rights is her organization’s “number one concern” at the moment. But Bock’s fears about political misinformation are more sweeping. Community organizing is difficult in the best of times. “But when you can’t agree on what is true and not true, when my reality doesn’t match the reality of the person I’m speaking to, it makes it more difficult to find common ground,” she says. “If we can’t agree on a common truth, if we

“IIf we can’t agree on a common truth, if we can’t find a starting place, then how does it end?”

—Natali Fierros Bock, Rural Arizona Engagement

Natali Fierros Bock says she could feel this mass delusion calcifying in the wake of the election in Pinal County, a rural area between Phoenix and Tucson where she serves as co–executive director of the group Rural Arizona Engagement. “It feels like an existential crisis,” Bock adds. Many of the Sharpiegate claims online referred to Pinal County, and Gosar, whose district includes a portion of the area, was reportedly responsible for helping organize the January 6 “Stop the Steal” rally in Washington that resulted in the deaths of five people. Mark Finchem, a Republican who represents part of Pinal County in the statehouse, was also in Washington on January 6.

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AROUND THE TIME of the 2016 election, Kate Starbird, a professor at the University of Washington who studies misinformation during crises, noticed that more and more social media users were incorporating markers of political identity into their online personas—hashtags and memes and other signifiers of their ideological alignment. In the footage from the Capitol she saw the same symbols, outfits, and flags as those she’d been watching spread in far-right communities online. “To see those caricatures come alive in this violent riot or insurrection, whatever you want to call it, was horrifying, but it was all very recognizable for me,” Starbird says. “There was a time in which we were like, ‘Oh, those are bots, those aren’t real people,’ or ‘That’s someone play-acting,’ or ‘We’re putting on our online persona and that doesn’t really reflect who we are in an offline sense.’ January 6 pretty much disabused us of that notion.”

It was a particularly rude awakening for social media companies, which had long been reluctant to respond to the misinformation that flourished on their platforms, treating it as an issue of speech that could be divorced from real-world consequences. Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms had made some changes in anticipation of a contested election, announcing plans to label or remove content delegitimizing election results, for instance. Facebook blocked new campaign ads for the week leading up to the election; Twitter labeled hundreds of thousands of misleading tweets with fact-checking notes. Yet wild claims about election fraud spread virally anyway, ping-ponging from individual social media users to right-wing influencers and media.

During the 2016 campaign, most public concern about misinformation centered on shadowy foreign actors posing as news sources or US citizens. This turned out to be an oversimplification, though many on the center and left offered it as an explanation for Hillary Clinton’s defeat in 2016; blaming Russian state actors alone ignored factors like sexism, missteps made by the Clinton campaign itself, and the home-grown feedback loop of right-wing media. In 2020, according to research done by Starbird and other contributors to the Election Integrity Project, those most influential in disseminating misinformation were largely verified, “blue check” social media users who were authentic, in the sense that they were who they said they were—Donald Trump, for example, and his adult sons.

Another key aspect in the creation of the big lie was what Starbird calls “participatory disinformation.” Trump was tweeting about the election being stolen from him months beforehand, but once voting got under way, “what we see is that he kind of relies on the crowd, the audiences, to create the evidence to fit the frame,” Starbird explains. Individuals posted their personal experiences online, which were shared by more influential accounts and eventually featured in media stories that placed the anecdotes within the broader narrative of a stolen election. Some of the anecdotes that fueled Sharpiegate came from people who used a felt-tip pen to vote in person, then saw online that their vote had been canceled—though the “can-celled” vote actually referred to mail-in ballots that voters had requested before deciding to vote in person. “It’s a really powerful kind of propaganda, because the people that were helping to create these narratives really did think they were experiencing fraud,” Starbird says. Action by content moderators usually came too late and was complicated by the fact that many claims of disenfranchisement by individual users were difficult to verify or disprove.

The Capitol riot led the tech giants to take more aggressive action against Trump and other peddlers of misinformation. Twitter and Facebook kicked off their platforms and shut down tens of thousands of accounts and pages. Facebook clamped down on some of its groups, which the company’s own data scientists had previously warned were incubating misinformation and “enthusiastic calls for violence,” according to an internal presentation. Google and Apple booted Parler, a social media site used primarily by the far right, from their app stores, and Amazon stopped hosting Parler’s data on its cloud infrastructure system, forcing it temporarily offline.

But these measures were largely reactions to harm already done. “Moderation doesn’t reduce the demand for [misleading] content, and demand for that content has grown during some periods of time when the platforms weren’t moderating or weren’t addressing some of the more egregious ways their tools were abused,” says Renée DiResta, technical research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory.

Deplatforming individuals or denying service to companies that tolerate violent rhetoric, as Amazon did with Parler, can have an impact, particularly in the short term and when done at scale. It reduces the reach of influential liars and can make it more difficult for “alt-tech” apps to operate. A notorious example of deplatforming involved Alex Jones, the conspiracy theorist behind the site Infowars. Jones was kicked off Apple, Facebook, YouTube, and Spotify in 2018 for his repeated endorsement of violence. He lost nearly 2.5 million subscribers on YouTube alone, and in the three weeks after his accounts were cut off, Infowars’ daily average visits dropped from close to 1.4 million to 715,000.

But Jones didn’t disappear—he migrated to Parler, Gab, and other alt-tech platforms, and he spoke at a rally in Washington the night before the Capitol attack. One outcome of unplugging Trump and other right-wing influencers has
been a surge of interest in those alternative social media platforms, where more dangerous echo chambers can form and, in encrypted spaces, be more difficult to monitor. “Isn’t this just going to make the extreme communities worse? Yes,” says Ethan Zuckerman, founder of the Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. “But we’re already headed there, and at least the good news is that [extremists] aren’t going to be recruiting in these mainstream spaces.”

The bad news, in Zuckerman’s view, is that the far right is now leading the effort to create new forms of online community. “The Nazis right now have an incentive to build alternative distributed media, and the rest of us are behind, because we don’t have the incentive to do it,” Zuckerman explains. He argues that a digital infrastructure that is smaller, distributed, and not-for-profit is the path to a better Internet. “And my real deep fear is that we end up ceding the design of this way of building social networks to far-right extremists, because they are the ones who need these new spaces to discuss and organize.” In March, Trump spokesman Jason Miller said on Fox that the former president was likely to return to social media this spring “with his own platform.”

A more fundamental problem than Trump’s presence or absence on Twitter is the power that a single executive—Jack Dorsey, in the case of Twitter—has in making that decision. Social media companies have become so big that they have little fear of accountability in the form of competition. “To put it simply, companies that once were scrappy, underdog startups that challenged the status quo have become the kinds of monopolies we last saw in the era of oil barons and railroad tycoons,” concluded a recent report by the staff of the Democratic members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Antitrust.

For now, the reforms at Facebook and other companies remain largely superficial. The platforms are still based on algorithms that reward outrageous content and are still financed via the collection and sale of user data. Karen Hao of MIT’s Technology Review recently reported that a former Facebook AI researcher told her “his team conducted ‘study after study’ confirming the same basic idea: models that maximize engagement increase polarization.” Hao’s investigation concluded that Facebook leadership’s relentless pursuit of growth “repeatedly weakened or halted many initiatives meant to clean up misinformation on the platform.” The modest “break glass” measures Facebook took during the election in response to the swell of misinformation, which included tweaks to its ranking algorithm to emphasize news sources it considered “authoritative,” have already been reversed.

Tech companies could do more, as the election-time tweaks revealed. But they still “refuse to see misinformation as a core feature of their product,” says Joan Donovan, research director for the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. The problem of misinformation appears so vast “because that’s exactly what the technology allows.”

There are some signs of a growing appetite for regulation on Capitol Hill. Democrats have proposed reforms to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which insulates tech companies from legal liability for content posted to their platforms, such as requiring more transparency about content moderation and opening platforms to lawsuits in limited circumstances when content causes real-world harm. (GOP critiques of Section 230, on the other hand, make the false argument that it allows platforms to discriminate against conservatives.) Another legislative tactic would focus on the algorithms that platforms use to amplify content, rather than on the content itself. A bill introduced by two House Democrats would make companies liable if their algorithms promote content linked to acts of violence.

Democratic lawmakers are also eyeing changes to antitrust law, while several antitrust lawsuits have been filed against Facebook and Google. But litigation could take years. Even breaking up Big Tech would leave intact its predatory business model. To address this, Zuckerman and other experts have called for a tax on targeted digital advertising. Such a tax would discourage targeted advertising, and the revenue could be used to fund public-service media.

Social media plays a key role in amplifying conspiracy theories and political misinformation, but it didn’t create them. “When we think of disinformation as something that appeared [only in the Trump era], and that we used to have this agreed-upon narrative of what was true and then social platforms came into the picture and now that’s all fragmented… that makes a lot of assumptions about the idea that everyone used to agree on what was true and what was false,” says Alice E. Marwick, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina who studies social media and society. Politicians have long leveraged misinformation, particularly racist tropes. But it’s been made particularly
potent not just by social media, Marwick argues, but by the right-wing media industry that profits from lies.

“The American online public sphere is a shambles because it was grafted onto a television and radio public sphere that was already deeply broken,” argue Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts of Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society in their book Network Propaganda. The collapse of local news left a vacuum that for many Americans has been filled by partisan outlets that, on the right, are characterized by blatant disregard for journalistic standards of sourcing and verification. This insulated world of right-wing outlets, which stretches from those that bill themselves as objective sources, Fox News chief among them, to talk radio and extreme sites like Infowars and The Gateway Pundit, “represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system,” the authors write.

