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The Pornographic Object of Knowledge
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Here is what Ferguson calls the ‘uncomfortable ironies, unexpected continuities, and unsettling discontinuities’ that constitute the history of race and inequality in our troubled Republic.

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17 color images

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Cover illustration: ERIC HANSON
White supremacy never stops. It never takes a day off. Its forces never quit the field of battle, even after a defeat. White supremacy doesn’t retreat; it retrenches.

On April 20, a Minneapolis jury found former police officer Derek Chauvin guilty of murdering George Floyd. The verdict came after months of nationwide protests and a three-week trial that was carried live on cable news. Chauvin’s conviction was the absolute minimum form of justice for Floyd’s family, but even that conviction was too much for some white nationalists. Hours after the verdict, white supremacist spokesperson Tucker Carlson went on television and suggested that the jury convicted Chauvin only because they were intimidated by the threat of “rioting” and property damage. Then he had a meltdown, which devolved into maniacal laughter, when a guest on his own show made the case for Chauvin’s guilt.

Other white-wing forces have taken the more subtle tack of arguing that the Chauvin verdict is proof that the criminal justice system “works.” The Wall Street Journal editorial board, for instance, took the opportunity to suggest that justice was always the likely outcome and that the protests that sprang up after Floyd’s murder were both wrong and unnecessary. Still other white commentators, like Ben Shapiro, have been promoting the idea that Black people are never satisfied and that a culture of victimhood prevents us from being happy with the outcome of the Chauvin trial. As always, white supremacists are pretty sure Black people should just be happy to be here, and any one of us who is not smiling and thankful under the yoke of unending white rule is a dangerous Negro who should go back to somewhere else.

The police, the people empowered to turn systemic racism into state-sponsored terrorism, remain totally unbow ed by the conviction of a single cop. At the very moment the verdict against Chauvin was being read in Minneapolis, police in Columbus, Ohio, shot 16-year-old Ma’Khia Bryant to death. Cops couldn’t wait until the close of business on the day George Floyd’s family found some measure of justice before killing another Black person.

I am obligated to say that Bryant was brandishing what appeared to be a kitchen knife at the moment she was shot by the police. I have to say that because, if I don’t, some white people will inevitably accuse me of avoiding the issue, and the very worst will accuse me of smearing the officer. I have to say that because the existence of that knife is why the officer will never be brought to justice. I have to surface the cop’s justification for gunning down a teenager less than a minute after arriving on the scene because the guardians of white ascendancy will simply not allow me to declare that shooting a Black teenage girl is a crime.

That’s the relentlessness of white supremacy. Every trauma must be dissected, every pain must be justified, and the prevailing white majority claims the sole right to determine whether those pains and traumas are legitimate, as if white people are the sovereigns of reality itself.

Even in the privacy of my own mind, the knowledge that most white people can only see the horrors of their police if Black people die in the appropriate, submissive way gnaws at me. When I saw the body camera footage of Bryan t’s death, I exclaimed, “Damn it”—not because they killed another Black person who should have been allowed to live but because I knew they’d get away with it.

Black people are always on trial. We are always being policed: in how we fight, how we mourn, and how we die.

Black people are always on trial. We are always being policed: in how we fight, how we mourn, and how we die. We are always being asked to produce evidence for why we should be allowed to live, and we can be beaten or killed at a moment’s notice should we fail to give the right answer.

And we’re never given one day of peace.
Stop Andrew Yang

Ranked-choice voting gives New Yorkers a chance to keep this unqualified dilettante from seizing power.

As a long-shot 2020 presidential candidate, Andrew Yang offered an entertaining diversion from the grimly serious business of defeating Donald Trump. Yang’s “MATH” hats, unabashedly nerdy followers, and uncanny ability to bring any social problem—from systemic racism to the crisis in health care—back to his panacea of a universal basic income mattered less than his entrepreneurial enthusiasm, PowerPoint persona, and air of business acumen.

But if his current poll numbers hold, Yang might actually become the next mayor of New York City—and that would be a catastrophe. New York has already had a rich dilettante as mayor. And Mike Bloomberg, for all his abundant faults, was an actual businessman who built and ran an actual corporation. The biggest organization Yang has ever run is his presidential campaign—which won him zero pledged delegates and fewer total votes than Tom Steyer. His candidacy did win him enough media attention to fuel a second career as a celebrity pundit—which must have made running for mayor seem like a win-win proposition. And at a time when Asian Americans are the target of hatred, Yang’s positive campaign and youthful followers have been a source of pride to a community too long overlooked amid New York’s competing constituencies. But, his repeated missteps—fleeing the Covid-stricken city, urging a crackdown on street vendors (many of them immigrants), clumsily attempting to pander to the LGBTQ community and to Orthodox Jewish voters—would have sunk a campaign that was based on issues rather than personality.

Yet in the era of social capitalism, when a Twitter following is easily converted into a donor base, Yang’s momentum may be hard to stop. Though there have been few reliable polls, he maintains a wide lead in those that have been released. While that may mostly be due to the name recognition he accrued during the presidential campaign, his mayoral bid—guided by Tusk Strategies, the consulting firm run by Bradley Tusk, Bloomberg’s former mayoral campaign manager—has been adept at nurturing a “front-runner” aura.

In ordinary times, Yang’s quest might qualify as harmless entertainment, a reality-TV spectacle for the chattering classes. But with New Yorkers still reeling from more than 50,000 Covid deaths and the city’s economy shattered and in desperate need of repair, the stakes are too high, and the cost of failure far too great, to elect a mayor who will require on-the-job training. As the disappointment of Bill de Blasio’s two terms amply demonstrates, good intentions are simply not enough to deliver the leadership the city needs.

The bad news is that with less than two months until the Democratic primary (which in the absence of a free-spending celebrity billionaire on the Republican line will determine New York’s next mayor), progressives have signally failed to coalesce around a single candidate. Instead, partisans of Dianne Morales, Scott Stringer, and Maya Wiley all offer plausible arguments for why their candidate deserves support. Morales, the furthest behind in the polls, was ranked second by members of the New York Working Families Party. Her unabashed run on the left has energized many millennials, and as the sole Latinx candidate in a city where at least a quarter of the Democratic electorate is Spanish-speaking, she has growth potential. As comptroller, Stringer has a citywide base—and a long history of outspoken support for progressive causes that earned him first place in the WFP rankings and the backing of unions ranging from the Teamsters to the United Federation of Teachers. Wiley, who served as counsel to de Blasio and chaired the Civilian Complaint Review Board, also has significant union support—and, like Morales, argues that after centuries of being run, often badly, by men, New York should put a woman in charge.

Though former sanitation commissioner Kathryn Garcia boasts the second most impressive résumé in the race, she faces the perils of running on competence alone. New York’s electorate is too big, and too balkanized, for a candidate without a base to break through. As leader of the city’s most populous borough, Brooklyn’s Eric Adams has a base. But he also has a record—as a conservative, a former Republican, and an ex-cop—that suggests progressives should look elsewhere.

The good news is that thanks to ranked-choice voting, even with multiple candidates vying for the left lane, a progressive can still be elected. The key, as Nation contributor John Nichols has written, is for voters to rank progressives as their top picks on June 22—and then stop. The genius of ranked choice is that progressive voters can go with the candidate they like best—so long as they leave Yang off their list. Whether New Yorkers follow Working Families Party state director Sochie Nnaemeka’s advice to “rank Scott as first choice, Dianne as second, and Maya as third to prevent a corporate-backed candidate from seizing power in City Hall” or prefer a different order, the crucial point is her conclusion. Withholding votes from candidates who are too corporate, too cautious, or too unprepared to lead the city is the best strategy to save New York from a return to unbridled gentrification and callous indifference to poverty, racism, and police brutality.
FIRST MET RAMSEY CLARK, WHO DIED ON APRIL 9, when I interviewed him for *Kennedy Justice*—the book I was writing about Robert F. Kennedy’s attorney generalship. Ramsey had been the assistant attorney general in charge of the Public Lands Division (now the Lands and Natural Resources Division) at the Department of Justice. In a department that included, among others, Burke Marshall as head of the Civil Rights Division, Nicholas Katzenbach as Kennedy’s number two, and Archibald Cox as solicitor general, Ramsey was thought by many—including yours truly—to be a nonentity who was given his job as a favor to Lyndon Johnson, then John F. Kennedy’s vice president.

But I quickly learned how wrong I was. The early 1960s were a period when many observers used to refer to “extremists of both sides”—the White Citizens’ Council on the one hand and the NAACP on the other. After just an hour with Ramsey, it was so clear his heart and mind were with the NAACP that I asked him why he was not a member.

“I guess I’m not a joiner,” he said with a smile. Also, while Ramsey had only good things to say about RFK, unlike the other assistant AGs, he didn’t hesitate to say where he disagreed. For one, he disapproved of the so-called “Get Hoffa” squad targeting the Teamsters union president, Jimmy Hoffa, which he felt made for unequal justice, and told me he had opposed wiretapping and bugging organized crime figures. Not only did he believe tapping and bugging to be wrong; he also thought they were inefficient. “It takes 27 men to install one of those things” (which he called “insidious”) and to monitor it, he told me. Later, as attorney general, Ramsey would issue an unprecedented directive banning these activities by federal agencies. And, among other liberal measures, he oversaw the drafting of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1968, which addressed discrimination in housing.

Most observers who didn’t know him assumed Ramsey would carry on in the hawkish tradition of his father, Supreme Court Justice Tom C. Clark, who had served as attorney general from 1945 to 1949 under Harry Truman. It was the senior Clark who had inaugurated the attorney general’s list of subversive organizations.

But the striking difference between father and son soon became apparent. Here’s one example: In 1949, Attorney General Tom Clark brought the famous case against Judith Coplon, a 27-year-old government employee accused of passing secrets to her Soviet sweetheart. And 18 years later, it was Acting Attorney General Ramsey Clark who dismissed the case against her. “I read the record over a couple of hours and there was nothing else to do. Her conviction had been reversed because of tainted evidence. Besides, the Constitution guarantees a speedy trial,” he told me.

When my conversations with Ramsey were over, his wife, Georgia, would wave from the doorway, saying, “Adios, Ram,” and then Ramsey would drive to work in his battered 1949 Oldsmobile convertible, which he much preferred to the chauffeured limousine that came with his job.

Some years later, in 1974, when he ran for the US Senate against Senator Jacob Javits, Ramsey asked me to be his campaign manager. Unlike others in that job, who always worried that their candidate would do or say the wrong thing, I always knew I could count on Ramsey to show us the best possible way.

Once, when a lawyer told him, “Your father doesn’t agree with you,” Ramsey responded, “Then don’t tell him what I said.” A champion of civil rights and civil liberties who opposed capital punishment, Ramsey ended up spending much of his life defending unpopular people, including Saddam Hussein and the despicable Lyndon LaRouche. This is not the place to get into why he took on any particular client, other than to say he always had eloquently expressed libertarian reasons for doing what he did.

I once discovered that Ramsey kept in the top drawer of his desk a little list of things he hoped to accomplish. When I thought I saw him check something off, I asked if he might want to call this a new kind of attorney general’s list. Ramsey smiled and cleared his throat and said, “I don’t exactly approve of that other kind of list.”

Besides being educational, working for Ramsey was fun. As The New York Times pointed out, he seemed to revel in telling others what they did not want to hear. “He advocated gun control in speeches to hunters and told defense industry workers that their plants should be closed.”

There will never be another like him.
Nothing to Fear But...
It’s time for Democrats to stop being cowed by GOP threats and embrace big reforms in policy and procedure.

I am not worried about what Mitch McConnell will do should Republicans take back the Senate in 2022. I am not worried about what Republicans will do should they retake all of government in 2024. I am not worried, because I already know the answer: When Republicans have power again, they will do “the worst.” I don’t waste a lot of time or mental energy contemplating the worst, because history has shown that I am simply not creative enough to imagine what evil Republicans will come up with next. No matter where I think the bottom is, Republicans will always find a new one.

Unfortunately, many centrist and moderate Democrats seem paralyzed by the fear of what Republicans will do if they take back the Senate or the White House. They’re afraid to pass sweeping policy or procedural reforms because of how they think Republicans will punish Democratic politicians in the future. It’s hard to even have a debate about big, structural changes to how government functions because too many arguments devolve to “If Democrats do anything, Republicans will be super mean.”

Consider filibuster reform. Amid all the angst, the discussion about ditching the filibuster quickly becomes no more than a vehicle for Democrats to share doomsday predictions about what McConnell and the GOP could do with just 51 votes. Conversations about court reform engender their own “But where does it end?” arguments, in this case about how Republicans will repack the court as soon as they regain the upper hand. Meanwhile, every time I turn on C-SPAN, I see Josh Hawley or Ted Cruz standing on the Senate floor as if they didn’t encourage a mob to storm the place mere months ago. Holding colleagues accountable for insurrection is also, apparently, something the Democrats are not interested in.

The basic argument from conservative Democrats is that the party should be cautious in its use of power. Taking aggressive, provocative actions, like ending or reforming the filibuster, might encourage Republicans to use power viciously should they ever get it again. But that argument is ludicrous. It proceeds from the false premise that Republicans are restrained by what Democrats are willing to do. The truth is that Republicans are restrained only by what their racist white voters will allow, and those voters have proved time and again that they will allow anything so long as their tribe comes out on top. Democrats are acting like they shouldn’t poke the sleeping velociraptor, when in fact that “sleeping” dinosaur is bait, and they’re already being hunted by other raptors waiting to pounce.

I will acknowledge that Republicans will use any action by Democrats as an excuse to further vitiate democracy, should they get a chance. If Democrats kill or even just weaken the filibuster, Republicans will use whatever small Senate majority they’re able to cobble together to ram through the most divisive and extremist laws they can think of. If Democrats add four justices to the Supreme Court, Republicans will add 10 when they get a chance. If Democrats prosecute Trump for corruption and tax fraud, Republicans will prosecute Joe Biden for having ice cream before dinner if they have to. That is their way.

Republicans are not bluffing when they promise retribution should Democrats use the power they have won. But so what? How is that any worse than what we have now? Republicans supported a whole-cloth lie about the results of the last election, which led directly to a massive insurrection against the government. Many of their voters were willing to capture and kill elected representatives or quietly support those who would. Republicans have chosen to pursue power at any cost, and yet there are Democrats like Joe Manchin who think defending procedural gridlock will “heal” these divides.

Who in their right mind thinks Republicans won’t use all the power they have in, say, 2025 just because Democrats showed restraint in 2021? Republicans never hold their fire because they’re afraid of the Democratic response. They never say, “If we’re not careful, we might piss off Chris Coons.”

The only way to protect people from what Republicans will do once they regain power is to make it difficult for the white supremacist rump of the party to gain power again. The only way to do that, legitimately, is to secure voting rights. The cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy.

If everybody votes, Republicans cannot win. Even Republicans know that. The current incarnation of their party appeals to a majority of white voters, but even a two-thirds majority of white people is a minority of Americans. Faced with this reality, with not being able to win, Republicans would either have to broaden their appeal beyond white supremacists or start another civil war for whiteness.

Democrats are acting like they shouldn’t poke the sleeping velociraptor, when they’re already being hunted by other dinosaurs waiting to pounce.

(I’m counting on the
former, because as we saw after January 6, most of these MAGA bros are front-running cowards who can’t organize without tacit support from Facebook and Twitter.)

Securing the vote is the only thing Democrats can do to protect themselves from Republican revenge fantasies. It’s the only thing that can neutralize the Republicans who still make it into office. And, not for nothing, protecting democracy is also in the literal job description of our elected representatives.

There are other things Democrats should have the courage to do to win the next elections. It would be nice to see the party support Medicare for All; it would be nice if the senator from Arizona found it in her heart to support wage earners’ getting an extra few bucks an hour while they serve her sangria. Democrats should be able to walk, chew gum, and distribute the Covid-19 vaccine at the same time. But the only way Democrats can win the next election is if they secure voting rights ahead of that election. Democrats could mail everybody a pot of gold and still lose if only white people are allowed to vote.