The conservative movement spent decades building this apparatus to peddle lies and fear along with miracle cures and pyramid schemes, and was so successful that Fox and other far-right outlets ended up in a tight two-step with the White House. Fox chairman Rupert Murdoch maintained a close relationship with Trump, as did Sean Hannity and former Fox News copresident Bill Shine, who became White House communications director in 2018.

The backlash against Fox in the wake of the election hinted at a possible dethroning of the ruler of the right’s media machine. Its far-right rival Newsmax TV posted a higher rating than Fox for the first time ever in the month after the election, following supportive tweets from Trump, and during the week of November 9 it passed Breitbart as the most-visited conservative website. But Fox quickly regained its perch. The network backedpedaled rapidly during its post-election ratings slump, firing an editor who’d defended the projection of a Biden win in Arizona and replacing news programming with opinion content. According to Media Matters, Fox News pushed the idea of a stolen election nearly 800 times in the two weeks after declaring Biden the winner. The network’s ad revenue increased 31 percent during the final quarter of 2020, while its parent company, Fox Corporation, saw a 17 percent jump in pretax profit.

The far-right media ecosystem has become so powerful in part because there’s been no downside to lying. Instead, the Trump administration demonstrated that there was a market opportunity in serving up misinformation that purports to back up what people want to believe. “In this day and age, people want something that tends to affirm their views and opinions,” Newsmax CEO Chris Ruddy told The New York Times’ Ben Smith in an interview published shortly after the election. Claims of a rigged election were “great for news,” he said in another interview. Trump’s departure from the White House won’t necessarily reduce the demand for this kind of content.

Since the Capitol riot, two voting-systems companies have launched an unusual effort to hold right-wing outlets and influencers accountable for some of the lies they’ve spread. Dominion Voting Systems, a major provider of voting technology, and another company called Smartmatic were the subjects of myriad outlandish claims related to election fraud, many of which were used in lawsuits filed by Trump’s campaign and were repeatedly broadcast on Fox, Newsmax TV, and OAN. Since January the companies have filed several defamation suits against Trump campaign lawyers Sidney Powell and Rudy Giuliani, MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell, and Fox News and three of its hosts. Dominion alleges that as a result of false accusations, its “founder and employees have been harassed and have received death threats, and Dominion has suffered unprecedented and irreparable harm.”

The threat of legal action forced a number of media companies to issue corrections for stories about supposed election meddling that mentioned Dominion. The conservative website American Thinker published a statement admitting its stories about Dominion were “completely false and have no basis in fact” and “rel[ied] on discredited sources who have peddled debunked theories.” OAN simply deleted all of the stories about Dominion from its website without comment.

These lawsuits will not dismantle the world of right-wing media, but they have prompted a more robust debate about how media and social media companies could be held liable for lies that turn lethal—and whether this type of legal action should be pursued, given the protections afforded by the First Amendment and the fact that the powerful often use libel law to bully journalists.

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—Ethan Zuckerman, Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure

Ethan Zuckerman has been thinking about how to build a better Internet for years, a preoccupation not unrelated to the fact that, in the 1990s, he wrote the code that created pop-up ads. (“I’m sorry. Our intentions were good,” he wrote in 2014.) Still, he believes that framing misinformation as a problem of media and technology is myopic. “It’s very hard to conclude that this is purely an informational problem,” Zuckerman says. “It’s a power problem.”

The GOP is increasingly tolerant of, and even reliant on, weaponized misinformation. “We’re in a place where the Republican Party realizes that as much as 70 percent of their voters don’t believe that Biden was legitimately elected, and they are now deeply reluctant to contradict what their voters believe,” Zuckerman says. Republicans are reluctant, at least in part, because of a legitimate fear of primary challenges from the right, but also because they learned from Trump the power of using conspiracy theories to mobilize alienated voters by preying on their deep mistrust of public institutions.

It’s one thing for an ordinary citizen to retweet a false claim; it’s another for elected officials to legitimize conspiracy theories. But holding the GOP to account may prove to be even harder than reforming Big Tech. The radical grass roots have been empowered by small-dollar fundraising and gerrymandering, while more moderate Republicans are retiring or leaving the party. Writer Erick Tricock argued recently in The Washington Post that what undercut a similar wave of conservative crankpot paranoia driven by the John Birch Society in the 1960s was explicit denunciation by prominent conservatives like William Buckley and Ronald Reagan as well as

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The Keystone XL pipeline, proposed more than a decade ago, has had multiple life cycles. It has been born, died, and been reborn. On January 20, during his first hours in office, President Joe Biden killed it. Again.

Keystone XL shouldn’t be confused with the Dakota Access Pipeline, though it’s easy to mistake the two: Keystone was proposed in 2008, DAPL in 2014. Keystone brings tar sands oil (a notoriously acidic, corrosive, and thicker cousin of light crude—and more prone to spills and ruptures during transport) from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. DAPL was designed to carry light crude from the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota and Montana through South Dakota and Iowa on its way to its terminus in Illinois. Both lines, however, are a stab through the heart of the heartland. Both lines threaten Native lands and territories. Both lines are heads of the great regenerating snake that is the oil industry.

Indigenous activists were the first to refer to these pipelines as “black snakes.” They recognized the threats and began rallying people to fight them. The problem is them. And as with the Hydra, defeating pipelines is a group effort: Heracles couldn’t have defeated the snake without Iolaus (Athena’s support didn’t hurt either), and the activists who battled both Keystone XL and DAPL—Indigenous water protectors, environmentalists, sundry allies—couldn’t have sparked a mass mobilization without one another.

These activists fought, over years and distances, and are still fighting. They fought, in the case of Indigenous activists, not simply on behalf of Native people and Native homelands but for the good of all Americans against the forces of extractive capitalism. They fought because they know what pipelines hold.

Much less clear, however, is what the future holds. Now that Biden has canceled Keystone XL, one head of the great regenerating oil snake is gone. But there are more than 20 petroleum pipeline projects (and some 22 natural gas pipeline projects) currently under construction in the United States, crisscrossing the country, threatening land and water. These pipelines include DAPL—which the Biden administration has actively declined to shut down—as well as the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline in Minnesota, the Permian Highway Pipeline in Texas, and far too many others to cite. They continue to push across the land, threatening communities and endanger-
Both lines are a stab through the heart of the heartland. Both lines are heads of the great regenerating snake that is the oil industry.


ing habitat, and they raise a crucial question: What will it take to get rid of all the great black snakes? How do we kill the Hydra?

To start to answer these questions, it helps to revisit recent history, to retrace the births—as well as the deaths and rebirths—of both the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines.

The origins of Keystone XL go back nearly 15 years, to a radically different economic moment than the present one. After earning rapid approval in Canada in 2007, the pipeline was given the green light by the George W. Bush administration during the waning days of his presidency. The year was 2008, and the economy was in turmoil because of the foreclosure crisis. Energy was expensive. And so it made “sense” to find a way to extract one of the earth’s dirtiest fossil fuels from under the boreal forest of northern Canada and send it to refiners across the Midwest and Texas. The US government, if it accomplishes anything, is phenomenally good at creating problems and then, in order to fix them, creating new ones.

The foreclosure crisis was largely the fault of the US government’s gutting of the Glass-Steagall Act and its unwillingness to regulate a predatory market full of bundled subprime mortgages, among other “toxic assets.” In order to provide cheaper energy to the cash-strapped masses, the government waved Keystone through, substituting one toxic asset for another. In the process, by facilitating the extraction of tar sands oil from the last unbroken forest in the world and one of the planet’s largest carbon sinks, the government created a whole new catastrophe, one that would imperil vast swaths of pristine habitat, beginning with the Missouri River (source of so much of our clean water).

What happened in the years that followed was its own kind of saga, a Heraclean tale of activists joining together in physical protest and legal action against government and capital, across state lines and even national borders. By most accounts, this saga began north of the United States, among Indigenous Canadians who first sounded the alarm about the rising threat. As the pipeline moved south, so did the opposition, eventually coalescing into an unlikely coalition of Indigenous activists, environmentalists, and ranchers in Nebraska. By 2011, the coalition had expanded even more, with Mark Ruffalo, Daryl Hannah, and Bill McKibben among the many activists engaging in a series of high-profile protests aimed at holding President Barack Obama to his commitment to green energy. Still, the movement remained broad. Tribal leaders sued and sought injunctions in court. Citizen activists took to social media and to the land itself to protest.

These efforts had a powerful effect. While Obama initially refused to change course—in fact, in 2012, he accelerated the enterprise, declaring that he was “directing my administration to cut through the red tape…and make this project a priority”—he ultimately reversed his position amid overwhelming activism and pressure. In 2015, he vetoed the bill that would have seen the pipeline to completion.

Unfortunately, it would prove to be a fairly empty gesture, because on January 20, 2017, Donald Trump became president, and on January 24, he signed a presidential memorandum that breathed new life into Keystone. That memorandum invited TransCanada to resubmit its pipeline application and set an expedited time line for approval by the secretary of state. It also, however, resurrected the movement against it, setting off a series of legal battles that would wind all the way to the Supreme Court. There, on July 6, 2020, the nation’s highest court upheld a lower court ruling stalling Keystone XL.

Still, the pipeline wasn’t quite dead. That end would come only when Biden, on his first day in office, cauterized the open wound with a presidential proclamation revoking the permit.

The Dakota access pipeline has had a different life and death. Or should it be lives and deaths? Proposed in 2014 to transport oil from North Dakota’s Bakken oil fields, the pipeline was nearly complete before it was effectively opposed, because the parent companies cleverly routed the majority of the pipeline across private land, which involved less red tape, such as permitting requirements and public hearings. But, awkwardly at first and then with more force, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of North Dakota rose in opposition—in meetings, in court, and ultimately in sustained and galvanizing protest.

These demonstrations began at Lake Oahe, under which the pipeline was slated to cross, in the spring of 2016. They started with a single small camp—Sacred Stone, where water protectors from the Standing Rock Sioux, the Cheyenne River Lakota, and the Rosebud Sioux gathered—and quickly expanded, culminating in the thrilling sprawl of the Oceti Sakowin and other camps. But as the protests grew, so did the crackdown by both private security companies and the federal government. The private contractors pepper-sprayed, tear-gassed, and fired rubber bullets at the Native protesters and their allies; then, in November 2016, the US Army Corps of Engineers ordered the protesters to vacate federal lands.

Despite all this, or because of it, there was victory: The Army Corps of Engineers, under pressure from the Obama administration, stalled the project until further study could be completed and, in late 2016, withdrew the easement allowing the pipeline to pass under Lake Oahe. But as with Keystone XL, the victory was short-lived because of Trump’s election. On the same day that he resurrected Keystone XL, Trump (more the “angel of death” than the “angel of death”) issued a memorandum to expedite the completion of DAPL. Duly expedited, the pipeline was completed in
April of 2017, and oil began to flow.

Yet even then, the saga wasn’t over. Not content with the initial flow levels, Energy Partners requested permission to double the amount of oil moving through the pipeline, despite the high risk of spills and accidents. Activists pushed back. They rallied and protested while the Standing Rock Sioux and several other tribes filed a lawsuit charging that the Army Corps of Engineers had failed to do a proper environmental review.

On July 6, 2020, they won—with the judge going so far as to order the pipeline shut down—but the Corps, joined by Energy Partners, promptly appealed. The matter remains in court. The Biden administration could have intervened but has opted not to. At a hearing on April 9, it announced it would keep the pipeline open while it performs the necessary environmental review.

So what does this tell us about slaying monsters? And what does it mean for those who helped lead the struggles? The answers are probably as complicated as the pipelines and their legacy, but they boil down to three things.

First, it’s clear that the multinational, multibillion-dollar companies intent on exploiting North American oil fields are supple and muscular and largely effective at pushing their projects through, with way more power and influence than they should have. While activists mounted creative, forceful, and sustained opposition to these companies’ projects, nearly knocking them back many times, the projects kept resurfacing, regenerating. The problem—of influence, of the power of power itself, of the pursuit of wealth at the expense of the people and land from which it is drawn—is persistent and profound.

Second, it shows that, without representation in Congress and the judiciary, Native American communities are shockingly vulnerable to the shifting winds and the whims of the executive branch. While there may be Native members of Congress, tribes themselves do not have seats there. This has been true for hundreds of years. Since the Supreme Court issued a trilogy of decisions related to the removal of the “five civilized tribes” from the Southeast in the 1830s, in which Chief Justice John Marshall referred to Indian tribes as “domestic dependent nations,” Indians have lived in a weird kind of limbo: They have been caught, Orpheus-like, between the garden of tribal independence and the underworld of modern nationhood. With every shift in federal policy, with every new presidential declaration, tribes are forced to adjust, and they have to do so without the security or power of even mere statehood.

What this shows is that despite the US government’s obsession with what it has called “the Indian problem,” what we really have is a “federal government problem.”

Third, and perhaps most crucial, despite the power of the oil industry and the capriciousness of the federal government, we can see that protest works. If not for the demonstrations over DAPL, it is likely that Obama, and now Biden, wouldn’t have opposed Keystone. And having shut down Keystone, the government—one hopes—will eventually kill DAPL too.

But in all this we can see something perhaps even more profound. During the height of the DAPL protests in 2016, David Archambault III, the chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux, editorialized that “justice looks different in Indian country.” Comparing the harsh treatment of the water protectors at Standing Rock with the acquittal of Ammon Bundy over the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge just months earlier, Archambault stated that there was one set of rules for white “self-styled cowboys” and a different one for Indians. Undoubtedly, he is right. But to see the struggle over pipelines as another instance of the (white) man keeping the Indian down is to misapprehend the bigger picture. What I saw during, and after, the protests was bigger. What I saw were Native climate activists and our allies putting our lives on the line for all Americans.

The struggle—then as now—is an older and bigger struggle between the common good and corporate profit, between the harms the US government has so long inflicted and the values it professes. Just as Native Americans have served in every war the United States has ever fought, in numbers higher than for any other ethnic group, so, too, have our modern warriors fought in environmental battles. As the United States has willed itself into being over the past 245 years, Native people have been there at every step—as activists and soldiers and politicians and, after 1924, as citizens. We’ve been there defending what has truly become our land as well as our water and our rights. We have been there since the beginning and have done our best to bend the national line toward justice.

Regardless of what Biden does about DAPL—or what will happen with other pipelines around the country—Native people will be there fighting for all of us. Col. Richard Henry Pratt, the architect of the Indian boarding school system begun in the 19th century—a system that tried to destroy tribes by separating Indian families, and tried to destroy cultures by forcing students to speak English and practice Christianity—famously said that he wanted to “kill the Indian, and save the man.”

Pratt didn’t succeed. We are still here—as communities, tribes, Native nations, and individuals. Nor has the country’s government or the corporations that seek to exploit this land, to take what they want, to privilege short-term gain over long-term sustainability, because the land, along with its riches and its richness, is still here. We have a better goal than Pratt did. We want nothing less than to kill the Hydra and save the land.
(Solomon, continued from page 21) through a CETA job making theater with psychiatric patients; the Public Theater’s Eustis calls himself “the poster child for CETA,” as the program gave him his first theater job as a teenager. Penumbra was founded on a CETA grant. Significantly, “CETA money went directly to artists, not to institutions,” recalls Philip Arnoult, who hired artists for his Baltimore Theatre Project through the program.

All these efforts share a tacit sense that the market triumphalism of the past four decades may finally be ending. Especially if the Biden administration delivers on vaccinating the whole population, government might reassert itself as a mechanism for serving the people and providing necessities that shouldn’t be left to the parsimony of the profit motive: education, health care, mail delivery. And yes, art.

While theater companies will have a tough time coming back as they grapple with eroded funds and audiences in no hurry to share armrests with sniffling strangers, their purpose—at least for those who have spent this grim year reassessing it—will feel more urgent than ever. The country will need healing as it comes out of the pandemic and the ascendant white nationalism of the Donald Trump years, and it will need spaces and frameworks for unpacking the past and dreaming the future. Theaters can provide them. “How do you make the world larger? How do you create that which no one has ever imagined?” asks Brosius. “That’s what artists do every day.”

(Carpenter, continued from page 26) Republican congressional leaders. But today’s party leaders have been unwilling to excommunicate conspiracy-mongers. In the aftermath of the Capitol riot, elected officials who spread rumors that the violence was actually the result of antifa—sheerAZ’s Paul Gosar and Andy Biggs—gained notoriety, while those critical of Trump were publicly humiliated.

The embrace of conspiratorial narratives has been particularly pronounced in state GOP organizations. The Texas GOP recently incorporated the QAnon slogan “We are the storm” into official publicity media, and the Oregon GOP’s executive committee endorsed the theory that the riot had been a “false flag” operation. In March, members of the Oregon GOP voted to replace its Trump-supporting chairman with a candidate even farther out on the extremist fringe.

Weaponized misinformation could have a lasting impact not only on the shape of the GOP but also on public policy. Republicans are now using the big lie to try to restrict voting rights in Arizona, Georgia, and dozens of other states. As of February 19, according to the Brennan Center for Justice, lawmakers in 43 states had introduced more than 250 bills restricting access to voting, “over seven times the number of restrictive bills as compared to roughly this time last year.” In late March, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed a 95-page bill making it harder to vote in that state in a number of ways.

Many of the far-right extremists, politicians, and media influencers who spread misinformation about the presidential election are now pushing falsehoods about Covid-19 vaccines. The rumors, which have spread on social media apps like Telegram that are frequented by QAnon adherents and militia groups, among others, range from standard anti-vax talking points to absurd claims that the vaccines are part of a secret plan hatched by Bill Gates to implant trackable microchips, or that they cause infertility or alter human DNA. Sidestepping the craziest conspiracies, prominent conservatives like Tucker Carlson and Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, who has become one of the GOP’s leading purveyors of misinformation, are casting doubt about vaccine safety under the pretense of “just asking questions.” Vaccine misinformation plays into the longstanding conservative effort to sow mistrust in government, and it appears to be having an effect: A third of Republicans now say they don’t want to get vaccinated.

These are the true costs of misinformation: deadly riots, policy changes that could disenfranchise legitimate voters, scores of preventable deaths. These translate into financial externalities: the additional expense of securing the Capitol, additional dollars devoted to the pandemic response. More abstract but no less real are the social costs: the parents lost down QAnon rabbit holes, the erosion of factual foundations that permit productive argument.