If securing voting rights means Democrats have to break the filibuster to pass legislation (and it does), then they must do that. If enforcing the constitutional protections of the right to vote means Democrats have to add justices to the Supreme Court (and it does), then Democrats must do that. If these and other acts of protecting democracy mean Lindsey Graham will go on Fox News and angry-cry while vowing vengeance, Democrats must risk that and sell tickets to the meltdown. Voting rights, voting access, and voting certification are among the only things that matter.

Democrats should not be paralyzed by fear; they should be motivated by it. As my ancestors would have surely noted, there’s no sense in worrying about what the slave catcher will do if they catch you. The only thing to do is to make it to freedom.

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**Securing the vote is the only thing Democrats can do to protect themselves from Republican revenge fantasies.**

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No one is above the law, including New York’s top legal officer. I will be asking an appropriate New York District Attorney to commence an immediate investigation, and proceed as the facts merit. My personal opinion is that, given the damning pattern of facts and corroboration laid out in the article, I do not believe it is possible for Eric Schneiderman to continue to serve as Attorney General, and for the good of the office, he should resign.

Three years later and facing nearly a dozen reports of sexual misconduct himself, including assault, Cuomo is singing a very different tune. Despite calling for Schneiderman’s resignation and an investigation, he’s created a false dichotomy in his own case, implying that the former undermines the latter. Waving around the concept of due process as a shield, he’s played to the court of public opinion, where the bar for evidence is considerably higher for women than the actual standard in law. Even feminists like Gloria Steinem can slide into this trap, punting on questions about whether Cuomo should resign—after six reports of sexual misconduct had already come to light—by saying, “Everyone is entitled to an investigation.”

The thing is, the attorney general’s investigation isn’t going to prove anything we don’t already know. Among the governor’s various denials, he’s left undisputed the facts of the account by Charlotte Bennett, in which she describes him grooming and soliciting her for sex—a clear violation of New York state’s human rights law. Regarding the other allegations, the inves-
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tigation probably won’t turn up any proof hard enough to satisfy Cuomo’s most ardent defenders, or even casual CSI fans. It will simply reveal more of the facts in evidence: contemporaneous text messages or e-mails to friends and family recounting the abuse, as well as corroborating documents and witnesses (who probably won’t have video of the governor shoving his hand up anyone’s blouse). Just like in every other workplace harassment investigation, it’s he said, she said, and in at least one instance, he doesn’t say anything different from what she says.

The investigation is of course necessary to establish the full extent of Cuomo’s wrongdoing and the liability of his associates. But it does not preclude resignation, which is about a moral and ethical standard for office—something not captured by a poll showing that 88 percent of Democrats support an investigation first rather than resignation. Cuomo is clinging to the polls, but they more closely reflect standard-issue sexism and the ordinary person’s ignorance of the law than anything else. Thirty years ago, Anita Hill confronted the same problem. Over the course of nine days, 11 national polls found that the vast majority of Americans believed Clarence Thomas. A year later, the results flipped. What happened?

As with Hill, none of the polling questions on Cuomo actually described the reported abuse, having asked respondents instead to speculate on “sexual harassment,” as if it were an ill-defined matter of personal opinion. Leaving settled law up to debate confuses the issue and puts the protected class at a disadvantage by calling their rights into question. A March 18 Quinnipiac poll further muddied the issue by offering a forced choice between investigation and resignation, as if the two were mutually exclusive. Fast-reaction polls about unfurling events often catch people in the middle of forming an opinion and may push them into taking positions that usually favor the status quo. That seems to be what happened with Hill, whose credibility crumpled under the polls, allowing the Senate Judiciary Committee to proceed with Thomas’s confirmation. It seems likelier that the huge swing a year later reflects that people were still making up their minds during the hearings than that they completely reversed their positions. Social scientists who conducted face-to-face interviews with 100 women within weeks of the hearings also found much richer answers. Hard-core Thomas supporters, for instance, tended to define sexual harassment as including physical touch—a point Cuomo also keeps hammering as (false) “proof” that he didn’t harass anyone. Another of the study’s key findings was a category of supporters called “Thomas by default,” comprising women who weren’t necessarily positive toward the Supreme Court nominee but were more skeptical of Hill’s motives. It’s that baked-in suspicion that skews how women are heard: not as reliable narrators but as inherently lacking in objectivity. Why else would Cuomo’s chorus of supporters, like former congressman Charlie Rangel, keep clamoring for patience—Back off, until you’ve got some facts—as if we don’t already have enough information to act?

For the same reason that, as recently as 2018, a New Hampshire appellate court overturned a rape conviction after the defendant learned that two women in his jury were survivors of sexual assault. And that The Washington Post, up until March 2021, banned Felicia Sonmez from reporting on rape after she disclosed she was a survivor herself. Women are disqualified as witnesses to their own experiences, requiring an undue burden of proof to overcome the suspicion of bias.

Due process is just a lie we tell ourselves.
It is a common lament that American society has become polarized. Most commentators consider this to be a harmful development. But for Frances Fox Piven, a distinguished professor emerita of political science and sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center and a longtime Nation contributor, polarization is not always negative. She makes the case for what she calls “dissensus politics,” arguing that movements win reforms by exacerbating fault lines in the electorate and compelling politicians to offer concessions in order to keep their coalitions together.

—Mark Engler

ME: Many people have noted how polarized American politics is today. Political commentators suggest that protesters being divisive is counterproductive. You see polarization differently. Can you explain why?

FFP: We have to start by realizing that the dynamics of electoral politics and movement politics are very different. If you have a two-party system and you want to win elections, you need a majority. And to create a majority, you have to build alliances between different groups. In movements, agitators identify issues and raise hell over them. They drive groups into action—and some groups they will drive away. For them, that’s OK. They don’t expect to build majority coalitions by raising hell.

ME: Playing off a famous Saul Alinsky quote, you have written that organizers should “rub raw the sores of dissensus.” How does this produce movement victories?

FFP: Often when movements win, we win because politicians want to stop divisions that are being caused by the disruptive behavior of the movement. For example, let’s assume that we have massive rent strikes in the big cities of the United States, because people don’t have the money to pay the rent and there are evictions threatened. This will create divisions between landlords and tenants, obviously, but also between people who side with the tenants and people who think that the landlords have to be supported and can’t be allowed to go bankrupt. So these divisions will leave politicians to try to stop what’s going on. Politicians don’t like divisions—especially within their coalition. To fend off the splintering of their coalition, they will try to propose reform. And that’s how movements win.

ME: You have said that movements and electoral politics are not mutually exclusive, and in fact that they need each other. How so?

FFP: People don’t join movements unless they think they can win something. What makes them think that they can win is often the electoral environment and the promises that politicians make. It’s the encouragement that they get from electoral victories—even small, low-level electoral victories. When politicians are trying to win an election, they blast off about what they’re going to do differently, and they create a good deal of hope. By doing that, they help to instigate the kind of ambition that fuels movement politics.

ME: How do you answer people who say that polarization hurts Democrats’ chances of winning in places that are more conservative?

FFP: Well, it may be true that it hurts their chances. Not everything a movement does supports the broad agenda of reform. But when it comes to people who are marginalized, I certainly believe in the utility and the beneficial effects of conflict on democratic processes. A lot of the tragedy of American democracy is the result of quiescence. Agitation and rising up from people at the bottom are good for democracy. They nourish democracy.

ME: Do you have any predictions of what might happen with social movements as Joe Biden’s administration continues?

FFP: I think Biden is going to be good for the movements. Winning is always good for movements. And Biden is letting people win. I mean, Biden has been so remarkable. Aren’t you just floored whenever you read about a new concession? Most recently, you have proposals to pour massive amounts of money into preventing climate change. This is so unpredictable. If you remember Biden as a senator, this guy was not somebody who was an innovator. He was not somebody on the left. He was kind of a sleazy politician. But he has become a new FDR.

“Agitation and rising up from people at the bottom are good for democracy.”
Taking Care

BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

President Joe Biden’s American Jobs Plan seeks to revitalize manufacturing and decarbonize the atmosphere. But one of its most vital elements is how it would transform the care economy. The state has always shaped how care is provided, but in this country the sector has been malformed since its creation. Biden’s proposal, following decades of work by activists and academics, would establish new preschools, build day cares, and fund the care of the elderly and disabled, but it also goes beyond that: It would fundamentally restructure care work in America.

Throughout the 19th century, the government played a central role in defining care work. Land grants supported settler families, and states opened poorhouses for the elderly. But two developments in particular created the foundation of contemporary care policy. First, in the late 19th century, the idea took hold that only impoverished families should be provided with day care. This resulted in the persistent notion, as the University of Maryland historian Sonya Michel put it, that “the presence of mothers in the workforce is...a ‘social problem’” that needs to be solved. To this day, pundits debate family policy within the world of poverty legislation—not as something that’s crucial for everyone.

The second arose from the incomplete nature of the New Deal. With its support for unionization and social insurance, the New Deal brought new rights to the workplace, but it largely ignored the household. It also excluded many domestic and care workers from the labor and legal protections that were being created. As a result, as care work expanded in the mid-century period, lawmakers assumed that private spending—bolstered by tax credits as necessary—would be sufficient to support care work.

For decades, as policy-makers have tried to tackle the problem of care work, they’ve been dealing with these unspoken assumptions—namely, that public aid should go only toward those in poverty, and that all other aid for care work should support private spending. These faulty premises have created a system in which Americans need to quit their jobs to care for children or other family members. According to one 2016 paper, the hourly cost of child care rose 32 percent between 1990 and 2010, and during this time mothers dropped out of the workforce in such high numbers that it led to a 5 percent decline in the total employment of women.

Overturning these beliefs can help us find our way out of the current situation. First, we need to formalize support for families and children as part of social insurance that is available to all. An easy step would be to take the one-year child allowances in the American Rescue Plan and make them permanent and easier for people to access monthly. The model here is the way Social Security works at its best, such as with its retirement pensions, where the benefits are clear and broadly accessible. This, in turn, will create a larger constituency that will defend the program and ensure that it is maintained over time.

Second, the government should provide care work facilities directly. Biden’s plan includes funding for government-run day care and pre-K. Relying on private providers can lead to care deserts as well as to price squeezes in the areas with more demand. These problems can’t be solved by giving people more money, as parents’ expenses are large and concentrated in the early years. Direct public provisioning of care work can ensure a baseline of quality and access that simply subsidizing the private sector can’t achieve.

Finally, we should fix the disparity in the legal world and make sure care workers are given the legal rights and recognition that all workers deserve. Biden’s jobs proposal notes that the home- and community-based services under Medicaid can support well-paying caregiving jobs that include benefits and the ability to bargain collectively. As the Groundwork Collaborative’s Rakeen Mabud and the University of Massachusetts Amherst’s Lenore Palladino found, investments in care work could create 2 million jobs, which would disproportionately go to women of color. Ensuring benefits and protections for these jobs would provide economic security for individual workers and their communities.

But to do all this, we must start by viewing care work as an essential component not just of the economy but of life itself. It requires just as much—if not more—investment as any other part of a modern economy. Biden’s American Jobs Plan is a start down this path.

Mike Konczal
Covid’s Deadly Toll

A man walks in front of burning funeral pyres as people perform the last rites for relatives who died of Covid-19 at a crematorium on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, on April 22. A new wave of the pandemic has overwhelmed the country’s health care services and caused crematoriums to operate day and night as the number of victims continues to grow exponentially.

By the Numbers

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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>41.5%</td>
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<td>Union election campaigns in which US employers were charged with illegally disciplining workers for supporting a union</td>
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<td>Amount spent by US employers each year on anti-union consultants</td>
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<td>$8B</td>
<td>Amount lost to wage theft each year by 2.4 million US workers</td>
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4x

How much more likely a noncitizen Latina is to experience minimum wage violations than a white male citizen

13.2%

How much more a unionized worker earns, on average, than a non-unionized peer

—Chalay Chalermkraivuth

Die-Hard False-Flag Theorists Analyze the January 6 Riot Videos

Antifa infiltrated the event,

These Trump fans say, and they may soon implore us

To recognize that guy whose Viking garb

Was plainly a disguise. Was that George Soros?
A Life

How Covid-19 turned the daily cross-border commute of thousands of farmworkers into a choice between safety and survival.

BY ESTHER HONIG

The day begins:
Workers wait in line at the US-Mexico border in San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora.
It’s one in the morning and the stars are out as hundreds of people shuffle slowly along the wall that marks the U.S. border in the small Mexican city of San Luis Río Colorado. In heavy boots and wide-brimmed straw hats, most everyone here is headed to work in the vegetable fields of Yuma County, Ariz. Bundled against the frigid November air in puffy coats and fleece blankets, they carry thermoses of hot coffee and mini coolers packed with breakfast and lunch, often small, tightly rolled meat burritos. The wait to get through the small port of entry averages two hours and on some days can take as long as four.

Every winter, as farms in the northern United States go dormant, Arizona’s agricultural season comes to life. Yuma County, known as the nation’s winter salad bowl, produces melons, broccoli, and 90 percent of the leafy greens consumed during the colder months in the U.S. From November until late April, between 8,000 and 10,000 people, according to one estimate, cross the border daily, spending seven hours or more traveling from their homes in Mexico to work in Yuma’s fields. Some are foreign guest workers who come on a special visa; others have green cards or dual citizenship but choose to live in Mexico, whether because it’s cheaper or because they have a family with mixed immigration status. These commuters make up around a quarter of the estimated 38,000 farmworkers who shoulder Yuma County’s $3 billion agricultural industry.

This past year, the pandemic turned an already difficult commute into a hazardous and potentially deadly endeavor. The line for the port of entry is effectively a mass gathering of essential workers with zero enforcement of local health guidelines. Mask use is spotty; people crowd together to prevent anyone from cutting in front of them; and no one is taking anyone’s temperature.

On the U.S. side of the border, the situation is hardly any better. In early December, several worker advocacy groups urged officials in Arizona to mandate that employers promote basic Covid safety measures, like social distancing and better ventilation in packing houses and on the buses that carry workers to the fields. Yet as of April, neither Yuma County nor the state had issued any guidelines, let alone mandates, for protecting farmworkers. Instead, Yuma County officials said they suggest that employers follow the guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Despite the evident risks, there has been no serious attempt to monitor the toll the virus has taken on the farmworker population. Arizona does not track cases among farmworkers, and testing in Mexico is severely limited. But what is known is troubling. Over the past year, outbreaks of Covid-19 have closely followed the harvest of labor-intensive crops—meaning anything that must be picked by hand. Yuma itself has been hard-hit. In mid-January, Arizona had the highest rate of Covid-19 infections in the world, and Yuma County had some of the worst outbreaks in the state. Even as infections have been trending down since the start of the year, the county currently has the highest number of cases per capita. Its only hospital has been overwhelmed, at times running out of ICU beds.

Still, farmworkers have continued to make the commute, rising impossibly early each day to cross the border. Like many others in line this morning, Manuel, who is in his late 20s, is headed to work in the lettuce fields. (This isn’t his real name. We’re protecting his identity because he could lose his job for talking to a reporter.) He stands eagerly with his thumbs tucked behind the straps of his backpack, a black face mask concealing a wide smile. Each day, Manuel wakes up at midnight after around four hours of sleep and slips out the door of his small apartment with an empty stomach. He takes a taxi to the border—at that hour there are no public buses, and walking is too dangerous—and arrives at the line by 1 a.m., which gives him a good shot at making it across in time to catch the bus to the fields. “It’s worth it,” he says of his commute. “You can make pretty good money.”

Once Manuel and the others are in Arizona, a fleet of white school buses...
Even as H-2A workers were being heralded as heroes for keeping food on grocery store shelves, Trump froze their wages for two years.

Morning routine: Two young workers cross into the US around 3 am. They had heard Covid-19 was a hoax, but soon people they knew got very sick.

will drive them to the day's work site, which can be up to two hours away. Group transportation has emerged as a potent vector for infection, yet the safeguards provided by employers vary widely. Most buses have limited the number of passengers to give each worker his or her own seat; some have hung plastic sheets between rows. Some drivers enforce the use of face masks; others do not. Without oversight from state or county officials, the level of protection depends on the company.