The problem with the far right’s universe of “alternative facts” is not that it’s hermetically sealed from the universe the rest of us live in. Rather, it’s that these universes cannot truly be separated. If we’ve learned anything in the past six months, it’s that epistemological distance doesn’t prevent collisions in the real world that can be lethal to individuals—and potentially ruinous for democratic systems.

(Stace colleague, continued from page 17) still proudly celebrating the Confederacy and the legal segregation of the races. On a cold day in 1963, the paper’s lead story reported on the inauguration of segregationist George C. Wallace as Alabama’s governor, noting, “Shivering throngs cheer Wallace.... Temperatures were below freezing as the Heart of Dixie played and marched for more than four hours...on a day when the breeze was blue and the skies were Confederate gray.”

The Response

In response to my inquiries, several news organizations have acknowledged their disgraceful history but declined to apologize. The Associated Press expressed “regret” over the racism of its past coverage and vowed to do more research into its own history. “We know of no instance in which the AP deliberately promoted racist violence,” wrote Daniszewski, the agency’s vice president and editor at large for standards. “However, the AP reported on lynching and other forms of racial violence over many years, sometimes in disturbing detail, with flaws and omissions. These shortcomings clearly reflected the attitudes and prejudices of the era in which these reports were written. But that is no excuse, and we regret them.”
On the AP’s coverage of the Colorado murder of Preston Porter, a Black teenager, in 1900, Daniszewski acknowledged that “the justification for the killing went unchallenged in this story and the supposed guilt of the victim was taken for granted.” He added that the AP was now “conducting further research on its own reporting from earlier times.”

A New York Times spokesperson said the organization “believes that owning up to moments when our journalism falls short is an essential part of demonstrating our commitment to fairness, accuracy, and integrity, and we’ve done it repeatedly over time. For example, with the Overlooked project: The Times acknowledges that since 1851, obituaries…had been dominated by white men, and we have since published more than a hundred obituaries of remarkable people, including celebrating the life and accomplishments of Ida B. Wells.”

A spokesperson for Tribune Publishing, the owner of many papers including The Baltimore Sun, the Chicago Tribune, and the Hartford Courant, said, “We continue to have discussions about Baltimore Sun Media’s past,” adding that they had published two editorials “detailing their past coverage and business practices and acknowledging our publications’ actions.”

Caroline Harrison, the CEO of Advance Local, parent company of The Birmingham News, said, “It is true that at times during its more than 130-year history, The Birmingham News has published material that falls far short of the anti-racist standards that are now a core part of our culture. Today, the paper, like all of our Alabama journalism, publishes work that regularly shines a light on day-to-day and systemic racism and oppression in our society, seeking to advance equitable opportunity.”

Maribel Perez Wadsworth, president for news at the USA Today Network, issued a statement on behalf of The Cincinnati Enquirer, The Commercial Appeal, The Fayetteville Observer, and the other Gannett-owned papers mentioned in this article. “Journalism plays an integral role in helping to expose injustices and right wrongs, and that includes important introspection into our own histories,” she wrote, stopping short of an apology but promising more inclusive coverage in the future.


In a significant development, however, The Boston Globe announced in March that it is joining forces with Boston University’s Center for Antiracist Research to found The Emancipator, a new publication dedicated to racial justice. Named after the first antislavery newspaper in the US, the project is the brainchild of Ibram X. Kendi, a professor at the university and the author of How to Be an Antiracist, and Bina Venkataraman, the Globe’s editorial page editor.

“‘It’s good for newsrooms to reckon with sins of the past. Just as important is to reckon with the most pressing problems of our time.’

—Bina Venkataraman, The Boston Globe
Who does Biden stand for?

BY KIM PHILLIPS-FEIN

HEN JOE BIDEN WAS IN HIS EARLY 20S, HIS new girlfriend’s mother asked him what kind of job he wanted. “President,” he replied, “of the United States.” A college senior at the time, Biden must have appeared brash and full of himself: Who would announce such a goal to someone he presumably wanted to take him seriously? But perhaps he knew something no one else did. Though it took a while longer than he might have hoped—and involved two earlier presidential bids, each embarrassing in its own way—Biden has made it happen at last.

Of his previous attempts, the 1988 run was likely the more disastrous. It began with Biden promising generational change as he declared his candidacy at the Amtrak station in Wilmington, Del.,
and it ended with his withdrawal from the race amid allegations of plagiarism. The campaign also had the dubious honor of being featured in Richard Ben Cramer's "What It Takes," an exhaustive portrait of the leading contenders for the nomination that year that painted none in a flattering light, but Biden least of all. A proud but insecure man, he was depicted as a legislator always pushing on to the next plan before accomplishing the previous one. He was a magnet for those who saw him as a rising star in the Democratic Party, but he kept his aides up to all hours of the night in meandering conversations. He loved to give speeches and work the crowd, yet his most inspiring lines were often stock phrases aimed only at winning the race. He wanted victory but was never entirely clear about what he would do with it once in office.

But missing from this skeptical portrait was a sense of the politics that motivated Biden to enter the scrum in the first place. Even though his ambition was evident, its source was less so: He had always wanted to be president, but why? What political goals drove him, what dreams kept him running? Even Biden himself, at least in Cramer's account, wasn't always sure. In the buildup to his announcement in 1987, the self-proclaimed "son of Delaware" was plagued by self-doubt: "He could not find that overriding reason why he should be President, why he was going to be President, what he was going to be President for."

Journalist Evan Osnos's new book, Joe Biden: The Life, the Run, and What Matters Now—one of the latest installments in the literature on Biden's life—doesn't really answer this question either. It does distill the political confusion, both the possibilities and the limits, around Biden's presidency. For Democrats and liberals, the most pressing demand in the 2020 election was to defeat Donald Trump, but they often seemed less concerned about who would be elected in his place. The result, according to Osnos, is that we're now left with an "urgent appetite, at home and abroad, to divine what had made" the 46th president—"how he thought, what he carried, and what he lacked."

In a way, this uncertainty reflects our moment's deeper tensions between stasis and change. Is what's needed a restoration of the "normal"—of the world as it was before the pandemic and the destructive narcissism of the Trump presidency? Or does countering the virus and the dynamics that led to Trump require a broader political shift—an attempt to create a society defined by greater solidarity and egalitarianism and the expansion of freedom that these might permit?

Throughout the book, Osnos presents Biden as a man open to either prospect. In his telling, Biden is a figure who may well be willing to use his power to press for sweeping legislation on climate change, to invest to organize, and his first months in office have suggested the possible return of a style of liberalism absent for a generation. Here is Biden, giving a Twitter speech that is the most pro-union statement from a president in a generation! There he is, offering his support to an infrastructure bill that relies heavily on taxing corporations and appears to draw on the kind of legislation that only recently was denounced as a "green dream" by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. His coronavirus rescue measures not only supply aid to state and local governments that might stave off cuts to social services and education, they provide support that will make life significantly easier for working-class and poor families (albeit through the dubious mechanism of tax credits, as the journalist Liza Featherstone has noted). Yet Biden has also backed away from a $15 minimum wage, remains opposed to Medicare for All, and has made clear his commitment to traditional US military power by authorizing a bombing strike in Syria.

Osnos sees Biden as a man compelled by the pandemic to become receptive to a politics he would have rejected only years before. But as many have observed, and as even Osnos suggests, there is little in Biden's political history that indicates any certainty that this will continue. Once the more immediate emergencies of Covid and the current economic crisis have passed, will he have the will and the desire to realize a political program centered on creating a more just and egalitarian society—permanently expanding the welfare state, empowering workers to organize, embarking on the kind of public investment needed to blunt climate change?

Although Biden now portrays himself as "Joe from Scranton," the child of hardscrabble northeastern Pennsylvania, one has to go back only a generation to find that much of his family hailed from money. His grandfather was an executive at the American Oil Company and enjoyed a life of privilege. But Biden's father failed in many of his own business ventures, and a family that had started near the top of the economic pyramid tumbled down—so much so that by the time Biden was 10, they had left Pennsylvania to settle in Wilmington, where his father began selling used cars.

As tenuous as his father's position may have been, Biden's childhood in Wilmington was anything but working-class. He went to a private day school where, as Osnos puts it, he was a "middling but popular" student. He attended the University of Delaware and went to Syracuse Law School, primarily to be close to his girlfriend Neilia Hunter, who would soon become his first wife. At Syracuse, Biden horsed around and almost flunked out, getting in trouble for writing a paper that used the work of others without the proper citations. In these years, he was peripatetic and jocular, seeking to include friends in possible business deals and making time for the family reunion, the first communion of a niece or nephew, or a gathering at the pizza shop with old school pals.

An affable guy, sure, but a president? In an age of student rebellion, Biden proved distinctly uninterested in the issues raised by the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. An institutionalist from the start, he instead looked to electoral politics—not to bring the politics of his generation into the halls of power so much as to enter them himself.

After graduating from Syracuse, Biden returned to Wilmington, where he briefly served as a public defender before running for the New Castle County Council. From this post, at the age of 29, he challenged Republican incumbent J. Caleb Boggs for his seat in the US Senate. Boggs had represent-

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ed Delaware as a senator for 12 years, but Biden managed to win the seat.

In some ways, Biden’s defeat of Boggs has parallels with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s toppling of 10-term Representative Joe Crowley in her first congressional race. But unlike AOC, whose political awakening came during Bernie Sanders’s 2016 presidential campaign, Biden was not really part of the social movements of his day. He had never been very involved in the anti-war or the civil rights movement, and he kept his distance from the New Left. He was more like a 1972 version of Pete Buttigieg, absent the academic credentials: a clever young man who could embody youthful energy, even passion, but without an oppositional politics.

Once in the Senate, Biden quickly became known as the “Democratic Party’s leading anti-busing crusader,” Osnos writes, opposed to the use of busing to desegregate Wilmington’s schools. In many ways, he amassed a record that one might strain to term “moderate,” voting for the 1994 crime bill, for welfare “reform,” and for the war in Iraq. As head of the Senate Judiciary Committee during Clarence Thomas’s confirmation hearings, Biden refused to allow testimony from other women concerning instances of sexual harassment by the Supreme Court nominee similar to those reported by Anita Hill. But rhetorically, at least, he has always tried to present himself as a politician for the downtrodden, a leader who would restore Americans’ declining faith in government.

Biden was never quite like the other New Democrats, a roster that included his contemporaries Gary Hart, Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and (years later) Barack Obama. His approach was never as technocratic as theirs, his commitment to markets never as ideological. Instead, he has long sought to appeal to the white working class, to position himself as part of it, even if this was as much a question of salesmanship and fantasy as anything else.

Given that it wasn’t backed by much substance, this ambition could also get him into trouble. The turning point of his 1988 campaign came when he lifted a speech directly from Neil Kinnock, the head of Britain’s Labour Party, in one of the primary debates that year. “Why is it that Joe Biden is the first in his family to go to a university?” he asked. “Was it because our fathers and mothers were not bright?… My ancestors, who worked in the coal mines of Northeast Pennsylvania and would come up after twelve hours and play football for four hours?” Biden, however, never had any coal miners in his family; the words were taken from Kinnock’s speech. (Indeed, as the historian Gabriel Winant has written in The Guardian, Biden’s only personal connection to the coal industry was a distant relative who died in 1911 and had actually owned a mine.) He’d cited Kinnock before, so a case could be made that in the pressure and anxiety of the debates, Biden simply forgot to attribute the source. But the press soon uncovered his earlier plagiarism incident in law school, as well as a cringe-inducing failure to credit Robert F. Kennedy for the lines in another campaign speech, and shortly thereafter, Biden was out of the race.

The imbroglio with Kinnock’s speech reflected Biden’s larger plight as a politician: He wanted to present himself as a standard-bearer for the old working class, while lacking any real connection to its members and not necessarily doing all that much to advocate on their behalf. In the end, however, these gestures to a working-
class style without a working-class politics paid off for him. It was precisely his image as Scranton Joe, someone who could speak to blue-collar workers, that made him attractive to Obama as a running mate in 2008. The Illinois senator, a university professor with a reputation for aloofness and playing it cool, saw in the political veteran a valuable point of identification. Here was someone who could signal Obama’s own moderation and help him connect with older white voters. And this symbolic identification stripped of a larger political program was partly also what brought the Democratic establishment to rally around Biden in 2020. As he assured wealthy voters at an early fundraiser, “Nothing would fundamentally change.”

If Biden’s attempt to identify with the working class has always been more aspiration than reality, the key aspect of his personal history that Osnos emphasizes is his experience of tragedy. The shocking death of his first wife and their baby daughter in a 1972 car accident that left him a single parent with two young sons, both injured in the crash, was only the first of his personal trials. More would follow: his own brain aneurysm and near-death in 1988 and, much more recently, the death of his son Beau from brain cancer at 46. Then there is his son Hunter, who has struggled with alcoholism and drug addiction for much of his life while also pursuing a career as a lobbyist and investor and getting entangled in shady deals with various foreign firms, with little regard for the effect it might have on his father’s career.

Biden has indeed suffered a great deal, and it is hard to imagine at times how he endured—in particular how he managed to sustain his political career during the years after the death of his wife and daughter, as his siblings and parents scrambled to help with his two small boys. But many journalistic accounts rely on these experiences to provide Biden with a political gravitas that isn’t always there. At points, the inescapable grief he has had to bear begins to stand in for the weight of history in his life and the limits of his own political achievements.

Osnos falls prey to this temptation to transmute Biden’s personal story into a larger politics. At times, the image that emerges is affecting. Describing how, during the 2020 campaign, Biden’s aides tried to have him speak on the phone every day with a “regular person,” Osnos recounts the day last spring when Biden was connected through a campaign worker with Mohammad Qazzaz, the owner of a coffee-roasting business in Dearborn, Mich., who had recently tested positive for the coronavirus and was attempting to quarantine in his house away from his two kids. His 2-year-old daughter kept knocking on his bedroom door, trying to get him to come out. Qazzaz choked up as he told Biden about how much he wanted to open the door for his little girl, but he was terrified of infecting her. Right away, Biden offered his own story of loss, a time when his two small sons didn’t understand the tragedy that had just happened to them all. He suggested how Qazzaz could connect with his daughter: by playing a game through the door, telling her a story. The two men were scheduled to speak for only a few minutes, but they wound up talking for more than 20.

Despite its staginess, this tale evokes Biden as a caregiver, someone who once had to stanch his own confused sorrow to guide frightened children. But for Osnos, it is also an example of his abilities as a leader for our moment. Biden’s experiences of loss, Osnos tells us, might make him the perfect president in a time when so many are dealing with death, illness, and despair. Drawing on an ability to empathize born of his history of grief, Biden may be a “weathervane,” Osnos suggests, a leader who will follow the calls for greater social spending, bold action on climate change, and steps toward racial justice. As the country reels from the public health crisis of the past year and the various pathologies that it has highlighted, the implication is that Biden may be willing to cast off the institutions and establishment he’s spent his life serving and push for more radical responses to the disasters unfolding around us.

Although Biden began his campaign with the narrow goal of defeating Donald Trump, Osnos argues, over the course of 2020 he began to awake to the reality that the “emergency” was even bigger than he had imagined. In this context, Biden might not provide “exalted rhetoric,” but “for a people in mourning, he might offer something like solace, a language of healing.”
wealth cannot simply be created from above, and it cannot be achieved without a considerable break from the past.

With the likes of David Brooks and Ezra Klein hailing Biden’s presidency as “transformational,” one popular theme to emerge has been that Biden is focused on policy rather than on political rhetoric; he has mostly chosen to stay away from divisive words. For all the comparisons to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, no money-changers are being thrown out of the temple here, and that’s all to the good.

Yet this cheerful assessment seems to breeze past the larger uncertainties, the tentative shifts, not just for Biden but for the whole country. Might not the absence of a political language, a framework to make sense of what’s happening, reflect the president’s own divided loyalties, not his canny strategic sense? If Biden was so willing to turn away from pressing for a higher minimum wage, what chance is there that he will work his old Senate connections to drum up support for changes to the legal infrastructure that would make it easier for people to organize unions, or use the presidency to lay out a moral vision that shames and marginalizes those legislators who oppose them? More deeply, will the steps toward reimagining the public sector represented by the coronavirus relief bill crystallize into a fuller commitment to the communal resources—health care, schools, day care, transit, parks—upon which we all rely? And absent a politics that has the power and the capacity to rally people against the deadly hierarchies that rule our lives, to really deliver a more just and equal society, won’t Trumpism—with its clear division of the world into enemies and friends, its crude and racist version of solidarity, its conspiracy theories that offer a compelling (if loony) explanation of power—continue to thrive, even if the Donald himself slinks off to a Twitterless obscurity in Mar-a-Lago?

These are the questions that only the next few years can answer, and the landscape may be shifting quickly, in the warehouses and hospitals and schools of the country as much as in the capital. But one thing is clear: The losses of the pandemic time are not simply the inevitable outcome of the natural order cruel twists of fate. They reflect in harsh detail the familiar inequalities of our lives. In this bleak landscape, the language of mourning and of solace is not enough. What we need is a language of outrage—and a politics of it too.

Overture to a Tragedy

Greetings to you who holds me close.
I hold you close because of your beauty
(I wanted to possess your beauty)—

The beauty which leaves your body that remains.

Greetings to you who stares at my face.
I stare at your face because of your smile
(I wanted to possess your smile)—

The smile which leaves your lips that remain.

Greetings to you who wakes me from sleep.
I wake you from sleep because of your dreams
(I wanted to possess your dreams)—

The dreams with nowhere to go when you wake.

Greetings to you and your luminous gaze.
You know that I’m not a thief.
I covet only one thing irresistibly,

Your heart—I beg you,

please, replace my heart with yours.

KIM OK
(translated from the Korean by Ryan Choi)
Degrees of Emancipation

Was Marx also a social democrat?

BY BRUCE ROBBINS

Karl Marx never publicly referred to his Jewish background. That background was known to all his friends, and Marx gave no sign of wishing to deny it. But even his daughter Eleanor, who studied Yiddish after becoming politically involved with the working-class Jews of London’s East End, refrained from mentioning her father’s conversion to Christianity.