The potential exposures workers face are compounded by the fact that most lack easy access to medical care, and paid sick leave is almost unheard of. A study last year by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, found that farmworkers in the Salinas Valley, one of the nation’s leading agricultural regions, had more than twice the rate of infection compared with the state population. This was due in part to the fact that many people came to work while sick because they felt pressured by their employers or because they couldn’t afford to miss work. Instead of isolating, they were side by side with coworkers, sharing rides to and from the fields, using the same tiny portable bathroom, even sharing lunches.

Manuel, like many other younger workers in line, says he isn’t too concerned about getting the virus. “I’m worried that my parents will catch it,” he says. “But we just take care of ourselves.”

Still, the risks from the virus are real, and all farmworkers must weigh them against the prospect of losing their jobs and not being able to make rent or buy groceries. It’s a lose-lose choice forced on them by the failure of the United States to develop a humane and realistic immigration policy, one that acknowledges the essential role this vulnerable workforce plays in keeping our food prices low and our grocery stores well-stocked.

For guest workers like Manuel, whose visas are tied to their jobs, the stakes are even higher. If he loses his job, he will likely lose his visa and possibly his opportunity to get one next season. “No matter how you’re doing—if you have a headache, your back or legs ache—you have to get up,” he says.

Originally from the state of Sinaloa, Manuel and his family moved to San Luis Rio Colorado when he was 12. He spent his teenage years in this border town surrounded by people who moved effortlessly across the international boundary, working in Arizona fields, shopping in American malls, and visiting family in the US. For most of Manuel’s life, the border represented an enticing opportunity, but without money or family on the other side, he had no legal means of accessing it.

After graduating from high school, Manuel became a locksmith. Then, in 2018, a friend recommended him to an employer in Arizona. That’s how most H-2A visas happen: A farmer needs more guest workers and asks a trusted employee for recommendations. Just like that, Manuel became one of the thousands who cross the border each day. This is his second season harvesting lettuce in Yuma County on an H-2A visa. He keeps the small slip of paper folded into his passport and guards it as though it were made of gold.

In Arizona, Manuel is paid close to $13 an hour, earning more in one day than he can in a week as a locksmith in Mexico. Those wages have made it possible for him to build a house and give his children a middle-class quality of life. He is separated from their mother, but every Sunday, his only day off each week, he takes his children to eat pizza, and sometimes they go fishing at a nearby lake. “Being a dad is a lot of responsibility,” he says. “You worry about [your kids’] needs: Are they missing this, are they missing that?”

In the off-season, Manuel still works as a locksmith, and he hopes to start his own business someday with the money saved from his H-2A job. He says he can’t keep picking lettuce much longer, maybe just two more years. “There are so many sleepless nights, hours of sleep that you’ll never get back,” he says. “And the work wrecks havoc on your body.”

Here have been guest workers like Manuel harvesting food in the United States since World War I. The H-2A visa, the latest incarnation of this country’s temporary worker program, was created in 1986, at the height of the Reagan era, as part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act. While the law granted amnesty to 2.7 million undocumented people, it was sold as a crackdown on undocumented immigrants. It mandated stricter border security and penalties for hiring anyone without authorization to work in the country. But to get the necessary votes in Congress, the bill needed support from American farmers, who, just as today, relied heavily on an undocumented workforce. The H-2A visa was offered as a bargaining chip. It created a new category of guest workers specifically for seasonal agriculture and gave growers an assurance that they’d have a reliable source of labor, even as the government worked to curtail undocumented immigration. This is also why it became the only guest worker visa with no annual limit.

In the past two decades, reliance on the H-2A visa has increased dramatically as the number of farmworkers who live in the United States, of which about half are undocumented, has declined. Last year, there were more than 213,000 H-2A workers, mostly from Mexico. Around 6,500 were sent to Yuma County, one of the main destinations for H-2A workers in the US. That’s still just a sliver of the estimated 1.4 mil-
million full-time farmworkers in the country, but in the past 14 years, the number of jobs filled by H-2A visa holders has increased fivefold. Even amid a pandemic and historic levels of unemployment, jobs filled by H-2A workers increased 7 percent in 2020.

As president, Donald Trump embraced the visa, using it to bolster his support in the agricultural industry even as he pushed anti-immigrant policies. In a speech he gave in 2019 to the American Farm Bureau Federation, the nation’s biggest farm lobbying group, he assured a cheering crowd that he’d make H-2A visas easier to use so that farmers could get the immigrant workers they needed, before adding, “We’re keeping the wrong ones out, OK?”

Last March, as the pandemic became undeniable and Trump rushed to close America’s borders, routine visa services were suspended worldwide. One of the only exceptions was the H-2A, which was deemed “mission critical” and processed in droves by partially shuttered consulates. Farmers pushed for the exemption, claiming that the nation’s food system would collapse if their guest workers were not allowed in.

Still, even as H-2A workers were being heralded as heroes for keeping food on grocery store shelves, the Trump administration froze their wages for two years. (H-2A workers are paid between $11.81 and $16.34 an hour, depending on the state. On average, their wages are 57 percent higher than state minimum wages.) The freeze, lobbied for by growers, would have cost workers an estimated $1.6 billion over 10 years. But it was challenged by labor groups and eventually struck down by a federal judge.

Now President Biden has vowed to overhaul the immigration system. He is backing the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, which would provide legal status to more than 1 million undocumented farmworkers. Anyone who has worked in agriculture for at least 180 days in the past two years would be eligible for “certified agricultural worker” status, helping to bring these undocumented workers out of the shadows. Those who have been working for less than 10 years would also be eligible for a green card after an additional eight years of agricultural work and payment of a $1,000 fine for breaking immigration law. In an attempt to win conservative backing, the bill would strengthen immigration enforcement and expand the H-2A program, permitting an additional 20,000 workers each year to fill year-round agricultural positions in industries, such as dairy and meatpacking, that have until now been excluded. The legislation passed the House with bipartisan support but faces an uncertain fate in the Senate, where a similar proposal was defeated three years ago.

By 2:30 am, Manuel has been waiting for over an hour and is about a block from the metal turnstiles that mark the entrance to the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) building. As the morning marches on, the line grows longer. Masks casually slip below noses as people peer over the shoulders in front of them. Those who have arrived late search for a spot to cut in line. To ward them off, people squeeze even closer together.

At times, this restlessness can swell into a collective panic. Along the line there’s a phenomenon known as an “avalanche,” in which people rush the turnstiles in a last-ditch effort to get across the border and not miss work. So far, Manuel has been in two avalanches. “I had to run when I heard the people at the back start to scream ‘Avalanche!’” he says. “The most dangerous thing in that moment is to fall over and be trampled.”

Workers told me the experience can be especially traumatic for women, who are sometimes groped by men exploiting the situation. The elderly and children are often injured, their heads busted open or ribs bruised from falls or trampling. When there’s an avalanche, CBP shuts down the portal for up to an hour and calls in the Mexican Army to restore order. Almost everyone in line misses work.

Juan Carlos Palacios, a mayor-domo, or supervisor, who recruits workers for the lettuce fields, says the problem of avalanches wouldn’t exist if the border facility were better managed. “They’re harming agriculture here in the valley with their slowness and their insufficient staffing,” he told me.

John Schwamm, the CBP area port director who oversees the San Luis, Ariz., facility, doesn’t dispute that processing moves too slowly here. But he says the problem this year isn’t staffing or even
San Luis is still the busiest port in Arizona, processing 1.8 million pedestrians and 2.2 million noncommercial vehicles in 2020. This is a direct result of the region’s booming agricultural industry, Schwamm says. During the growing season, he estimates, farmworkers add about 30 percent to total daily crossings. As Yuma County’s agricultural industry has grown, the demand for labor has grown too—a trend that is expected to continue, further straining an already congested system.

In the past 13 years, the building at San Luis that processes foot traffic has been expanded three times to accommodate the growing number of pedestrians. Most recently, in 2018, a new $6 million building was built with the intention of reducing wait times. A modern single-story structure, it has floor-to-ceiling windows and an airy, zigzagging roof inspired by the grooved crop rows in the nearby fields. But according to Schwamm, demand has already outpaced the new capacity.

“I understand the issue; it’s crystal clear to me, and I do everything in my power that I can,” he says. “But the problem is infrastructure.”

Schwamm has lived in Arizona all his life and has spent the past 36 years working for the CBP. He’s seen the line here grow exponentially over the last decade. He’s seen the avalanches. And he knows about the fights that break out almost daily over people cutting in line. But he says his agents can’t intervene. As a US agency, he says, there’s little the CBP can do to control the chaos in the line, because it’s on the Mexican side of the border.

One reason so much strain has fallen on San Luis is that the H-2A visa works a bit differently here than in the rest of the country. Technically, the visa allows for a single entry, meaning a guest worker is permitted to cross into the US before continuing on to a farm in Washington state or Florida, where they would remain for the duration of the contract. But along the border, according to Schwamm, the CBP has a special agreement with local employers that allows their H-2A workers to enter the US and return to Mexico daily. It’s an added benefit for the employers, who don’t have to pay for worker housing, one of the costliest requirements of the visa. But it also ensures that throngs of people will continue passing through Schwamm’s overmatched facility.

Many H-2A workers I spoke to, including Manuel, say they prefer this setup, because it allows them to see their family at night and eat a home-cooked meal. There’s also a lot of skepticism about the employer-provided housing, which H-2A workers commonly complain is overcrowded and unsanitary. Four years ago, an employer in Phoenix, G Farms LLC, was found to have 69 guest workers living in an encampment consisting of old school buses, truck trailers, and a shed. With daytime temperatures

This work is all José Luna has ever known. He entered the US in 1969 “in search of food” and a job in agriculture.
exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit, the “housing” lacked proper ventilation and had exposed electrical wires and gas lines that investigators deemed “life threatening.”

Employers have also been known to impose curfews, prohibit guests, and limit how often workers can leave the premises. Manuel says he’d hate to give up the ability to do what he pleases once he’s off the clock. “The truth is that I prefer to be here [in Mexico] because I feel freer,” he says. “Over there, you just have work. Here, you have family and friends.”

At 4:30 AM when Manuel has finally passed through customs into the tiny border town of San Luis. The main street resembles a bustling night market, with hundreds of farmworkers milling about. Lines radiate from food trucks blaring brassy banda music and selling a cheap breakfast of tamales and instant coffee.

People sit together and talk as they wait for the buses to arrive around 5:30 AM. They gather on the curb in front of the 24-hour gas station or beneath the golden arches of the local McDonald’s. Others choose to catch up on sleep, stretching out on a park bench or on a sliver of sidewalk beneath a lit awning. Some farms send their buses early so workers can climb aboard and sleep.

Many, like 71-year-old José Luna, come prepared with their own blanket. “This is the time when I should be laying down to get a bit of rest. But look at where I am,” he says, gesturing at the buses and trucks rattling past, spewing exhaust. “This is bad for you.”

Luna, sporting a long gray mustache and brown leather boots, sits on a bench, his blanket draped across his shoulders. He had crossed over at 10 PM, nearly eight hours before work, when the wait in line was only 30 minutes. He says he does this because his joints can’t handle standing for long hours. Once across, he finds a spot to sleep.

Luna is emblematic of the aging domestic agricultural workforce. Like him, many are foreign-born but have green cards or citizenship, recipients of Reagan’s 1986 amnesty. In their younger years, they followed the harvests across the country, traveling from state to state. Now they’ve settled down, working in Yuma County and living in Mexico, where their US wages afford them more.

This work is all Luna has ever known. Born to a family of subsistence farmers, his formal education ended after the first grade, when he was pulled out of school to help his family grow corn. He likely entered the US without permission in 1969, when he was 19, “in search of food” and to find work in agriculture.

These older farmworkers face a significantly higher risk from the coronavirus, yet they continue going to the fields out of economic necessity. Most everyone knows at least one person who has died from Covid-19. As 66-year-old Víctor Manuel Hernández told me, “It’s not strange anymore when they tell you what’s-his-name is dead. It’s normal.”

What scares Luna is that many of his younger coworkers seem unconcerned about the virus. They assume that even if they get sick, they’ll recover. So while Luna avoids large gatherings, he knows other workers are still going to parties or bars on the weekends. He says that thought crosses his mind every morning as he climbs into the work bus. “With the colder weather, all the bus windows are closed, and the virus is inside,” he says.

Over the years, this work has twisted Luna’s bones and worn out his joints. But he’s convinced that the hard labor is good for him. He says he can’t stand sitting around at home and repeats a popular saying in Spanish: “En la cama, uno se acaba.” In the bed, one ends.

By 7 AM, Manuel has finally arrived at the field. The bright green rows of lettuce are striking against the dry desert landscape. Banda music belts from a portable radio as Manuel and the other workers walk the rows, using short, flat knives to slice the heads of romaine from their stalks. Loose leaves are discarded and the heads tossed into plastic bags. The bags are then passed to a line of workers standing on a long, elevated platform that’s pulled slowly behind a tractor as they wedge the bags into cardboard boxes.

Once Manuel and his crew have cut and packaged some 11,500 heads of lettuce, typically between 9 and 10 AM, they’re allowed a 15-minute break for breakfast, which they take together on the bus. Then it’s back to work.

As the sun rises higher in the sky, temperatures quickly climb into the 80s. Before the pandemic, most of the workers wore beard nets to protect the produce from stray hairs. Now they wear face masks to protect one another from the virus. Manuel says the masks get soaked with sweat and stick to your face. Sometimes it feels like he can’t catch his breath, but the supervisor yells at anyone who removes their mask.

In the lettuce fields, no one knows exactly when the workday will end. It can be anytime between 3 and 6 PM, depending on the size and the number of orders the crew is required to fill that day. Once the field is sufficiently cleared, Manuel and the other workers are allowed back onto the bus. His hands aching and his boots caked in dark soil, he checks his phone to see if his kids have messaged him. As the bus pulls away, he stares out the window, which is open to let in the breeze, and starts to plan dinner in his head.

Back in San Luis, the air is cooling as evening sets in. The workers don sweaters and jackets as they walk down the main street toward the border. The line to cross back into Mexico is never quite as long.
In 1979, Robert Bullard and a team of 10 graduate students spent weeks poring over city records, library archives, and microfiche, searching for landfill locations in Houston, a sprawling, 557-square-mile city that’s home to nearly 1.5 million people. There was no Google or geographic information systems, no iPhones or laptops. To find a landfill, Bullard and his students had to follow the paper trails of permits, deeds, and licenses. The project took over Bullard’s living room and ate up his weekends and holidays.

“Once we put together a list, we had to go, physically, and find the sites and verify that they existed,” recalls Bullard, who was then and is now a professor at Texas Southern University, among the state’s most prominent historically Black colleges and universities. “I told my students, ‘Houston is flat. Anytime you see a mountain, that’s a landfill.’”

Then came the Magic Markers. Bullard and his students bought a map of the city and color-coded its neighborhoods according to race using census data. Red neighborhoods were more than 50 percent minority, and yellow were less than 10 percent. Next they plotted the landfills’ locations with pushpins.

Nearly all the pins landed in red neighborhoods. Black residents accounted for just over 27 percent of Houston's...
population, and yet five out of six city-owned landfills were in Black neighborhoods. Six out of eight city-owned incinerators were in the same neighborhoods, and three out of six privately owned landfills were, too.

“Ironically, the communities that had the landfills also had the worst garbage service,” Bullard says. He’s told this story hundreds of times over four decades, but outrage still lingers in his voice. “Some of these folks could walk their garbage bags to the landfill, but they couldn’t get their garbage picked up by the city. That’s how racism was so ingrained.”

Bullard started looking at landfills after his then wife, Linda, an attorney, sued the City of Houston and Southwestern Waste Management over a proposal to build a landfill in a predominantly Black, middle-class neighborhood in northeast Houston called Northwood Manor. In a 1994 interview, Linda recalled that the landfill company had quietly gone about securing permits, and residents assumed that a new shopping center was going to be built instead of a landfill. “The company...was waiting for us. They wanted us to argue the suitability of the site. They wanted us to argue the technical aspects, because we would have lost,” she said. That’s when she knew she had to find another way to sue. So she asked her husband to help her find a pattern to prove that the new landfill, called Whispering Pines, wasn’t an anomaly. If the city had repeatedly permitted landfills in Black neighborhoods but not white ones, there was a pattern of discrimination that would allow her to sue using the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But the data Bullard and his students compiled didn’t hold up in court. “From the evidence before me, I can say that the plaintiffs have established that the decision to grant the permit was both unfortunate and insensitive,” US District Judge Gabrielle McDonald wrote in her decision. “I cannot say that the plaintiffs have established a substantial likelihood of proving that the decision to grant the permit was motivated by purposeful racial discrimination.” McDonald denied a temporary injunction against the landfill’s operator, which had already received a state permit, paving the way for its construction.