As its title suggests, *Karl Marx: Philosophy and Revolution*, by the distinguished Israeli political scientist Shlomo Avineri, is not, in spite of the “Jewish Lives” series for which it was written, primarily about Marx’s Jewishness, such as it was. The book gives us, along with a quick and readable account of the life and works, a Marx whom Avineri takes as more useful for what he sees as our nonrevolutionary times. In his view, Marx was less inspired by the desperation of the 19th century working class, which cried out for immediate revolutionary change, than by the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and justice, whose realization might be seen as following a less pressured timetable. This fidelity to liberty and justice, Avineri goes on to argue, came in part from his family’s mixed experience of those ideals, dangled in front of them as members of the Rhineland Jewish community during the French Revolution and then jerked away in its aftermath. For Avineri, that jarring experience inspired both Marx’s commitment to an egalitarian universalism and his skepticism as to whether liberalism could deliver on that commitment.

Avineri, one suspects, is also writing from his own experience, as an Israeli and a Zionist. He reminds us in the book that he once served as the Director-General of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sustaining simultaneous commitments to universalism and particularism is never a walk in the park, but it has been an absolute nightmare for the leaders of Israel, a state that has tried to claim it is both democratic and Jewish. Avineri, who has written important books on Marx and Hegel as well as on Zionism, wants to stick up for the universal values of democracy. One can only approve. But by siding with Marx’s universalism—a universalism that Avineri links less to the international struggle of the working class against capital than to an unrealized Enlightenment liberalism—he ushers us gently away from the revolutionary Marx to a more gradualist and social democratic Marx whose central vision of change is better adapted, in the author’s eyes, to today’s limited political horizons. The largest question the book raises, then, is not about Marx but about the times we live in: how drastic a change we need (thinking forward, for example, to the climate crisis, which is not going away, or the climate-change-induced pandemic that will inevitably come after this one) and the prospects that social democracy offers—or doesn’t—for making it happen.

Born in 1818, Marx grew up in the Rhineland town of Trier, near the French border. It was an eventful time for the region’s Jews. Just how eventful can be seen from the narrative of Marx’s family name, which Avineri has gone deep into the local archives to explore. Marx’s paternal grandfather was born Mordecai Levi. He was the chief rabbi of Trier, and it was during his years in office that the town was conquered by the French revolutionary armies and annexed to France. French law was extended to the Rhineland.

This extension of French rights and jurisprudence was truly revolutionary. It meant that, for a brief but consequential moment, the region’s Jewish population was emancipated and granted equal rights. It also paved the way for greater assimilation: Mordecai Levi could (or was encouraged to?) rename himself Marcus Levi. He was the chief rabbi of Trier, and it was during his years in office that the town was conquered by the French revolutionary armies and annexed to France. French law was extended to the Rhineland.

This extension of French rights and jurisprudence was truly revolutionary. It meant that, for a brief but consequential moment, the region’s Jewish population was emancipated and granted equal rights. It also paved the way for greater assimilation: Mordecai Levi could (or was encouraged to?) rename himself Marcus Levi, which eventually became Marx Levi—the name that Marx’s father would briefly take on. It is
“intriguing to speculate,” Avineri writes, that without French interference, “Marx would have been born Karl Levi.” He then asks, playfully, whether “a theory called ‘Levism,’ or later “Levism-Leninism,” would have had the same wide appeal as “Marxism.”

As Avineri tells the story, French intervention in the fate of the Rhineland’s Jews was not only a major factor in the lives of Marx’s grandfather and father; it was also central to his own political coming of age. When the French were expelled in 1814, four years before Marx was born, the Rheneland was handed over to Prussia, and the Jewish community of Trier suddenly had its emancipation and equal rights revoked. Marx’s father, who appeared in the 1801 census as Heschel Lewy, had become Henry Marx by the time he started to study law. But when Prussia’s anti-Jewish legislation was reimposed in 1815, it once again became illegal for any Jew to hold a position of authority over a Christian. Thus, Henry Marx (now Heinrich again) could no longer practice law—unless he converted to Christianity. He petitioned to be spared conversion, but his petitions were rejected, and so he converted. Still, Heinrich and his family remained very much a part of the Jewish community. He served as its legal counsel; his brother took over the post of chief rabbi; Heinrich’s wife, Henriette, was also the child of a rabbi and did not convert until after her father died. When Marx was born, she was still Jewish, and according to Jewish law, this made Marx Jewish.

This is a lot of history to have left “no clue,” as Avineri puts it, in Marx’s “enormous body of work, drafts, and correspondence.” It certainly made its mark on his circle of acquaintances. Among the (fellow) Jews who surrounded Marx in his days as a student was Eduard Gans, his teacher in Berlin and a protégé of Hegel. When Gans converted to Christianity in 1825 in order to be named a professor, Heinrich Heine—like Marx, a Jewish Rhinelander who, according to Avineri, was likely radicalized by the community’s bizarre experience of emancipation tendered and then revoked—paid sarcastic tribute in a poem, “To an Apostate”: “And you crawled towards the cross / That same cross which you detested... / Yesterday you were a hero / But today you’re just a scoundrel.” As Avineri notes wryly, “Heine himself converted later the same year, and the anger (and disgust) may have been aimed at himself as well.”

Avineri does not claim Marx as a “Jewish thinker.” He does not endorse Isaiah Berlin’s suggestion that the proletariat was for Marx an unconscious substitute for his repressed Jewish identity. He does not argue that the tradition of Old Testament prophecy spoke through Marx’s messianism, as others have maintained. When Avineri writes about, say, The Communist Manifesto or Capital, he goes silent on Marx’s Jewishness, and he is right in this. To do otherwise would be to overvalue Marx’s Jewish background and undervalue his analytic genius. But Avineri does make a compelling case that for Marx, French Enlightenment universalism drew its long-lasting appeal from the short-lived emancipation of the Jews of the Rheneland, which also gave Marx a standard against which to judge the German state “as not really representing the general interests.”

This disappointment with the pretend universalism of the state, Avineri argues, made Marx both an angry critic of Hegel and an inheritor of the ideals of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Communism would do what, despite Hegel’s hopes, the state had failed to do. It is not news that, as Avineri writes, “the origins of Marx’s socialism are in an internal radical critique of Hegel’s philosophy.” But the controversy continues over how much of Hegel he rejected and how much he retained; Avineri sees him retaining a lot. While Marx thought he had replaced Hegel’s idealism with a materialism centered in the deprivation of the working class, Avineri maintains instead that, thanks in large part to the tumultuous political experience of the Rheneland Jews, he was more decisively swayed by Hegel’s commitment to Enlightenment universalism than by the knowledge he acquired (largely through Engels) of the condition of the industrial working class.

“Marx never studied directly the life condition of the modern proletariat,” Avineri writes, and the contention clearly means a lot to him, as he repeats it: “Marx never independently studied working-class conditions on his own,” we read 50 pages later. If Marx was so interested in analyzing the dynamics of what came to be called capitalism (the word didn’t exist yet), it was largely, in Avineri’s view, so as to understand the failure of the 1848 revolutions, which is to say the weaknesses of an Enlightenment universalism that was rolled back almost as soon as it was initiated. Marx’s analysis of 1848 also gave him confidence that another Enlightenment-bearing revolution was just around the corner—or, at the least, should be. But for Avineri, Marx’s study of capital and its impact on the making of modern class led him toward skepticism about revolutionary politics. Insurrections like the Paris Commune were, in Marx’s view, premature and bound to fail. Like other biographers, Avineri points out the irony that it was Marx’s account of the Commune that made him famous as a revolutionary, even though he had not participated in the Commune and indeed had developed serious reservations about it. Only a relatively brief period of Marx’s life, Avineri insists, was in fact devoted to revolutionary activities.

Reorienting us away from Marx’s revolutionary politics and toward a latent philosophical universalism, Avineri then proceeds to the most contentious part of his argument: his rehabilitation of Marx as a philosophically minded social democrat, not merely open to the idea of a peaceful and gradual transition to socialism but quite critical of any recourse to violence. “Marx,” he writes, “argues that the Reign of Terror was itself a testimony of the failure of Jacobin politics.... [A]ny attempt to use force when conditions are not ripe for internal change are doomed to the tragedy—and cruelty—of the Jacobin terror.” The point could also apply to the Russian Revolution. Some Marxist prophecies have no doubt failed, but this is one that arguably came true. On the other hand, should we imagine Marx condemning antifa?

While there is much to admire in Avineri’s insistence that Marx can and should remain relevant to today’s politics, there are aspects of his commitment to social democracy that would leave readers in the dark about some
of the issues where Marxism remains most vibrantly alive. One of the foremost is the connection between capitalism, violence, and racism. In theory, capitalism was not supposed to need violence (as feudalism did) in order to separate the poor from the products of their labor. The exception, mentioned at the very end of Capital, Volume I, as the very beginning of capital’s rule, was so-called primitive accumulation, or colonial-style expropriation, which Marx insists is distinct from exploitation.

Yet even if he saw violent expropriation as a precondition for capitalism’s emergence, Marx did not insist that it would necessarily disappear with the advent of wage labor. And as many Marxist thinkers have pointed out, a distinctly capitalist violence has in fact persisted into the 21st century. Colonialism, racism, police brutality, and mass incarceration, they argue, have to be considered central features of a capitalist system that has never been able to—and perhaps never could—make do with exploitation alone.

As the historian Walter Johnson has shown, the textile mills of Manchester depended on the cheap cotton grown by unwaged slaves on the plantations of Mississippi. Likewise, the racialized prison population of the United States gives ample evidence that violent expropriation, premised on the denial of full political rights to some portion of the population, is still very much alive. So too, then, is the Marx who gives us analytic terms for it. Readers who are not alerted to this side of Marx’s legacy are being cheated out of a valuable inheritance.

But what to make of Marx’s own engagement with Jewishness—Europe’s, if not his own? The go-to text here is “On the Jewish Question,” Marx’s youthful 1844 essay (he was 26), which comes in two parts. The first is a critique of Bruno Bauer’s writings on Jewish emancipation, and it offers the groundwork for Marx’s critique of liberalism and the limits of formal democracy. Bauer, who in later years would write a viciously anti-Semitic tract and became a supporter of German imperial expansion, insisted that if Jews wanted equal rights, they would have to convert. Marx, perhaps inspired by the pain and anger he felt at his father’s forced conversion, took umbrage at such a demand and argued against the need for conversion; Jews as they are deserved equal civil and political rights.

So far, so good. But then the essay becomes, in Avineri’s words, “controversial, if not notorious.” In the second part, Marx expresses what Avineri politely calls “some extremely critical views about Judaism, identifying it with capitalism.” This is an understatement: Marx equates Jewishness with money-grubbing and adopts a particularly pernicious stereotype, Judentum, as a metaphor for commercial society in order to denounce it.

One might object, in Marx’s defense, that at the time this was common practice, among Jews as well as non-Jews. Heine, a Jew who had a thing about Jewish noses, described Hamburg as “a city of haggler” inhabited by “baptized and unbaptized Jews (I call all Hamburg’s inhabitants Jews).” One might also note, as Avineri does, that “if Marx’s words on Judaism are harsh, his indictment of Christianity as the source of universal human alienation because of the rule of money is even harsher.” In other words: OK, Jews may be like this, but so are Christians. Under present social conditions, everyone is obliged to be like this.

This is not a rhetorical strategy that one can enthusiastically recommend, since it comes dangerously close to reinforcing existing prejudices. Avineri, who does not hide how troubled he is by it, nevertheless defends Marx. He argues, first, that Marx never talked about actual Jewish people or Judaism but only spoke in a “code”—Judaism standing in for the dominance of commerce—that “was known and universally understood by his contemporaries.” And he returns to his insistence on the trauma of the Marx family’s conversion, suggesting that with this recent history in mind, Marx “defensively sought to dissociate himself from even a whiff of lingering identification with Judaism, to prove that his anti-Bauer argument was unrelated to his family’s background.” He also emphasizes the fact that Marx never said anything as offensive as this again, even when a good opportunity presented itself—for example, when he got pugnacious with the Jewish polemists against Bauer in The Holy Family.

To say the least, it’s not an ironclad defense. If neither here nor elsewhere did Marx discuss actual Jews, their living conditions, or their religious practices, isn’t the same thing true of certain unambiguous anti-Semites? Avineri insists that Marx knew nothing about the lives and religious practices of actual Jews—but could this be true, given that his grandfather and uncle both served as the chief rabbi of Trier? And does it matter either way?

If there is a better defense, it would perhaps entail accepting that Marx spoke as a revolutionary or at least a radical, not as a social democrat, and in that mode he got himself in trouble. After disagreeing with Bauer and supporting political emancipation for the Jews here and now, Marx then goes on to discuss what human emancipation would have to entail. Human emancipation cannot happen, he proposes, without getting rid of religion itself, Christianity as well as Judaism, and that is why Judaism is also the target of his essay. A liberal form of emancipation, one that leaves civil society untouched, would allow religion and its forms of inequality to remain in place—or, Marx adds, even strengthen them by making them part of the unregulated private sphere. It’s the same problem at the level of economics: Political emancipation leaves private property alone.

Marx may be too confident thinking that getting rid of both religion and private property would necessarily rid the world of anti-Semitism or, for that matter, other kinds of racism. But at least he was trying to speak with that end in view. Social democrats, when they speak, are obliged to be very careful about the sensitivities attached to existing identities—or perhaps that is true only in countries like the United States today, where the Democratic National Committee has put its fate in the hands of women and minorities. Revolutionaries, however, though they also know they have a natural constituency in women and the oppressed, are more likely to assume that no one, including these groups, is so very attached to their own identity, since that identity has been largely imposed on them by a social system they have good reasons to dislike. As a revolutionary, one therefore is likely to speak about those already existing identities in a less generous fashion even if
he or she recognizes they are not the root of the problem.

At one point in the essay, Marx writes, “No one in Germany is emancipated. We ourselves are not free. How are we to liberate you?” It’s a fair point—but the mode in which Marx speaks here is even more important. He permits himself a sweeping revolutionary rhetoric that refuses to be toned down even if it might offend. Perhaps it even wants to offend.

The same could be said of “On the Jewish Question” in general. Marx is less attuned to the sensitivities of the present because he writes primarily with a view to the future, a future in which he assumes that many of the binaries that now define us will have fallen. As a revolutionary, Marx assumes that we need to become something other than what we are and that we also want to become something other than what we are.

As Avineri moves beyond the revolutionary 1840s, the Jewish theme goes underground and stays there for much of the rest of the book. But it comes back toward the end when he discusses how, despite Marx’s commitment to Enlightenment universalism, Marx did take into account the particularities of different national situations—for example, when he answered, with some reluctance, questions about the prospects for revolution in this or that country.

Thinking first and foremost of the fortunes of the working class, Marx is often understood as not being extremely sympathetic to the struggles for national independence, for example in Germany and Italy, and this put him at odds with many of his fellow leftists who, Avineri notes, wanted to combine socialism and nationalism, including—Avineri adds—the combination of “socialist Zionism.” And it is true that on matters national and international, Marx’s primary focus on class conflict did not always give him much added insight into the subject of empire and national liberation.

As Avineri shows, Marx was troubled (as many of us have continued to be) by the difficulty of formulating a political position that satisfies both local and international interests and aspirations. His fear of Russia as a reactionary world policeman meant that he also found himself “siding with conservative British politicians who saw the containment of Russia as one of their major geopolitical aims.” After the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, he welcomed the downfall of the Second Empire of Napoleon III and called on French workers, who were about to embark on the noble adventure of the Paris Commune, to make their peace with the provisional government. This stance led some on the left to label him (on the principle that the enemy of my enemy is my friend) an apologist for Bismarck and Germany. He defended the position by noting that the success of French imperialism was holding back the self-definition of the French working class—and here he was not wrong.

When Avineri accuses Marx of having insufficient sympathy for the Indian victims of British imperialism, he is iffy on affect—there is no question where Marx’s sympathies lie, even if his revulsion at the imperial plunderers was stronger than his deference to the village communities whose way of life they destroyed. Here Avineri also undervalues Marx’s universalism. When Marx wrote of Indian peasants, he was saying no more than what he said about the French peasants of 1848: that they were not ready for revolution. He was not making a distinction between a European “us” and a non-European “them.” Marx’s disappointment in the political potential of peasants may have been unfounded, but it was genuinely universalistic.

Approaching the end of his book, Avineri comes upon a moment when, in his view, Marx might have taken the demands of the national more seriously: He speculates about what may have been said between Marx and Heinrich Graetz, an ordained Orthodox rabbi who trained in Leopold von Ranke’s school of German historiography, when the two became friends at the spas in Carlsbad and then began coordinating frequent visits there.

A Poem

It is not normal, a woman says
Never has been, another said
Ordinary, the men women make
In parks, corners of street, rhyme Daily,
I shut the window I pass messages by
The so-called tender seed of birch blows quietly by
It will be crushed in the office of living
and still may take root So crush
what is given The tender too carry guns
Do not forgive the too forgiven

Jos Charles
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HARDCOVER

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Graetz is the subject of a chapter in Avineri’s *The Making of Modern Zionism*, a book that begins, like *Karl Marx*, with the 19th century emancipation of the Jews. The Jews went into the 19th century defined as a religion, Avineri writes, but came out of it with the option of defining themselves as a nation, and he gives the lion’s share of the credit to Graetz’s proto-Zionist political history.

Born in 1817, the year before Marx, and, like him, deeply influenced by Hegel, Graetz becomes a sort of alter ego to Marx—a notion that grows more pronounced in the final pages of the new book. It’s as if the idea of solving the problem of Jewish identity by becoming a Zionist was always there, floating in the background, waiting in vain to be recognized by Marx.

The missing minutes of their meetings, Avineri notes, await “the creative talents of a gifted novelist—or playwright—to imagine what the two were talking about when walking side by side from one spring of mineral water to another and sharing their ideas about history, past, present, and possibly future.” It’s a lovely image, but these days it seems unlikely that any responsible writer or reader—even those social democrats who might embrace Avineri’s Marx—would give these materials the sort of spin that Avineri seems to be hoping for.

Since it’s unlikely that we can expect the appearance of a Zionist Marx, miraculously uniting Enlightenment universalism with Israeli nationalism, we are left with one final question: Should we prefer Avineri’s social democratic Marx over the older revolutionary Marx? These days would-be revolutionaries are in no position to mock the timidity of the gradualists. Today, who isn’t a social democrat? The term fits Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the Rev. William J. Barber II, however revolutionary each may seem in the current American context, and one wonders if parallel to these important figures we also need a more revolutionary voice, like Marx’s, which might inspire the kind of movements that can confront the vast problems of climate change, pandemics, and rising inequality without the polite tones that are preferred by today’s political elite. For that, and more, it’s good to know that the revolutionary Marx can still speak to us, rudely and ringingly and righteously.