The maps and the pins couldn’t definitively prove that employees at Southwestern Waste Management or staffers at City Hall had intentionally chosen to put Houston’s trash in Black neighborhoods. Even today, communities of color face an uphill battle proving that these decisions, however they were formulated, violate their right to clean air and a healthy neighborhood.

Today the phrase “environmental justice” is common parlance among environmentalists and climate activists, who understand that poor communities and communities of color across the globe will disproportionately bear the effects of climate change. Environmentalists have made strides in embracing racial justice as a part of their mission. But Bullard, now 74, says, with characteristic frankness, “That’s because we kicked them in the ass.” For a significant portion of his career, Bullard and other environmental justice scholars and activists were dismissed by traditional environmental groups, who saw environmental justice as a social issue separate from the effort to protect and preserve natural spaces.

Whispering Pines Landfill is still in operation today. The school across the street is still predominantly Black and Latinx, and more than 95 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-cost lunch programs. Over the years, the neighborhood has attracted more industrial facilities. A few years after the landfill case, Linda stopped practicing law. But for the better part of the next four decades, Bullard would keep thinking and writing about landfills. If the rest of America was just as segregated as Houston, was trash ending up in Black people’s backyards all over the country? And if it was, how would you even begin the process of cleaning it up?

In 1987, a national team of researchers confirmed that the pattern Bullard had discovered in Houston prevailed in every part of the country and amounted to a national crisis. The United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice published a report called “Toxic Waste and Race in the United States,” which analyzed the racial makeup of areas surrounding thousands of toxic waste dumps and landfills across America and found they were concentrated in communities of color. It was a watershed moment for the emerging environmental justice movement, providing activists and communities with hard numbers that showed a correlation between race and environmental hazards.

The report was catalyzed in part by a high-profile environmental justice fight in Warren County, N.C., where the state government had approved a landfill for highly toxic contaminated soil in a county that was nearly all Black. Bullard and his co-author, Beverly Wright, are cited in the footnotes of the report. By the late 1980s, Bullard and Wright had published a handful of journal articles on environmental justice in the South. But the United Church of Christ’s report helped form a unified national movement out of scattered examples in dozens of Black communities in the South: a lead smelter near public housing in West Dallas, a chemical plant in a small town in West Virginia, waste facilities in Alabama’s Black Belt, industrial facilities near rural towns along the Louisiana Gulf Coast.
In 1990, Bullard published one of the first textbooks on environmental justice, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Using a handful of case studies, the book gave the experiences of Black Southerners a prominent place in urban planning and environmental studies, fields that had, until that point, all but ignored their concerns. “When I sent my manuscript for *Dumping in Dixie*, publishers wrote back to me saying, ‘What is this? There’s no such thing as environmental justice. The environment is neutral,’” Bullard says. That sentiment permeated almost every conversation he had in the ’90s. Academics and activists had to pressure the government—and mainstream environmentalists—to simply acknowledge that environmental decisions were often discriminatory.

Bullard and colleagues from the movement met with the Environmental Protection Agency to push it to recognize that communities of color across the nation face unequal environmental impacts, and they played a role in organizing the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which brought together a broad coalition of communities of color and Indigenous people. The summit developed 17 principles of environmental justice, which still guide the movement today.

In 1992, then-Senator Al Gore and Representative John Lewis introduced the Environmental Justice Act, which would have mandated that the EPA track environmental justice communities—those that have experienced a disproportionate pollution burden—and maintain a list of the 100 areas most affected by pollution, while making the process of approving such sites in those communities more transparent. It also would have enabled the EPA to collect fines and fees from landfills, refineries, and polluting industrial facilities and to fund local initiatives to aid people affected by the toxic sites.

The bill never even got a hearing. Lewis would continue to push for environmental justice protections until his death, in 2020.

In 1994, environmental justice advocates finally won a victory at the federal level. Bullard looked on as President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12898, which marked the first time that the federal government formally recognized, and promised to act on, environmental injustices across the nation.

But 27 years later, the executive order has fallen short. Because federal agencies have leeway in how they implement executive orders, it is virtually unenforceable. A report from New York University’s Institute for Policy Integrity concluded that federal agencies have either outright ignored Clinton’s environmental justice order or failed to recognize whom it is intended to protect.

The lack of federal regulation means that most communities of color still can’t fight off new industrial developments. They often don’t have the legal grounds to claim that a refinery or industrial plant has intentionally violated their civil rights, particularly when residential neighborhoods are next to those zoned for industrial use. Stopping a development requires proving that it would violate an existing environmental law, such as pollution limits, or showing that it failed to acquire the requisite permits. There’s also the issue of “legacy pollution,” says Paul Mohai, a professor at the University of Michigan who has long worked with Bullard on environmental justice. Areas that already have a toxic facility tend to attract more industrialization, concentrating the hazards in the same communities for decades on end. “We haven’t even come close to talking about that in policy discussions,” he says.

Without those legal protections, grassroots movements around the country are fighting to right the wrongs of the past and stop pollution from getting even worse. In Louisiana, for example, an industrial corridor has been dubbed Cancer Alley because generations of residents of the predominantly Black community near its plastic-manufacturing plants have developed the deadly disease. Last year, the community fought off a proposed chemical plant, pressuring the US Army Corps of Engineers to rescind its permit. When it did, the corps attributed its change of course to the sensitive wetland ecosystems that could have been affected by the plant, but didn’t mention environmental justice.

In Houston, Juan Parras, the executive director of the environmental justice advocacy group Tejas, has spent decades trying to protect the communities downwind of the Ship Channel’s polluting refineries. Every so often, plants near his home in Manchester seek permits to increase the amount of pollution they can emit; their applications are often approved. “We are in the belly of the beast,” he says. The Ship Channel is one of the busiest ports in the United States, a hub for oil and gas refining and petrochemical production. In Manchester, rates of leukemia and asthma are higher than in areas further away from the Ship Channel.

There aren’t many lawyers willing to go up against multimillion-dollar companies like Chevron, Exxon, or Valero on behalf of Manchester’s residents, Parras says. And his community, predominantly Latinx and low-income, with many undocumented people, can’t count on politicians, either. “A lot of politicians depend on donations from the industry,” he points out. “So the state is friendly [with the industry], the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is friendly. Who pays the price for this friendliness? It’s the communities on the front line.”

**Publishers wrote back to me saying, ‘There’s no such thing as environmental justice. The environment is neutral.’”**

—Robert Bullard
suburb north of Houston, the ranking for hazardous waste proximity drops to the 16th percentile. Exposure to particulate matter in the Woodlands is in the fourth percentile, compared with Houston’s position in the 89th. And study after study has found that the pattern exists not just in Texas cities—Port Arthur, El Paso, Austin, Midland, Lubbock—but also nationwide.

Decades of research has demonstrated that there is a link between long-term exposure to pollution and chronic health conditions. When the Covid-19 pandemic swept the world last March, it quickly proved to be more deadly in communities of color, which often have concentrated pockets of preexisting health conditions such as asthma and chronic lung problems. In Houston, Black and Latinx people make up 68 percent of the population, but as of March 31, they accounted for 75 percent of the county’s Covid deaths. White residents account for 24 percent of the population but only 19 percent of the death toll.

Like pushpins on a Magic Marker map, the numbers are stark. “The best way to put it is that these are lessons unlearned,” Bullard says. “The way the pandemic is hitting low-income communities and communities of color—this is not a surprise. It may have shocked some people that don’t recognize the existence of systemic racism.”

The week that we spoke by phone, Dallas County had gotten into hot water with the Department of State Health Services for attempting to prioritize vaccinations in communities of color on the city’s south side. The department threatened to cut the county’s vaccine allocation altogether rather than let it give low-income communities and communities of color priority—even after wealthier white residents had been receiving the lion’s share of vaccines for weeks. Statewide, at the end of March, Black people, who account for 12 percent of the population, had received 8 percent of the vaccinations; Latinx people, who account for 40 percent of the state’s population, had received 25 percent of the vaccinations. The only group that was overrepresented was white people, who made up 41 percent of Texas’s population but received 50 percent of the vaccinations.

“You are getting hit with a double whammy of racism, and it’s showing up in terms of health disparities,” Bullard says. During a flood or a pandemic, Black and brown neighborhoods get hit the hardest. But the funding and resources inevitably flow to wealthy, white communities first. “Money follows money,” Bullard says, “and money follows whites.”

To this day, low-income communities of color are significantly more likely than other types of communities to live near hazardous waste.

HE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION REINIGORATED THE ENVIRONMENTAL justice movement. For the previous four years, communities of color watched the Trump administration roll back what little protections they had, including standards governing air pollution. Calls for a federal environmental justice law grew louder, amplified by the Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd last May. To Bullard, it’s something of a magic moment, despite the compounding tragedies. “There is an understanding that racism is stamped in America’s DNA, that racism impacts every aspect of our lives. We are not making this up,” he says.

This year, President Joe Biden signed an executive order establishing an environmental justice office in the Justice Department and an office of climate and health equity in the Department of Health and Human Services. The order also mandates that 40 percent of the benefits from new climate investments “flow to disadvantaged communities.”

Biden has so far appointed one of the most diverse cabinets in US history: Michael Regan is the first Black person to lead the EPA, and Deb Haaland is the first Indigenous person to lead the Department of the Interior, which oversees federal lands and works with Native American tribes. The National Black Environmental Justice Network, which Bullard co-chairs, met with the Biden transition team to push for these appointments.

But executive orders aren’t enough. “They don’t have the permanence of law,” Mohai says. “They don’t go further than the agencies the president is in charge of.” At most, an executive order is “a declaration of good intentions,” he says—and communities of color deserve more than that.

Federal legislation could specify concrete environmental justice goals, Mohai continues, such as reducing pollution burdens in specific communities, as well as ways to measure those goals. And crucially, legislators typically write in funding provisions for such laws, while executive orders can’t create sources of funding. In January, Senators Ed Markey and Tammy Duckworth and Representative Cori Bush introduced the Environmental Justice Mapping and Data Collection Act, which would create a comprehensive and uniform mapping tool to identify environmental justice communities nationwide and then direct federal funding toward the communities highlighted in Biden’s executive order. With more public attention on the issue and a Democratically controlled House, the bill might have a fighting chance.

But Texas was a thorn in the side of Barack Obama, the last Democratic president who tried to implement sweeping environmental policy changes, says Ron Reynolds, a Democratic state representative from Fort Bend County. Texas sued the Obama administration over climate and environmental regulations 27 times. A week after Biden took office, Governor Greg Abbott announced that he was planning to sue the administration over any new environmental regulations. For the second session in a row, Reynolds, the only Black lawmaker on the Texas Legislature’s energy and environment committees, introduced a bill that would create an environmental justice advisory committee at the state level. In the previous session, the committee chair never granted the bill a hearing. “Most of my colleagues don’t know anything about environmental justice,” Reynolds says. “This is not a priority for them.”

(continued on page 27)
Prophet at

Larry McMurtry amid a tiny fraction of the stock at his monumental bookstore in Archer City, Tex.
When I was in my early 20s, I got an e-mail from Barbara Epstein, the cofounder of The New York Review of Books, asking me to write about a series of novels by Larry McMurtry. I don’t remember how Barbara knew of my existence. And I don’t know what qualifications I had for this work—besides being, like nearly 30 million other people, from Texas. But it was my dream to write for the Review, and I was determined to do my very best.

Excitement turned to terror when I realized that The Berrybender Narratives were—how can I put this?—awful. They featured a family of daffy English aristocrats on the loose in the wild, wild West, raided by Indians, ravaged by buffalo, bedazzled by blizzards. The books were so corny that I was at a loss. I knew Barbara was close to McMurtry: A recent book of his was even dedicated to her. I didn’t think it would be smart to kick off my relationship with the Review by saying I hated these books. But it also didn’t seem smart to kick off my writing career by lying—by saying I liked something that I didn’t like. I didn’t know what to do.

In desperation, I started reading McMurtry’s other books. And many of these were not just better than The Berrybender Narratives; they were, to my surprise, masterpieces. His characters were so vivid, his plots so intriguing, his language both so natural and so refined, that I came to regard him, book by book, with something approaching awe. Almost 20 years and thousands of books later, I still remember those books. I’m not a crier, and those books made me cry.

McMurtry wrote about the place we came from: tawdry, pretentious Texas, all those auto spas and outlet malls and chips on the shoulder. In his books I saw a portrait of that place and of its people that I had never seen before. He liked the things I liked about it and loathed the things I loathed—but he had a far broader vision than I did. He saw the connection between the postmodern, post-industrial place I knew and the desperation and the violence and the poverty from which it had emerged. By the time I came along, that Texas no longer existed, not even as a memory. Yet I found that, even though I didn’t know I knew this place, I knew this place. Those books did what great literature does: They helped me understand who I was.

Still, that didn’t solve the problem of The Berrybender Narratives. Eventually I saw that instead of pretending I liked them, I could write a bigger piece about McMurtry’s career. Summing up his work, I wrote:

It is astonishing enough that one person could be on a first-name basis with so much of the historical experience of Texas—the original conquest; the destruction of the Indians; the rise of the ranching economy; the end of the open range; the birth of the small towns; their subsequent decline; the emigration from the countryside; the rise of cities. Just one of these themes could have kept a lesser writer busy for a whole career. McMurtry has mapped them all.

That piece taught me something I’ve often thought of when writing biographies: Every great writer has his failures. The bad books are inextricable from the good ones. The great writer isn’t the one whose every utterance is crafted and workshopped and polished. When you read through a writer’s work, you see that the successes depend on the failures; they come out of them. The failures suggest the problems; the successes solve them. And that’s why the great writer is the one who dares to fuck up.

A while later, I received a fax. “That’s the best piece anyone’s ever written about me,” McMurtry said. “Also the only good piece.”

It was the highest accolade I’d ever received.

My second encounter with McMurtry came a few years later.

I was driving from Houston to Santa Fe, and decided to stop off in Archer City. This town, west of Fort Worth, is famous for only two things: being the birthplace of Larry McMurtry, and the bookstore he had founded there.

For decades, alongside his own writing, McMurtry had also been a “bookman.” To read his essays and nonfiction was to discover something you might not suspect from his novels, which was that he had an encyclopedic knowledge of rare books and had owned bookstores throughout his career. These had culminated in Booked Up.

I wrote McMurtry to say I was coming to town. He was traveling and sent his regrets,
but I went anyway, because I was fascinated by the bookstore. I had heard, and then immediately saw, that the word “bookstore” is painfully unequal to Booked Up—and so, to describe its size, is the word “huge.” Gigantic, immense, massive: All fail to convey its scale. It took up nearly the entire downtown of Archer City, building after building of books of a quality I had never before seen gathered in a single place. It was as if a tornado had swept up Charing Cross Road and plopped it down next to a rural Dairy Queen.

In that bookstore was nothing less than the energy that created Texas. I was both appalled and proud to descend from the same people as McMurtry—those ornery, sentimental people I recognized on every page of his books. It wasn’t hard to see the ambition—and also the extremism, the people who didn’t take no for an answer, the people who were gonna be goddamned if they let anyone push them around. For these people, the reasons others might have thought it was a bad idea to import hundreds of thousands of rare books into a hick town in the middle of nowhere were—well—precisely the best reasons to do it. They were the whole point.

The number and quality of the books beggared belief. My partner, who had spent 10 years working on a book about the 19th-century Ashanti, found books on that subject he had never before encountered. But as huge (gigantic, immense, massive) as Booked Up was, it couldn’t contain all the books that McMurtry had brought to Archer City. They had spilled out into every corner of the town. When we repaired to the local diner, we saw a scene that my partner, who is Dutch, found so cinematically American that he could hardly believe it was real. Straight from Marlboro Man central casting, cowboys were hunched over the counter, eating hamburgers, drinking Lone Star longnecks.

I’m from Texas; I didn’t think that was so exotic. What I thought was exotic were the 12 volumes of the Works of Turgenev on a shelf above our red vinyl booth.

A narrative unfolded. The boorish kid, mocked for being interested in things nobody else was interested in, grows up. He moves away and finds success. Then he comes back—and takes his revenge.

Nobody in Archer City was laughing at him now. Booked Up wasn’t a bookstore. It was how the West was won.

In 2014, I was spending a few months working in Susan Sontag’s archive at UCLA. I wanted to drive out to Tucson, where Sontag had spent a period of her childhood, in order to get a feel for the place. And I also wanted to finally meet McMurtry, who had been friends with Sontag and was living there.

Driving east from Los Angeles, the swimming pools and palm trees peter out and the desert begins. With its barren mountains and its house-size cacti, Arizona always felt outlandish to me, hard to associate with a symbol of Manhattan like Sontag—hard, even, to associate with modern America at all. In contrast to Texas or California, Arizona still felt like it belonged to itself.

I checked into the Arizona Inn, an elegant resort McMurtry had recommended. It had been built in the days when the town was dotted with tuberculosis sanatoriums. And it was just a few minutes’ walk from Sontag’s house on East Drachman. I walked over to the house, a postage stamp perched on a concrete slab. It was empty; I could go right up to the windows and imagine her loneliness in that place. From the moment she stepped off the train from New York, she didn’t belong. Her sister Judith told me that she hugged the first cactus she saw.

The next morning, I settled into the dining room at the Arizona Inn. At the neighboring tables, fat men in bolo ties were rifling through velvet bags stuffed with jewels.

“Gem and Mineral Show,” Larry McMurtry said.

He introduced himself, and then introduced me to Diana Ossana. They were roommates and writing partners, and together they had won an Oscar for Brokeback Mountain.

Diana was blond and attractive and younger. Larry looked and sounded like my grandfather, or any number of my relatives. She was warm; he needed to warm up. She asked about my drive. I said how much Arizona reminded me of northern Brazil and asked, just to make small talk, if they’d ever been to Brazil.

Diana said she’d love to, someday. “They’re having a few problems with rape,” Larry muttered.

He told me about the three times Sontag had come down to Archer City. I loved the idea of Susan in Archer City. It seemed like something only McMurtry could have pulled off. On one trip, her son bought some cowboy boots from a maker in El Paso, which inspired a comment about how dangerous El Paso was.

“I won’t get off the road there,” Larry said.

We talked about Barbara Epstein, who had died in 2006. I said how grateful I was to her for the chance to write for the Review, and how I knew they had been close. They weren’t, he said. He appreciated her support of his writing, but though he had dedicated a book to her, they had never actually met.

“It just didn’t somehow happen.”

I mentioned how many letters there were from him to Sontag in the archive, but none to her, and I noticed that people wrote to her, but she didn’t write back. He said this was true, that she could be social for only a few hours, that she always had to retreat to her desk.

“I don’t know that many writers. I knew a few once. They all died.”

We went back to talking about The New York Review. Larry felt that Bob Silvers, Barbara’s...
coeditor, would have been far less congenial to his writing, and mentioned Bob’s partner, Grace Dudley.

“Lady Dudley was a Yugoslav tart.”

Diana seemed to be worried that he was getting out of hand. “The great thing about Larry is that he will say exactly what he thinks,” she said. “Not that he’s rude—he is not rude—he is just very honest.”

This was true. He enjoyed gossip—“Being a novelist, you like gossip”—and saying outrageous things, but there was also a gruff kindness that, in some way that is hard for me to explain, was the voice of old Texas. Texas people like poking you; they like seeing how far they can go, daring you to flinch. I knew this, which is why his dryness and wryness were as homey to me as iced tea. I felt the relief the exile feels when he gets to speak his own language.

He ordered the vichyssoise and a cheeseburger.

Diana told how she had met him after he had heart surgery at age 55. His brain had changed, and he was plunged into depression. She took care of him and saw his personality return slowly, in a better form. “Before the surgery,” she said, “Larry was kind of a prick.”

I could believe that. I could also believe that someone as talented as he was didn’t suffer fools.

But he was incredibly generous to me. The transcript of our conversation that morning ran to nearly 30,000 words. That was just the beginning. After lunch, Larry and Diana showed me around Tucson. We went to their house, where I met Larry’s wife, Faye Kesey, who had been married to Ken Kesey. Larry had a crush on her for 40 years, and when Ken died, Larry proposed.

The next morning, when I was due to drive back to Los Angeles, they insisted on meeting for breakfast. Larry, Diana, and Faye came to a little golf club.

Larry was in his late 70s and didn’t look good; the talk was of wrapping things up. He gave me a copy of his forthcoming novel, The Last Kind Words Saloon. It would be his 50th book. “Fifty’s a good number,” he said. “Fifty is enough.”

When I got in the car, I found myself crying once again. I lived in Europe. He lived in Tucson. I knew, as I pulled out of the parking lot, that we wouldn’t meet again. And I felt overwhelmingly lucky to have had that time with him. No words of affection had been exchanged, and after two days, it seemed presumptuous to call him a friend. But I knew that the reason he had taken all that time for me was because of my essay all those years before. He’d felt understood by me. And over that weekend, I felt understood by him.

When I got back to Los Angeles, I opened the book and saw an inscription: “For Ben. A brother.”

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A generation of younger activists are expanding the boundaries of the environmental justice movement that started with Bullard’s research. Today they push for climate justice, too, recognizing that communities of color will bear the most risk in a hotter world with more weather extremes. In Texas, chapters of the Sunrise Movement, a youth-led climate action organization, have attracted people who see the links between green energy, fair housing, and health care as crucial to a better future. It might seem harder to fight on all those fronts, but according to Neha Desaraju, a high school senior and a Sunrise communications coordinator based in Dallas, it’s part of the group’s overall strategy to push the political boundaries of what’s possible.

In El Paso, Miguel Escoto cofounded the city’s Sunrise chapter after graduating from St. Edward’s University in Austin and moving back to his hometown. “I had always cared about climate change, but it was always philosophical and abstract, like global greenhouse gases and science,” he says. Escoto was more interested in immigration issues, including the rights of undocumented residents in the border town. But in Austin, working with local grassroots groups and reading about how climate change would have an impact on global migration helped him connect the dots.

Escoto realized that the Marathon Refinery, which he’d driven past dozens of times as a child, was located in a mixed-immigration-status neighborhood in El Paso. Many of the residents who were most exposed to the plumes of pollution from the oil and gas facility were undocumented, so they were reluctant to speak up, Escoto says. Environmental groups were hard at work tackling the issue—and Escoto wanted Sunrise to amplify their efforts. With his local chapter, he’s helped energize young people to organize social media campaigns and participate in public hearings on new industrial developments and in protests supporting the communities fighting for clean air.

These days, Bullard is back at Texas Southern University, where he teaches classes and takes Zoom meetings throughout the day. After leading his own research center at his alma mater, Clark Atlanta University, and serving as the dean of TSU’s School of Public Affairs, he returned to the classroom in hopes of training people of color to become leaders in environmental justice and all the fields it touches: law, engineering, urban planning, and health care.

“What gives me hope is that young people have fewer wedge issues than my generation,” Bullard says. Polling has shown that millennials and Gen Zers are more likely than older generations to believe that the government can and should solve problems like climate change and racial inequities. Organizations like Sunrise are also more diverse than their predecessors, such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club.

In December, the United Nations Environment Program presented him with its lifetime achievement award. “Bullard’s research into environmental justice in the USA has influenced global research into similar practices impacting minority and low-income communities in other countries,” says Inger Andersen, the program’s executive director. “Professor Bullard’s work has, in my view, ushered in a third wave of the human rights movement, with growing recognition that all people have a human right to a healthy environment.”

When I ask Bullard what the UN award means to him, after decades of fighting for the concept of environmental justice to gain traction, he replies that he didn’t do the work for the recognition. Still, “it made my day,” he adds. “It was an honor.” And then he returns to the main point: “Even with the pandemic and everything, the world on lockdown—the work goes on. The work goes on.”
Notes From Below
The lost novel of Richard Wright
BY ELIAS RODRIQUES

In the midst of the Great Depression, a series of ghostly and mysterious thefts flummoxed the Los Angeles Police Department. In November of 1931, $11,000 went missing from a safe at the Owl Drug Company, with no sign of breaking and entering. Then a safe was emptied in a nearby clothing store. Over the next few months, blankets, typewriters, and other items disappeared from stores in the neighborhood without a trace.

The police had no witnesses, no leads, no suspects, and no idea what was going on until the following winter, nearly a year and a half later. In February of 1933, they surveilled a store for nine nights straight. On the
final evening, an officer saw an arm emerge from a small hole in the floor and reach for the lock on a nearby trapdoor. The officer tried to grab it, but the phantom limb pulled back just in time and vanished underground. The police decided to search the basement and, amid all the furnishings necessary to live, found their culprit: Herbert C. Wright, a 33-year-old white man who, unable to find a job during the Depression, endeavored to solve the problem by living underground and stealing.

Though this gothic tale has long since fallen through the cracks of historical memory, it left traces on the most famous African American novel of the mid-20th century: Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, which begins and ends with its protagonist living underground. But it more directly influenced another author whose work had an impact on Ellison’s. Just after publishing Native Son, Richard Wright read about the robberies in True Detective and found his new subject. As he recalls in “Memories of My Grandmother,” he was already thinking about surrealism and about science-fiction tales of invisible men when he learned of Herbert Wright, whose bizarre story gave him a means of applying those interests to his next book.

In 1941, Wright began to draft The Man Who Lived Underground, a novel about a Black Chicagoan named Fred Daniels who escapes into the sewers after the police arrest and beat him and attempt to frame him for murder. The senselessness of the event leads Fred to conclude that life is meaningless. As a result, he decides to live underground, tunneling into basements to steal what he needs and observing the aboveground world with a cynical eye.

A surrealist and existentialist tale, The Man Who Lived Underground was rejected by several publishers, but the novel found an afterlife via a series of winding roads. The rejections led Wright to condense the narrative, in particular cutting the lengthy description of police violence in the novel’s opening, and turn it into a short story that was published in 1944. That story was admired by Wright’s friend and mentee, Ralph Ellison. Later, after winning the National Book Award in 1953 for Invisible Man, Ellison stated that his novel had been inspired by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Notes From Underground. While he and Wright had fallen out by this time, Wright’s influence on the novel is hard to deny. Despite this fact, Invisible Man entered the American literary canon, while Wright’s story languished in obscurity. In the popular imagination, he became known as the author of Native Son, Black Boy, and (for those interested in anti-colonialism) The Color Curtain, but not as the originator of invisible men living underground. That honor remained Ellison’s.

Now, some 80 years after Wright drafted the novel, the Wright estate and Penguin Random House have published The

Elias Rodrigues’s first novel, All the Water I’ve Seen Is Running, will be published in June.

Born in 1908 to parents who were the children of slaves, Wright had a turbulent childhood in Jim Crow Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas. He attended Black schools until the age of 15, when he dropped out to go to work and help pay the family’s bills. At 17, he moved to Memphis on his own, where he continued his education by reading Harper’s and The Atlantic, among other periodicals; two years later, in 1927, he and his family moved to Chicago, where Wright found work as a clerk with the US Postal Service.

Though his job survived the early years of the Depression, his position was eliminated in 1931, and Wright went on relief. The next year, he began attending meetings of the local John Reed Club, a literary offshoot of the Communist Party. In time he became a party member and worked with the Federal Writers’ Project. In 1938, he published a short story collection, Uncle Tom’s Children, and two years later he published the novel for which he is best known: Native Son. It was in the midst of this period of early success, when Wright was a member of the Communist Party and still close to the days of his impoverished childhood, that he wrote The Man Who Lived Underground.

The novel begins at the end of a workday. In its opening pages, we meet Fred Daniels as he is counting his wages after leaving his employer’s house, where he mows the lawn. “Tired and happy, he liked the feeling of being paid of a Saturday night,” Wright tells us; “during seven sweltering days he had given his bodily strength in exchange for dollars with which to buy bread and pay rent for the coming week.” As he walks down the street and contemplates going to church the next day in the hopes of feeling “renewed” for the upcoming workweek, he sees three policemen watching him. The cops stop and question him, but Fred feels no fear, since he hasn’t committed any crime and is certain that his employer and his church will vouch for him if need be. As far as he’s concerned, once the encounter is over, he will return to his familiar routine of trading labor for wages and going to church until the end of his life.

Fred, of course, is wrong. The three cops—Lawson, Johnson, and Murphy—ask him what he’s doing in the neighborhood and whether he has ever been arrested before. Though Fred answers their questions truthfully, Lawson says, “We’d better drag ‘im in.” “I ain’t done nothing…” Fred protests and adds, “My wife’s having a baby,” to which Johnson replies, “They all say that.” The three cops force him into their patrol car, and Murphy says, “I think he’ll do.” After this ominous remark, Lawson asks, “What did you do with the money?” They lead him into their patrol car, and Murphy says, “I think he’ll do.”
matter how long he lived.” His life is now out of his hands and in those of the state.

At the station, the cops reveal that they suspect him of murder and theft in the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Peabody, a white couple who lived next door to Fred’s employer, and they begin to beat him as they attempt to extract a confession. With each blow, Fred inches closer to confessing to get “free of this nightmare.” Their questions “had the power of projecting him into a strange orbit where, though he was not guilty of a crime, they made him feel somehow guilty.”

Fred repeatedly insists on his innocence and pleads to be let go so he can return to his pregnant wife, Rachel, but the beating continues and he eventually passes out. When Fred comes to, the cops beat him unconscious again. When he wakes up a second time, the district attorney is present. He tells Fred that he can see his wife if he signs a typed confession. “Yes, all he had to do was write his name and they would take him home, home to Rachel…. Elation seized him,” Wright tells us; “truly, he felt nothing important could come from his signing his name to that splash of white that danced before his eyes.” Though Fred finally agrees, he has been beaten too savagely to control his body: The DA has to take his hand and guide it through the routine.

But the cops aren’t done with Fred yet. Next they take him to the scene of the crime, where they ask him to describe how he killed the Peabodys as they continue to beat him. Wright describes Fred’s increasing despair throughout this ordeal:

What these men said, what he said, the blows and curse words, were all neutral and powerless to alter the feeling that, though he had done nothing wrong, he was condemned, lost, inescapably guilty of some nameless deed.

After this, the cops finally drive Fred home, and he gazes out the window, seeing other Black people and realizing that they “had become alien to him.” The police let him out of the car to see Rachel, but with Murphy following close behind him. As they approach his apartment, Fred begins to feel hope:

“This nightmare was ending!” But when he sees Rachel and she asks who the policeman following him is, Fred feels as if his “consciousness was possessed by the man who waited behind his back.” He no longer belongs among the Black people walking freely through the neighborhood or with the woman with whom he hoped to have a future. He has now been claimed by the state; he is now the officers’ property.

Rachel’s pregnancy offers Fred an unexpected escape. As he holds his wife in his arms under Murphy’s watchful eye, she goes into labor. The cops take her and Fred to the hospital, with Murphy keeping him in custody on the labor ward. But he leaves Fred briefly to go to the restroom. “At last he was alone,” Wright says; “at last that constant threat of nameless punishment was gone from him, for a little while.” In this moment of freedom, Fred makes his escape: He jumps out a window, runs down the street, and hides in the vestibule of an apartment building. But then he hears the sound of police sirens circling. “He had to leave; to remain meant risking capture and a renewal of torture.” Fred looks into the street and spots a half-open manhole. Seizing this small window of opportunity, he runs to it and descends into the sewers.

Fred’s escape underground, however, soon yields new problems. Shortly after his descent, a stream of sewage water threatens to sweep him away. After narrowly avoiding the peril, Fred contemplates the subterranean dangers he now faces—disease, drowning, a gas leak. “He should leave, but an irrational notion made him remain.” Rather than risk being arrested and incarcerated, Fred decides to stay underground and fend for his survival there.