Another World
*The grand return of Pharoah Sanders*

BY MARCUS J. MOORE

Not everyone loves the piercing sound of Pharoah Sanders’s saxophone. It’s a sonic signature so polarizing that, in his 50-year career, he’s become something of a bête noire among listeners and critics alike. In the mid-1960s, as jazz transitioned from straight-ahead bebop and hard bop, Sanders, along with saxophonists John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, helped pioneer a frenetic blend of spiritual jazz that, through shrieking horns and loose rhythmic structures, was meant to summon higher powers.

The idea, it seemed, was to blow the sax so hard that the music reached God’s ears. But this technique also had its detractors: *New Yorker* critic Whitney Balliett once likened it to “elephant shrieks” that “appeared to have little in common with music.” Dennis Hunt, writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, called it “primitive” and “nerve-wracking.” Neither Coltrane nor Ayler would live to see this strain of jazz become popular: Coltrane died of liver cancer in 1967; Ayler died three years later under mysterious circumstances. The Holy Trinity of spiritual jazz had been winnowed to one: Sanders, the Son to Coltrane’s Father and Ayler’s Holy Ghost.

Now 80 years old, with nearly 40 albums to his credit as a bandleader, Sanders is an icon—albeit a reluctant and reclusive one—whose catalog (a heady mix of soul, free jazz, and spiritual jazz) has only appreciated with time. While Sanders isn’t the leader of *Promises*, his new album, composed by Sam Shepherd (an electronic producer known as Floating Points) and featuring the London Symphony Orchestra, it still feels like a grand return for a legend whose sound influenced a generation, be it fellow saxophonists like Shabaka Hutchings, the rap producer Madlib, or Shepherd himself. On paper,
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Sanders and Floating Points is an odd pairing—the latter being a key figure in dance music. But there’s a strong synergy, as if Sanders and Shepherd were guiding each other through the music without any preconceived notions of where it would end up. Sanders was introduced to Shepherd’s music by a representative of the record label Luaka Bop, who played Floating Points’ then-unreleased album *Elaeina* for him in 2015. Sanders said he’d like to meet the artist one day. The two eventually got together, first in London, then in a Los Angeles studio to record this composition in 2019.

Though *Promises* is separated by tracks, or “movements,” as they’re called here, it’s one composition meant to be played in one take. In that way, it recalls Sanders’s 1971 album *Black Unity*. But where *Unity* was upbeat, *Promises* is an ambient record, which is perhaps the natural synthesis of Sanders’s and Shepherd’s styles. Here, we find an atmospheric swirl of saxophone wails, gentle chants, abundant strings, and hovering synth chords.

There’s a prevalent calm in this collaboration, and even in its loudest moments—when the orchestra’s string section arises in “Movement 6” and when Sanders matches Shepherd’s ascending synths with thunderous brass at the end of “Movement 7”—the album sustains its meditative aura. The resounding moments are met with bouts of equally riveting stillness that lend the LP its overall brilliance. That’s due in part to Shepherd, the record’s composer, whose solo work has proven him a master of sonic tension. He likes to slowly fade in his music, letting it simmer for a few minutes before bringing it to a boil.

In “Peroration Six” and “Apoptose, Part 2,” the concluding tracks on *Elaeina* and 2019’s *Crush*, respectively, Shepherd ends the songs abruptly, just as they crescendo. While Shepherd typically does this within the scope of a two-to-five-minute song, *Promises* is a long, slow climb with pronounced peaks and valleys along the way. Tying this all together is a subtle loop of strings, electric keyboard, and acoustic piano that serves as the album’s heartbeat. The coil sounds gorgeous on its own, scaling upward as the instruments on top become more luxuriant. At certain points, when the strings and horn are stripped away, the loop resets to its original blend, doubling as a bridge to the next section. On “Movement 4,” for instance, the arrangement recedes, and Sanders fills the space with delicate hums and scatting, the only vocals we encounter in the 46 minutes of music. And his voice sounds pleasant, albeit weathered; his faint coos provide even more warmth.

By “Movement 5,” Shepherd’s key chords intensify, and Sanders meets the mood with a fairly powerful saxophone solo that briefly darkens the aura. Throughout the album, Sanders proves he still has some of the vigor of years past. Perhaps because of age or the album’s orchestral intent, his saxophone never reaches that cacophonous squeal of his youth, but the quieter approach works well in the subdued context of *Promises*. Close to the end of the album, Shepherd opts for cosmic flair, pulling buoyant synths from his production equipment to envision what floating in space might feel like; the movement’s pitch-black composition is both beautiful and weightless. Light percussion rises in the mix, and Sanders returns with his fiercest horn work on the album, a volcanic, quick-blasting solo bolstered by Shepherd’s keys and otherworldly electronics.

If there’s a track that aligns closest to Sanders’s musical aesthetic, it’s “Movement 8,” the album’s gospel-based section, where Shepherd concludes with a prominent organ solo that reminds me of something I’d hear on bygone record labels like Strata-East or India Navigation, which specialized in underground artists who integrated jazz, gospel, and soul into their work. Indirectly, Shepherd’s playing recenters Sanders as the album’s cult hero, taking listeners back to an era when records like his *Karma* and Alice Coltrane’s *Journey in Satchidananda* helped make him a star.

While Shepherd rightfully gets top billing as this album’s architect, I can hear his deference to Sanders throughout. And who could blame him? It’s likely not often that he gets to build with a pillar like this, whose open-mindedness and exquisite playing have co-constructed a work as solid as *Promises*. In the end, they and the London Symphony Orchestra have compiled a masterpiece that, like Sanders’s classic work, will only get better with each subsequent listen.
Disability Access

Re “Abolish Guardianship and Preserve the Rights of Disabled People,” by Sara Luterman [March 22/29]: I can speak to being in a school for the blind and visually impaired, having attended one for many years in Baton Rouge. Disability service systems are never designed to support persons with disabilities, but are about managing access to scarce resources.

David Faucheux
Lafayette, La.

Where is the Joy?

Re “The Lavish Pleasures of Natalie Wynn,” by Liza Featherstone [March 8/15]: Ms. Wynn is one of the few public figures who talk about cancel culture in a way that matters to me. I don’t care about Celebrity X or Pundit Y not getting a movie or book deal. I care about leftists going after other leftists, about activist circles getting ripped apart because we confuse our own painful dramas for attacks.

Vice President Kamala Harris gave a big tell that she wasn’t super far left in her acceptance speech when she said of the democratic struggle, “But there is joy in it.” I haven’t felt real joy from politics in a long time. I just want the left to work together for a better world and maybe for it to be fun in some parts.

James Jones

Calexit vs. the Filibuster

Nathan Newman makes a compelling argument in “The Case for Blue-State Secession,” but then he dismisses it as a “second-best solution” [Feb. 22/March 1]. Actually, his preferred solution of abolishing the Electoral College hardly has any chance for success, not to mention the adoption of a parliamentary system, whose superiority is demonstrated in Alexis Grenell’s column “[46 and Done,” Feb. 22/March 1].

The most realistic means for states to legislate or conventions to support this amendment is the best solution.

Walter L. Williams, PhD
California Independence Movement
Palm Springs, Calif.

Black Sci-Fi Worldmaking

Stephen Kearse does an exceptional job of placing N.K. Jemisin within the history of African American writers of science fiction and fantasy, even acknowledging both pioneers and current luminaries “[The Empire Is the World,” Feb. 8/15]. I was also pleased to see Christopher Priest included as part of that pantheon. Black creators who work almost exclusively on comic books or animated TV series, such as Priest and Dwayne McDuffie, are often left off lists of influential sci-fi and fantasy writers. Given that Jemisin herself now writes regularly for DC Comics, it makes sense for those names to be added to that conversation.

Vince Slusksi

Letters

Comment drawn from our website
letters@thenation.com
Please do not send attachments
Grieving for George Floyd

At the Hennepin County Government Center downtown, Derek Chauvin, the police officer who knelt on George Floyd’s neck for nearly 10 minutes last May, is facing murder charges. Outside, protesters are keeping vigil: The day before jury selection began in early March, they held a funeral in the streets. Against a backdrop of police barricades, hundreds silently marched around the Government Center to honor Floyd and other victims of police violence. The protests are rituals of mourning as well as calls for justice. Parents, partners, and friends share their trauma in the hopes of preventing someone else’s. Time and time again, they recount their loved ones’ last minutes and honor their lives. A eulogy that never ends.

—Alyssa Oursler and Anna DalCortivo

Minneapolis

Justice denied: A man walks past chalk protest art across from the Hennepin County Government Center on March 9, the second day of jury selection for Derek Chauvin’s murder trial.

Shouldering the burden: A man helps carry a symbolic casket honoring Floyd during a march through downtown Minneapolis on March 7.

Honoring a life lost: Brandon Williams, George Floyd’s nephew, lowers his head during a moment of silence outside Cup Foods, the scene of his uncle’s death, on March 12.

Feeding community: Natalia Méndez Saavedra, a Mixtec migrant, is the co-owner of La Morada restaurant, a refuge and political meeting space for undocumented migrants.
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