Suddenly Fred sees his own and others’ lives from a new perspective. Faced with the senselessness of the officers’ violence, he begins to question his and other people’s way of living. After finding that the sewer tunnels lead to basements, he spies on the congregants of a basement church, but scorns their singing for its resemblance to “whimpering.” He tunnels into an unknown building, sees a sink, and instinctively washes his hands. “He had slipped back...into the characteristics of everyday life aboveground,” Wright tells us; “and, having been engaged in the simple act of washing his hands, he had merely taken the next step in the long ritual of routine.” Washing his hands distracts him from his pressing needs, including the thirst he feels. Realizing his folly, Fred drinks the first clean water he’s been able to find in hours and then urinates in the basement’s corner. Free from the routines and demands of life aboveground, he begins to reconsider what he wants and what, in his eyes, makes a life meaningful.

After stealing a number of items, Fred tunnels into the basement of a real estate office that “collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in rent from poor colored folks.” From his hiding place, he watches someone enter the combination to a safe. When that person leaves, Fred opens the safe himself, thinking to steal the money in it. But something unusual happens:

He rubbed the money with his fingers, as though expecting it suddenly to reveal secret qualities. It’s just like any other kind of paper, he observed…. As he toyed with the money, there was in him no sense of possessiveness.

Now unable to use money to purchase anything, Fred no longer feels the attachment to it that people aboveground do, nor does he feel their attachment to objects. Wright describes his thinking later:

He did not feel that he was stealing, for the cleaver, the radio, and the money were on the same level of value, all meant the same thing to him. They were the toys of the men who lived in the dead world of sunshine and rain he had left, the world that had condemned him.

The realization that money no longer has any value to him culminates in Fred’s return to his cave, where he dips the bills in glue and pastes them to the walls. At last, Wright tells us, “He was free!” Defying capitalism, liberating himself from society, and escaping the reach of a racist state, Fred achieves what he sees as emancipation by realizing “the inexpressible value and importance of himself.” He resolves to live by his own rules from this point on, because he now values himself and his way of seeing the world.
But as in every existentialist crime novel—from Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment to Albert Camus’s The Stranger—Fred’s individualism liberates him at the cost of endangering other people. When he returns to the basement of the real estate company, he finds Lawson accusing one of the workers of robbing the safe. The cop leaves the room, and the man commits suicide. Fred next reenters a jewelry store from which he stole some diamonds. There he sees Murphy accuse the watchman of stealing and then torture him to extract a confession. At first Fred thinks “the watchman’s being wrongly accused might serve to lift him into a higher state of awareness,” just as it did with him. But though he wants to believe this, he fears that won’t be the case and that the watchman will pointlessly suffer for Fred’s actions. Finally, after much consideration and internal dialogue, Fred decides that he must return to the world aboveground to share the truths that he has learned.

“E”very move he made now was informed with a marvelous precision,” Wright says of the beginning of Fred’s ascent. “[H]is entire muscular system seemed reinforced from a reservoir of unlimited energy.” Propelled by the newfound knowledge of his life’s value and by the guilt he feels at seeing others being punished for his actions, Fred opens the manhole he originally escaped through and sticks his head out into the aboveground. After three subterranean days, the light blinds him: “He stood between that terrifying world of life-in-death above him,” Wright says, “and this dark world that was death-in-life here in the underground.” But in the end, Fred has no choice: No longer able to live underground happily, he returns to the streets.

Yet his time in the subterranean world has defamiliarized the world aboveground, such that the street comes to seem as surreal as the sewers once did. “A strange thing was happening. Traffic stopped, but no one rushed forward to challenge him.” As Fred stands in the middle of the street, the cars swerve around him and the drivers yell at him for disrupting traffic. He sees a police officer and briefly wonders, “Was this real?” Then he walks past a mirror, inspects his sullied appearance and eyes glaring “oddly,” and laughs. He is nearly as unrecognizable to himself as the simple happenings of life on the street are.

While Fred’s confusion highlights the thoroughness of his transformation, his attempts at communicating with others demonstrate the degree to which this change has isolated him. After seeing his appearance, he starts walking toward the police station.

He would go to the station, clear everything up, make a statement. What statement? He did not know. He was the statement, and since it was all so clear to him, surely he would, in one way or another, make it clear to others.

When he arrives at the station, the cops ask why he is there. Fred responds that he is “looking for the men,” but the police don’t understand. They ask where he came from. “I come out from under the ground,” Fred tells them. One cop says they should send him to a psychiatric institution; others joke that he’s insane. Though state violence has freed Fred from the illusion that work would make his life meaningful and abiding by the law would prevent him from becoming a criminal, he struggles to explain those lessons to others.

Fred’s final encounter with the three cops who attempted to frame him reveals the extent to which state violence and his life on the run have permanently estranged him from others. When Fred mentions his former workplace, the cops pass him on to Lawson, Murphy, and Johnson. But when Lawson recognizes him, he asks simply, “Why in hell did you come back?” “I just didn’t want to run away no more,” Fred replies. Murphy tells him that they caught the man who killed the Peabodys, but Fred insists that he is guilty nonetheless, enumerating his many subterranean thefts. The officers don’t believe him and assume he is crazy. Then Fred reveals that he saw them torturing the night watchman. Scared that Fred will reveal their brutality, the officers tell him to show them where he went underground. As they drive him to the manhole, Murphy notes that “colored boys sure go off their nuts easy.” Johnson replies, “It’s because they live in a white man’s world.” Demonstrating the truth of this statement, when the group arrives at the manhole, the cops force Fred to go back into it. Suddenly, an air raid siren distracts the officers—but this time, instead of trying to escape, Fred beckons for their attention. Lawson—in part annoyed by Fred, but also because he wants to kill the witness to their violent interrogations—pulls out his gun and shoots him dead. In the end, Fred becomes “a whirling, black object…lost in the heart of the earth.”

If obeying laws doesn’t prevent criminalization, then why obey them?

n its surrealistic tale of a fugitive residing in the sewers, The Man Who Lived Underground represents police violence as antisocial, both because it isolates its victims and because it then pushes those victims to violate social norms themselves. Fred’s experience of being randomly assaulted by the police and framed for a murder he did not commit demonstrates how people experiencing police violence feel not only their body being harmed but also their position in society and the very rules they thought they lived by. If following the law does not prevent a person from being made a criminal or protect them from being assaulted by the police, then why not steal or violate any number of other social norms? By following Fred’s descent underground, where objects are useful only insofar as they satisfy his basic needs or urges, Wright underscores for his readers how capitalism and the state ultimately assail our humanity and blind us to other ways of living and relating to people. Yet the devastating consequences of Fred’s decision to return to society—hoping to liberate people from the routines of their lives, only to be murdered for it—also shows that there is a cost to renouncing the value of money, to being a fugitive, and to saying what one knows. Even in the effort to return to society and make it better, the fugitive remains persecuted by the state. For Wright, police violence is tragic not only because it is brutal and unfair but also because those who testify about it are punished for doing so. These punishments serve only to further marginalize, isolate, and alienate the victims.

The degree to which police violence isolates Fred surfaces in Wright’s portrayal of his relationship to his wife. Early in his subterranean life, Fred sees the glow of the streetlights and thinks of Rachel. “More and more,” Wright tells us, “he found it repugnant to think of...
her, as though the image of her crowded more important things from his mind." This change carries through underground, when he returns not to his home but to the police station.

The representation of Rachel (and, let us not forget, their newborn child) as crowding out more important matters is troubling enough on its own. But in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Fred’s isolation from Rachel is caused, at least in part, by the state and by the alienation and dislocations created by the violence to which it arbitrarily subjects its citizens. After all, had Fred remained in police custody at the hospital, he would have been incarcerated and separated from her anyway, and he flees his wife only because the cops tried to frame him for a crime. For Wright, the casualties of police violence include not only the person assaulted but also the families broken by criminalization and incarceration.

While Wright is assuredly not known for progressive gender politics—in fact, much scholarship on gender in Wright’s novels foregrounds his conservative representations of women—the novel helps to elucidate the consequences of police violence on Black women, even when the person assaulted is a Black man. As the anthropologist Christen A. Smith argues about Black women whose loved ones have been killed by the police in Brazil and the United States, Black mothers give life and thus often bear the “social responsibility” for keeping Black people alive. As a result, they also tend to bear the brunt of the material and emotional fallout of the police murders of Black loved ones.

Wright’s novel does not describe how Fred’s assault and eventual murder by the police affects Rachel—indeed, he does not describe much about Rachel or her thoughts at all—but it is not difficult to imagine the impact that state violence has on her. Rachel has to bear the anxiety of not knowing where her husband is, the grief of his being presumed dead when his body is not found, and the difficulty of raising a son without her husband’s wages. Each step Fred takes toward breaking free of society’s strictures is, simultaneously, a step away from the wife and family that depend on him. Inasmuch as *The Man Who Lived Underground* dramatizes how state violence isolates Black men, it also gestures toward how such violence affects Black women and Black families.

For all of its surrealist imagery, its phantasmagoric underground setting, and its questioning of social norms, *The Man Who Lived Underground* is, in many ways, a story about the material and emotional effects of state violence on work, kinship, and sociality. The novel focuses on a Black man—and rightfully so, given the state’s disproportionate use of violence against Black people—but its tale of how work and money push people to abide by rules that the state itself violates at will ultimately has much to say about all impoverished workers. After all, Herbert Wright, the real-life white man who lived underground, took to living in a basement because he could not find employment during the Depression. He stole to support himself in an economy and a country that would not support him. The surrealist, fantastical, and gothic elements of both his story and *The Man Who Lived Underground* serve to underscore how bizarre and unnatural such a governmental structure should seem. The publication of Wright’s long-lost novel, one hopes, will remind us that there are other ways of seeing the state and the market and, ultimately, other ways of governing ourselves and supplying the necessities of life.
Diminishing Returns

A liberal economist tries to reckon with the state of capitalism today

BY ALYSSA BATTISTONI

The 2008 financial crisis is widely credited with reviving the American left, from the tent cities of Occupy Wall Street to the proliferating chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America. Yet it is not just street protesters and millennial Marxists who have put capitalism under scrutiny: Liberal pundits and policy-makers have also become analysts of capitalism’s ailments. Since Thomas Piketty’s 2013 breakout hit, the publishing industry has churned out new books on capitalism, inequality, and economics at a furious pace. The past two years alone have seen the publication of Piketty’s follow-up, Capital and Ideology; Gabriel Zucman and Emmanuel Saez’s The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay; Heather Boushey’s Unbound: How Inequality Constricts Our Economy and What We Can Do About It; and Anne Case and Angus Deaton’s Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism, to name just a few. Even capitalism’s erstwhile champions now find themselves on the back foot: None other than globalization’s manic hype man Thomas Friedman has turned to mea culpa, admitting that “we broke the world” by letting capitalism run too rampant. (“We”?)

The growing body of liberal capitalism studies can be found throughout the academic disciplines, but it is most pronounced in economics, where a new cohort has loosened the formalist strictures of a previous generation and embraced a more historical and sociological approach. Instead of perpetually refining idealized and abstracted models, these economists ground their analyses in an accumulating mountain of empirical evidence documenting the growth of gargantuan fortunes at the top, the deteriorating health of those at the bottom, the decline of upper-bracket tax rates, and the stagnation of most people’s wages.

Although its analyses and prescriptions are radical by the standards of the past few decades of Anglo-American politics, this work is hardly revolutionary. Yet it has forced many liberals to finally reckon with the features of capitalism that leftists have long lamented: the production of vast poverty amid obscene wealth, the convergence of economic and political power, and the proliferation of crises that disrupt the system’s promised stability and undermine human health and happiness.

The economist Branko Milanovic has been a central participant in the debates of this emerging
field, as well as one of its most idiosyncratic contributors. Born in Belgrade when it was part of Yugoslavia, Milanovic wrote his dissertation on income inequality in his home country long before it was a fashionable topic. He went on to research income inequality as an economist at the World Bank for nearly two decades before taking up a string of academic appointments; he currently teaches at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. But he is not your typical World Bank economist: Milanovic knows his Marx and, though not a Marxist himself, has long insisted on the value of class analysis and historical perspectives to economics, while also dabbling in political-philosophy debates about distributive justice. His experience of life under actually existing socialism, meanwhile, gave him critical distance from the end-of-history narratives that were trumpeted in much of the West after the fall of the USSR—as well as from the end-of-the-end-of-history hand-wringing that has proliferated since 2016. The discourse, then, seems to be catching up to where Milanovic has been all along.

With several books to his name already, Milanovic's breakthrough came in 2016 with the publication of Global Inequality, as his longstanding research interests converged with the mainstreaming of the study of inequality. The book took stock of globalization's effects on income around the world and brought an international focus to what in many countries had been treated as a domestic issue. It garnered attention for its famous “elephant curve” graph, which showed that since 1988, the working and middle classes of emerging countries have made huge gains and the working and middle classes of the developed West have lost income—all while the rich around the world made out like bandits. The graph was notable not because it contradicted the conventional wisdom on globalization but because it presented stark and clear evidence of an oft-discussed trend. Milanovic argued, moreover, that the graph was not all bad news: While the working and middle classes of the North Atlantic were struggling, their peers outside the West were doing better than ever. Even if capitalism distributes prosperity unevenly, Milanovic believed, it remains a powerful engine for generating wealth.

Capitalism, Alone, his latest book, takes on still bigger game, offering an account of capitalism itself. This ambitious undertaking can perhaps be read as a tribute to Marx. “Whoever studies Marx,” Milanovic wrote in 2018, “can never forget the grandiosity of the questions that are being asked.” The point of economics is to understand the world as a whole. And for Milanovic, what is novel about capitalism today is that it spans the whole world. In previous epochs, capitalist societies coexisted with those that organized production differently: hunting and gathering, slavery, serfdom, subsistence farming, and, of course, the socialism of the Soviet Union. Since the latter’s fall, capitalism has become not only the world’s dominant economic system but, functionally, its only one.

Like his previous book, Capitalism, Alone blends empirical research with creative analysis, bringing an eclectic mix of Marxist class analysis and Weberian sociology to bear on economic data about inequality, corruption, growth, and migration. But where Marxists typically seek to delve beneath the realm of appearances to understand how capitalism really operates, Milanovic stays at the surface level, analyzing capitalism’s effects as they appear in the data and developing typologies accordingly. For him, moreover, clarity about capitalism’s defects does not translate into a call for its demise. In fact, Milanovic argues that no such thing will happen. He is not deluded about capitalism but rather reconciled to it. The book’s philosophy can be summed up as: It is what it is.

Milanovic opens Capitalism, Alone with a definition of capitalism borrowed from Marx and Weber and likely familiar to most of his readers. Capitalism, in this account, is a system in which production is “organized for profit using legally free wage labor and mostly privately owned capital, with decentralized coordination.” This system has long existed, he contends, citing the Roman Empire and sixth-century Mesopotamia along with the more familiar examples of Italian city states and Dutch traders—an argument that runs counter to those made by many scholars of capitalism, who disagree on its precise starting point but rarely place it quite so far back in history. But today, instead of competing with or encroaching upon other forms of production, capitalism operates without any true competitors.

For Milanovic, then, the study of contemporary capitalism means recognizing internal differences within a unitary system. He identifies two main types: the meritocratic “liberal capitalism” of the West and the state-led “political capitalism” of China and a number of other countries. Like his brief history of capitalism, this schematic is both unremarkable in its generalities and idiosyncratic in its details. Notably, his use of “liberal” is not a reference to liberalism as it is usually conceived in terms of individual freedom, the rule of law, and democratic governance. Rather, his system of “liberal meritocratic” capitalism is loosely inspired by two of the possible distributive systems in John Rawls’s A Theory of Justice. The liberalism of Western capitalism, Milanovic argues, is found in the fact that goods are, at least in theory, distributed meritocratically and that social mobility is “liberal”—that is, aided by policies like inheritance taxes and free education so that individuals’ opportunities are not constrained by arbitrary conditions of birth. His analysis of political capitalism, by contrast, highlights the relationship between the political and economic spheres: In political capitalism, political power is used to achieve economic gains instead of the other way around.

Today’s liberal capitalism, Milanovic argues, must be distinguished from two earlier strains of capitalism: the “classical” capitalism of the 19th and early 20th centuries and the “social democratic” capitalism of the mid-20th century. He derives these categories not from an assessment of their underlying distributive principles or how their industries were organized but from a set of empirical features. In classical capitalism, capital was highly concentrated and received a rising share of income; those who owned capital were rich, married one another, and transmitted their benefits to their children. In social democratic capitalism, this maldistribution was at least partially checked, with an increasing share of income going to labor and with rich people less likely to marry one another as

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People should be able to get rich by working, he argues, and it’s better to have hard-working wealthy people than a leisure class. The tendency for people to marry those of similar education and income levels reflects little more than the “greater participation of women in the labor force, social norms that value paid work, and a preference for partners who are similar to ourselves.” He acknowledges that these norms have pernicious side effects—the fact that people who receive income from capital also work for money makes it harder to hike tax rates, for example, since today’s wealthy are seen not as parasites but as people who have earned their money. But rather than interrogate these beliefs, he simply notes them in passing as one of the many barriers to change.

Milanovic points out plenty of others. In his view, the social democratic tool kit of the past—unions, mass education, high taxes, social transfers—will not suffice to fix the current state of income inequality. Service workers are difficult to organize and are unlikely to attain the power of unions in the heyday of manufacturing. Mass education has hit a “ceiling” and is likely to deliver diminishing returns to a new generation of young people. High taxes and social transfers have also become “politically difficult” to achieve in a globalized economy without risking capital flight—and in any case, as Milanovic notes, the large middle class of rich countries now looks upon such transfers skeptically, unconvinced that it will benefit from them. Perhaps most significantly, a new wave of “economic migration” presents a challenge to welfare states, one that threatens to send them into a vicious cycle of cuts. (I’ll return to this shortly.)

For Milanovic, what is novel about today’s economic systems is that they are all capitalist. A system in which actors use “political power to achieve economic gains.” As an ideal type, its key features are an efficient bureaucracy, absence of the rule of law, and the autonomy of the state. In the absence of democratic mechanisms, state legitimacy stems from the ability to deliver growth; if growth falters, other aspects of the system may come into question. Growth is managed by a technocratic and meritocratic bureaucracy, yet laws are arbitrarily applied, ignored, or modified in pursuit of the goal of adequate growth. Corruption is “endemic to political capitalism,” at least to a point: Taken too far, it damages the growth that legitimizes the system in the first place or increases inequality to a point that delegitimizes the bureaucracy that manages it. The real aim is not to plunder the system but to retain control over it. Whereas liberal democratic states have largely been captured by capitalists, political capitalist states are autonomous insofar as they alternately encourage and rein in the private sector according to the national interest.

Milanovic’s argument about political capitalism, which draws on his past research on socialist economies, is also partly genealogical. While his account of the development of liberal meritocratic capitalism follows a familiar trajectory, he identifies political capitalism as the outgrowth of communism. Communism, he maintains, is hard to understand within what he describes as the teleological narratives advanced by both liberals and Marxists. Marxists have traditionally thought that capitalism was a necessary stage on the way to communism: Capitalism would develop the forces of production, which communism would then seize and put to use for the benefit of all. Liberals, meanwhile, expect “linear progression towards richer and freer societies.”

Yet in Milanovic’s view, neither the Marxist nor the liberal account offers a satisfactory explanation for the rise and fall of communism: The rise presents a problem for liberals, the fall for Marxists. Moreover, neither account is well-suited to explain the “specifically Third World” path to development, instead assuming that such countries will simply follow the trajectories of the developed West. Milanovic’s approach is to invert the traditional Marxist view: He contends that communism acted as a way station to capitalism rather than the other way around. Communism, he writes, was “a social system that enabled backward and
colonized societies to abolish feudalism, regain economic and political independence, and build indigenous capitalism,” noting that communist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America did the work instigated by bourgeois revolutions in the West, with the added challenge of overthrowing not only feudal powers but colonial ones. Once in power, communist parties built infrastructure, educated populations, and developed extensive bureaucracies—all of which ultimately paved the way for capitalism once the Cold War ended.

One might note that it is strange to describe a system in terms of what it gave way to, which after all is easier to see in hindsight. But Milanovic’s point is that communist societies modernized under the control of powerful states, many of which have retained an authoritarian stamp even after their transition to capitalism.

From these broad brushstrokes, Milanovic outlines a set of empirical features with which to identify systems of political capitalism: They are characterized by single-party rule and political structures that emerged after an anticolonial independence struggle, usually a violent one. In some of these states, a left-wing party Stewarted the transition to capitalism. It is not entirely clear what these criteria have to do with communism’s evolution into political capitalism, and Milanovic doesn’t explain, which is particularly striking given that this definition of political capitalism is notably constructed so as to exclude the former Soviet Union. In fact, Milanovic asserts that only 11 countries fit his description: China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Laos, Singapore, Algeria, Tanzania, Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. Although these countries share some historical trajectories, the huge variability among them (not all, for example, were communist) raises questions about how useful a category political capitalism is as Milanovic has constructed it. More generally, the fact that most of the world’s countries do not fit into either of his categories suggests further limitations to this scheme for parsing capitalism. How should we understand Russia and Brazil, India and Saudi Arabia?

In any case, of the political capitalist states Milanovic identifies, only China receives sustained attention. Unlike in the West, he observes, in China wages across all strata have risen significantly over the past several decades, but as in the West, the wealthy have rocketed ahead of the rest. So far, however, they have yet to become a “class for themselves” acting politically to advance their economic power; the state stands ready to keep them in check and maintain its control.

Will this change? Will Chinese capitalists, that is, seek to take over the state as they have in Europe and the US and implement something more like liberal capitalism, under which they will no longer be subjected to arbitrary state power? And will China seek to export its mode of capitalism to the rest of the world, as the US has sought to do? Milanovic thinks it unlikely—but what is certain is that China will play an increasingly significant role in the future of capitalism and the international institutions shaping it.

Indeed, although Milanovic purports to be analyzing the two major strains of capitalism today, Capitalism, Alone is best understood as a book about two countries: the United States and China. Its publication comes during what appears to be the early stages of a political confrontation, or vice versa?

Disappointingly, Milanovic says little about how liberal and political capitalism interact within the now-total global system. Instead, he focuses his discussion of capitalism’s current dynamics on what he sees as the key feature of globalization—greater mobility for both capital and labor—and the political challenges that result. Here, the upshot of Milanovic’s distinctive blend of normative political theory, empirical economic analysis, and ostensibly pragmatic policy recommendations becomes most concrete and its limitations most apparent.

Milanovic approaches the political dynamics of migration very much as an economist. He describes the disparities in income and welfare state provision between poor and rich countries as a “citizenship premium” (a term introduced in Global Inequality). Nationalism is not simply an affective phenomenon, he argues, but an attempt to hold on to a source of rent: Citizenship is “a joint monopoly exercised by a group of people.” Although citizenship is a valuable asset, it is for the most part not a marketable one. For now, at least, it is mostly distributed politically, through control over borders and documents.

On the basis of this economic analysis, Milanovic makes a political argument: As long as there are differentials in national income, labor will move in its pursuit of higher wages. But this movement, he adds, will always be contested. As living standards, wages, and welfare benefits decline in the West, the working classes of the developed world will seek to protect what remains of the premium they receive for being citizens of a wealthier country, and they will often do so not just through protectionist policies but by trying to keep others out.

Closed borders are Milanovic’s worst-case scenario. They are bad for migrants, but they are bad, he argues, for most other people too. He would prefer that labor and capital move freely, and he is genuinely opposed to the injustice of an international system in which accidents of birth determine most people’s fate. But if he is a cosmopolitan, Milanovic also styles himself a pragmatist. Since he accepts that the backlash to migration is inevitable, he also argues that we must accept some demands that the mobility of labor be restricted. If not, an even greater backlash against globalization might occur.

Milanovic doesn’t seem to seriously consider the opposite approach—restricting capital while letting labor move freely. But his analysis also suffers from a weakness of much so-called realism: It advocates policies based on a set of assumptions about what the working classes prefer in terms of labor.
mobility and migration, while also assuming that those preferences are fixed in advance rather than shaped through politics itself.

What emerges from these assumptions is a draconian proposal: Pending an age when technology makes it possible for people in one part of the world to work in another without actually moving, he argues, states should create a “tiered” system of citizenship and rights. To preserve the preferential status of current citizens, migrants should not receive the full “citizenship premium”; rather, they should have a “curtailed” set of economic rights. This tiered system of legal migration, he continues, must be paired with a strict border policy that would end illegal migration entirely—what Milanovic bluntly describes as a “ruthless cracking down on excess migration.”

If this sounds familiar, it is because most countries already utilize multitiered immigration systems along the lines that Milanovic prescribes. The United States, for example, grants different rights and privileges to different groups of workers. People with H1-B visas for “skilled” but temporary work are eligible to stay in the country for three to six years, while those with H2-A visas for short-term, usually seasonal agricultural labor may be authorized to stay for as little as a month—and that is to name only two of the 20 categories of temporary workers recognized in the United States. Meanwhile, green card holders can reside here permanently but are subject to deportation if they are convicted of certain crimes. And while they are technically eligible for some public benefits, a regulation introduced under the Trump administration was intended to prevent those who might eventually draw on government assistance from receiving green cards in the first place. Only naturalized citizens receive all the benefits of those born citizens.

This system treat migrants as a source of more or less disposable labor for the companies on which they are dependent, leaving them vulnerable to employer abuse, and it effectively allocates more privileges to the better-off. But if this hierarchy of rights is indefensible morally, it also fails to achieve Milanovic’s purported aim: The existing tiered system has not diminished anti-migrant politics. And Milanovic’s proposal to, in effect, retain the existing system while hardening borders—that is, to accept a rightward swing on immigration policy—is arguably more likely to fuel anti-migrant flames than to douse them.

In any case, immigration restrictions have not protected the citizenship premium that Milanovic claims is at the core of anti-migrant politics, and putting more of them in place is not likely to either. Migration is not the reason for capital flight, and closing borders does not restore unionized manufacturing jobs, as Milanovic surely knows. His ostensible pragmatism, then, simply reinforces an ideology that scapegoats migrants for the actions of capitalists. Any egalitarian politics must seek to challenge this “common sense” rather than concede to its mistaken premise.

The tone of matter-of-fact compromise with an unsatisfying and dysfunctional status quo that Milanovic proposes in the context of migration pervades Capitalism, Alone. Where the globalization literature of the 2000s was exultant with promise, Milanovic’s book frankly admits the limitations of actually existing capitalism and resigns itself to making the best of things. Milanovic anticipates criticisms from those who find his portrait of capitalism uninspiring: “Isn’t this state of affairs a plea for change in the socioeconomic system?” Or to put it...
more sharply, is this really the best we can do? Doesn’t this chronicle of the rapid increase of inequality and iniquity, of self-justifying elites and self-dealing bureaucrats, nativism and corruption, cry out for something better? And yet his answer to such questions is an old one: There is no alternative—or a bit more precisely, capitalism is the worst system, except for all the others.

“Capitalism has a side of lightness and a side of darkness,” Milanovic declares. The light side is the side of doux commerce, what Montesquieu described as commerce’s tendency to inculcate kinder, gentler behavior. The dark side is its encouragement of competitive and acquisitive tendencies. A sales agent may be friendly, but don’t be fooled—no one is here to make friends. The pursuit of money is fundamentally amoral at best. As Marx said of the Dutch colonialists’ engagement in the slave trade in Java, “Das ist der doux commerce!”

But while we might wish that economic life were more pleasant, Milanovic thinks we should face reality. Capitalism has channeled our private vices into public benefits, directing human acquisitiveness into forms of competition that increase our overall well-being. All we can really do is soften it around the edges. “Capitalism,” he argues, “has successfully transformed humans into calculating machines endowed with limitless needs.” We may be disturbed by the way these calculating tendencies have burrowed into our private lives and eroded our moral commitments, as many left-wing critics of commodification argue, but we have chosen to participate, and now there’s no going back.

To illustrate his point, Milanovic considers the calls for more leisure put forth by heterodox economists like Kate Raworth and basic income advocates like Rutger Bregman. Though well-intentioned, such proposals are little more than fantasies, he insists. Individual people who adopt lives of greater leisure will find themselves falling behind their hard-working peers, while nations that attempt to set shorter work weeks will find themselves overtaken economically, to the point that the citizens of richer nations will buy the very land out from under them. Although Milanovic does not address the socialist revival within the world of liberal meritocratic capitalism directly, his response would presumably be the same—that socialism can succeed only where it is here to stay.

A few pages before the book’s abrupt end, Milanovic does offer a few suggestions as to how this world can be made more tolerable, commerce more doux—at least in liberal capitalist societies, which might yet evolve into a “people’s capitalism” or an “egalitarian capitalism.” Capital, he argues, could be equalized through changes in tax policy that encourage the middle class to hold more high-yield financial assets; measures could be taken to increase employee stock ownership; there could be a wealth tax. Intergenerational opportunity, meanwhile, could be evened out by erasing the disparities between public and private schools.

Many of these ideas are fine as far as they go, and some have already been championed by left-leaning politicians. Others, like the encouragement of middle-class asset ownership, have long been policy. But they are hardly adequate to address our contemporary economic and social crises, and in any case they do little to solve the political problems that Milanovic has identified. Why is a wealth tax, for example, not doomed by capital flight or competition, as those aiming for greater leisure would be? If the rich dominate politics to the extent he suggests, how would such policies be implemented in the first place? If class conflict between labor and capital really is at the heart of how wealth is distributed, as Milanovic declares from the start, how can it be ameliorated through such mild tweaks?
irresponsible but indicative of the larger limits of Milanovic's project. It is folly to think that one can reform capitalism without considering the changes reshaping the earth itself. Climate change will not bring capitalism to an end—at least in the immediate future—but it will drastically alter the conditions under which it operates and present grave new challenges for both liberal and political capitalism. Moreover, climate change is merely one example of the fact that capitalism does not actually exist “alone” on a planet that operates according to its own rules. We are right now living through another such example: the Covid-19 pandemic. So if the legitimacy of political capitalism depends on growth and stability—and it seems to me that the legitimacy of liberal capitalism does, too—then capitalism itself faces a rocky road ahead, one that inheritance taxes alone will not smooth.

The turmoil of Covid-19 and the economic mayhem it set in motion are extraordinary but also portentous: They offer a glimpse of future trends. Further increasing the stock portfolio of the middle class will do little to halt ecosystemic breakdown, extreme weather, and emergent disease. Capitalism in all its varieties will be hard-pressed to respond to these supposedly “external” threats; legitimacy will rely not only on sheer growth but on the ability to protect populations from life-threatening catastrophes and disease, not least so that growth can eventually continue in some form.

The two great crises of the 21st century—the 2008 financial crash and the Covid pandemic—have revealed the centrality of the state to today’s global capitalism. Central banks have propped up asset prices and prevented a nosedive into depression despite an unprecedented plunge in economic activity, itself caused by public edicts. Governments, meanwhile, have undertaken unprecedented fiscal stimulus to boost demand. Indeed, contra the small-government paeans of the 1980s and ’90s, the future of capitalism now looks brightest in places where states play a more active role in managing the economy, whether tilting the scales toward solar power or managing emergent public health crises. This new terrain calls for greater attention to the political dimensions of capitalism and the evolving role of different kinds of states—whether the Fed’s outsize power to shape financial markets, China’s remaking of the world’s physical infrastructure, or the European Union’s massive regulatory apparatus.

Milanovic’s account of capitalism today is most useful in gesturing toward a comparative analysis of capitalism, detached from the liberal teleology of the past three decades. Yet for all his criticisms of an earlier era of liberal economics, he too seems stuck in the globalization paradigm of the 1990s; a more smoothly connected world remains his lodestar. He has worried recently that the pandemic, by leading countries to place restrictions not only on migration but on travel and trade, will derail progress toward that goal. The pandemic has surely made global value chains appear more vulnerable and will no doubt lead to forms of restructuring. And tensions between capitalism’s core powers—the United States and China—have intensified dramatically. But globalization is not likely to be reversed altogether.

Milanovic is not wrong in saying that “no challenger appears in sight” or that it is hard to imagine a serious one emerging, even in the face of the current crisis. But this should be worrisome even to capitalism’s defenders. Capitalism’s most serious challenges may be those that are the product of its own success—what Marxists might call its contradictions. Capitalism, Alone demonstrates the limits of studying capitalism’s empirical effects without a theory of how the system actually works—or especially, how it doesn’t.
Evelyn Waugh liked to tease Graham Greene by remarking that it was a good thing God exists, because otherwise Greene would be a Laurel without Hardy. It is a mark in Greene’s favor that he recounts the jibe in a tribute to Waugh written shortly after his friend’s death in 1966. Throughout his life, the fabulously successful Greene was ever ready to pull his own leg, such as when, in 1949, he entered a New Statesman competition by submitting three parodies of his own writing under pseudonyms. One of the entries was judged good enough to merit a guinea of the six-guinea prize. Greene then wrote a letter to the editor owning up to the prank and regretting that he had not won the contest outright, especially as the money would be tax-free—always an important consideration with Greene.

It is not insignificant that Waugh’s squib does not work the other way round, even though Waugh was far more firmly, if not indeed fanatically, committed to his faith than Greene ever was; in the course of a private audience at the Vatican, Pope John XXIII is said to have interrupted a tirade by Waugh against the reformist spirit sweeping through the church by observing gently, “But Mr. Waugh, I too am a Catholic.”

Ironically, while Greene was known universally, and to his irritation, as the world’s preeminent “Catholic novelist,” Waugh was what Greene wished to be accepted as: a novelist who happened to be a Catholic.

Both men were converts, but while Waugh pledged himself absolutely to Rome and never wavered, Greene was always ambivalent in his religious commitment. In later years, he would claim to be a Catholic agnostic, which is an impossibility, as anyone who knows anything about Roman Catholicism can tell you. Either you are in or you are out; there is no middle way.

Given the large number of books that have been written about Greene, including a monster three-volume *Life* by Norman Sherry, one might wonder whether there was need of, or even room for, yet another. Richard Greene, biographer and poet—a rare combination—and no relation, so far as we know, has already given us a collection of Greene’s correspondence, *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*. His new biography, *The Unquiet Englishman*, is perceptive, refreshingly unsolenm, lively, at times funny, and shrewd throughout. It’s also a wonderfully bright and entertaining read, for which we must be grateful in these shadowed times. His Graham Greene is an intrepid venturer into the world’s violent places who comes home and writes fictional accounts of his experiences. This seems right, for Greene was as far from an art-for-art’s-sake novelist as could be found. All the same, a little more art and a little less swashbuckling would surely have made him a finer writer than he managed to be.

Greene was born in 1904 in a small market town in Hertfordshire. His father was a teacher at Berkhamsted, a minor public school—which in the way of things English means it was a private school—where later he became headmaster. His salary and perks, including accommodation for his wife and their six children and free education for their four sons, ensured that the family was comfortably off. The Greenes subscribed to the Anglican religion, in the unemphatic way of most of the well-to-do English middle class of the time. However, Greene’s was a fervent soul, and one evening in December 1920, when he was 16, he found God—or, as no doubt he would have said, God found him. He was idling on the grounds of the school. He could hear at a distance the school orchestra playing Mendelssohn and, nearby, a rabbit moving about in its hutch. Suddenly, out of the blue of twilight, God was there.
The moment, and the description of it, are typical of the author of *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*. For most people who come suddenly to religion, or better say faith, the Lord announces himself as the spirit of inspiration, affirmation, joy; for Greene, loitering at the edge of night on that emblematically English croquet lawn, there is only an intimation of “violence, cruelty, evil.” As Richard Greene remarks: “He could only imagine Hell, not yet a heaven.”

In this context, it would be well to keep in mind the future novelist’s age at the time, his troubled mental state—not long after that dark evening of the soul when the Pentecostal fire descended upon him, he was diagnosed as manic depressive, or bipolar, as we say now—and that every self-respecting *poète maudit* finds hell a far more warming prospect than a cold heaven. All the same, that was the moment when the young Graham discovered far more than just his religion; he discovered what would come to be called, by critics friendly and unfriendly, “Greeneland.” If, that is, we believe his account of what happened: Rare is the novelist who can resist embellishing a scene. When dealing with Greene’s autobiographical writings, as the author of *The Unquiet Englishman* delicately notes, “caution needs to be exercised.” All the same, the vignette, whether true, exaggerated, or invented, vividly predicts the atmosphere and at least some of the preoccupations of the future novelist: a figure standing alone in a darkling scene, sensing the immanence of wickedness, sin, and suffering, as well as the possibility of redemption.

Greene chafed under the privilege into which he was born. His family may have been top dogs, but from his earliest days Graham was firmly on the side of the underdog. His parents’ people were moneyed, with business interests including brewing, which involved the slave trade: An ancestor, Benjamin Greene, ran a business on the island of St. Kitts in the West Indies that was worked by 225 slaves. Greene’s parents were first cousins, and both had tainted genes. Charles Greene’s father suffered from what Graham judged to be manic depression, like himself, and his maternal grandfather, an Anglican priest, was also mentally ill. The latter labored under a burden of guilt—presumably he had Doubts—and according to Graham, “when his bishop refused his request to be defrocked, [he] proceeded to put the matter into effect himself in a field,” doffing his frock and standing naked before his gaze-eyed pissars and tight corseted. Richard Greene—ah, what a trial to the reviewer is this proliferation of Greenses!—tells us that as a young man, Graham had little time for his well-meaning but somewhat bumbling father, dozing instead to his high-minded mother, who had the distinction of marrying a cousin, if a distant one, of the great Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, an abiding influence on Greene’s own fiction. As the years went on, however, the father rose in the son’s estimation, while the mother sank, mainly because she was a snob, and Graham Greene was never that.

As we know, snobbery has always been a plague upon English social life, and never more so than in the Edwardian era, as the imperial world grew weary and the old absolutes began to totter on their plinths. Berkhamsted school was very modest compared to Eton or Harrow, but it had its own traditions of intolerance, exclusivity, and brutality. Pupils who boarded were known as aristocrats, day boys formed the middle class, and underneath all there toiled what Greene’s friend and fellow Berkhamstedter, the writer Peter Quennell, described as “a despised proletariat, the ‘train boys,’ so called because they arrived by train from various adjacent towns.” Richard Greene writes of these scholarship students: “Also called ‘train bugs’, this last group attended the school with financial assistance and were mocked for their accents, bad clothes, and supposed smell.” Acting out of what his son called “rather noble old liberalism,” Charles Greene, to his great credit, sought by various civilizing measures to alleviate the plight of the downtrodden among his charges. Young Graham also offered sympathy and support to the bullied among his fellow pupils.

And where in such a school hierarchy was the live-in son of the headmaster to find a foothold? Even allowing for exaggeration and Greene’s slight tendency to romance the facts, his boyhood seems to have been little short of intolerable, and entirely so on occasion. In his autobiography, he described the green baize door that marked off home from school, those two separate countries, writing, “I had to remain an inhabitant of both.” Naturally, he ran away, leaving a note for his parents saying he would not come back until they promised that he would not have to return to St. John’s, his school “house,” where he had suffered at the hands of a pair of bullies and was forced to deal with “filth,” by which he seems to have meant, his biographer ventures, “that boys were farting all the time.” Young Graham was soon found and fetched home, and despite his parents’ sympathy, he was required to return to school and its mephitic vapors.

*The Unquiet Englishman*
*A Life of Graham Greene*
By Richard Greene
W. W. Norton & Company
608 pp. $40

*John Banville’s novel* April in Spain *will be published in the fall.*

*The Power and the Glory*...
to the other boys and loyalty to his father, out of which emerged a personal mythology concerning trust and betrayal.”

A prominent, indeed notorious, passage in this “personal mythology” was the occasion in the early 1920s when Greene played, if that is the word, a game of Russian roulette. By then, he was at Oxford, unhappy, chronically bored, and for most of the time, as he said, in a “general haze of drink”; he was also undergoing psychoanalysis, which he blamed for the fact that for years afterward he “could take no aesthetic interest in any visual thing.” And he was hopelessly in love with his younger siblings’ governess, a woman 10 years his senior.

Desperate circumstances required a desperate remedy. In his autobiography, he makes the claim of chancing upon a revolver—“a small ladylike object with six chambers like a tiny egg-stand”—in a cupboard in a bedroom he shared at home with his brother Raymond. Greene goes on to say that he took the gun out to Berkhamsted Common, loaded a single bullet, spun the chamber, “put the muzzle...into my right ear and pulled the trigger.” It was not a suicide attempt, he explained, but a bid to escape from boredom and unhappiness. “The discovery that it was possible to enjoy again the visual world by risking its total loss was one I was bound to make sooner or later.” Surely in this we hear not the voice of the 19-year-old Greene but of the world-weary, rich, and famous “Catholic novelist” who wrote those lines. He took the revolver back with him to Oxford and had five more goes with it there, then gave up the dangerous game.

Did he really play it, and as he said he did? “This is one of the most famous episodes in Graham Greene's life,” his biographer writes. “However, it may not be entirely true.” Greene’s mother dismissed the tale as made up, and his brother, who owned the gun, said there was no ammunition with it. The novelist himself later suggested that the bullets were blanks, and that he knew they were.

There is no doubt that the flight from boredom—or perhaps apathy is a better term—was a driving force in Greene’s life, as it is, indeed, in the lives of all of us, to a degree rarely acknowledged. It sent him to roam the world along the “dangerous edge of things,” in a phrase of Robert Browning’s which he quoted frequently. On these journeys he risked life and limb many times over: in Indochina when the French were there; in Vietnam when the Americans succeeded them, disastrously; and in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Asked in an interview why so many of his books were set far away from England, Greene said, “It’s a restlessness that I’ve always had to move around, and perhaps to see English characters in a setting which is not protective to them.”

Greene had endured London in the Blitz at the start of the 1940s and later the terrifying onslaught by V-1 and V-2 rocket bombs, and perhaps nothing was ever again as vivid to him as the experience of living in constant fear of imminent death. He seems to have enjoyed it all, remarking to his friend Anthony Powell, in the coolly brittle tone popular at the time, “London is extraordinarily pleasant these days with all the new open spaces, and the rather Mexican effect of ruined churches.”

After Oxford, Greene worked as a
sub-editor at The Times of London; “subbing” was a discipline which afterward he said he could strongly recommend to any aspiring writer. He also began to write journalism.

As it happened, an article of his published in the undergraduate magazine Oxford Outlook led eventually to his marriage, the only one he contracted to, despite the many romantic liaisons he carried on throughout his life. In the piece, a rather prissy concoction inveighing against the current “over-sexed” age, he wrote: “We either go to church and worship the Virgin Mary or to a public house and snigger over stories and limericks.” This brought a stinging letter from an enthusiastic young Catholic, Vivienne Dayrell-Browning, private secretary to the publisher Basil Blackwell, who a couple of years before had brought out a slim volume of Greene’s verse under the ill-advised title Babbling April. Miss Dayrell-Browning admonished Greene for speaking of “worship” of the Virgin Mary—worship being reserved for God alone—and informed him that the correct term was “hyperdulia,” a lesser form of veneration. Such an exchange must inevitably lead to romance. The two met, had tea, went to the movies, and Greene was lost, or found, he was never quite sure which.

The path of love did not run smooth. There were tiffs, tears, tantrums, breakings off, and reunittings. Greene more than once proposed, and in the end was accepted on condition that he convert to Catholicism. He agreed, but that route too had its bumps and swerves. Greene argued hard with the priest from whom he took instruction in church doctrine. Unlike Waugh, he was never to be a rule-bound Catholic; religion, for him, had in it a strain of magic. In the 1970s, hearing from a concerned Catholic who felt the novelist had lost his faith, he replied that he had always made a distinction between faith and belief: “I think I still have faith, even though the belief is a bit ragged.”

Greene could have sought to have the marriage annulled, as Waugh did after he left his first, flagrantly unfaithful wife. But he seems to have been content to let matters rest between him and the woman who, perhaps not incidentally, bore a marked resemblance to his mother in form and personality. Anyway, the Vatican, though ever indulgent of the rich and famous, would probably have found the existence of the Greenes’ two children something of an impediment to permitting the dissolution of the marriage.
he number and intensity of Greene’s love affairs is a matter of legend. His greatest love—at least until 1959, when he met Yvonne Cloetta, who was to be his partner during the last three decades of his life—was Catherine Walston. The formidable Mrs. Walston was American, married, rich, beautiful, and a Catholic convert, and served as the model for Sarah in The End of the Affair, no more a convincing female character than any of the others Greene attempted. He met Catherine at a party in 1945, and the following year, when he was looking for a house to buy, she showed him one in Cambridgeshire and afterward, being the holder of a pilot’s license, flew him back to London in a light aircraft she had hired for the purpose. Greene wrote, “A lock of hair touches one’s eyes in a plane with East Anglia under snow, & one is in love.”

There were, however, complications, to say the least. “Greene’s life was now knotted in the most extraordinary way,” his biographer notes. “He was married to Vivien, living with Dorothy [Glover], a set designer he had met during the war, purportedly involved with a possibly non-existent Claudette Monde [a French journalist], and in love with Catherine Walston.” Eventually, he would rent a flat next door to the one occupied by Catherine and her not entirely compliant husband.

Catherine was certainly a game girl. When her husband, Harry, found out his girlfriend was pregnant, his wife obligingly traveled to Dublin, where the child was to be born, “went about with a pillow under her clothes until the delivery, and was then certified as the mother” and took the boy, James Walston, as her own. The Dublin rumor mill at the time had it that when she was there, she whiled away the time in a brief affair with a well-known Jesuit and alcoholic, one Father Donal O’Sullivan—shades of Greene’s whiskey priests.

Greene’s early books were not successful. In the second half of the 20th century, young authors dejected by poor sales and dismissive reviews would be encouraged by their editors to look to Greene’s example and keep on. Just remember, one was told, he published six novels before he hit the jackpot with Brighton Rock! When success came, it came with a tremendous splash. After the war, his novels sold in the hundreds of thousands, his plays ran for months, and he made a fortune from film adaptations.

But were the books any good? Richard Greene makes a better case for them than they do for themselves. They have not worn well. If we contrast, for example, Brighton Rock with Georges Simenon’s Dirty Snow, published 10 years after Greene’s over-wrought thriller—cum-religious tract, we cannot but acknowledge Simenon’s dark masterpiece as by far—by very far—the greater and more enduring of the two.

And what to make of postwar melodramas such as The Power and the Glory, The Heart of the Matter, or indeed The End of the Affair? The first is risibly portentous and the second embarrassing; the last is a quite good middletrow novel until two-thirds of the way through, when it becomes a quasy meditation on the nature of sin, self-sacrifice, redemption, and the miraculous, to which the only possible response is laughter. It may be that his most accomplished works are Lord Rochester’s Monkey, a biography of the once scandalous poet done with the lightest of touches, and the screenplay for The Third Man, the greatest mainstream movie ever made. Among the novels, The Quiet American is the one that will most likely live on, but for its remarkable political prescience, not its literary merit. What he classed as “entertainments” contained his best work: Travels With My Aunt is far more than entertaining.

How in Greene’s time could so much be made of so many of his second-rate books? He was the darling of the middletrows—not a pejorative term; what would fiction do without the middletrow reader?—and of the critics alike. The publication of a “new Greene” was an event to be marked on calendars around the world. Papa Doc Duvalier, the Haitian dictator who had contemplated having Greene assassinated, kept a copy of The Comedians on his desk along with a revolver and a Bible.

Greene worked in the public sphere and kept himself in the public eye. Brighton Rock, published in 1938, the year of the Munich betrayal, spoke to the anxieties of Auden’s “low dishonest decade.” After the war, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima and the rest of the horrors, when the devil seemed to walk abroad in plain sight, Greene—never an intellectual and leery of modernism and the modernists’ disdain of the audience—had the courage, and the decency, to write simply and straightforwardly about the momentous issues of the day, about wars, revolutions, and the depredations of tyrants of right and left, while at the same time addressing the things of the spirit, such as religion, morality, and the duty of the citizen, both to the state and to the state of his or her own soul. As the Cold War spread its permafrost on both sides of the Iron Curtain, people craved signs and, when they got them, took them for wonders. Greene’s books were no wonders, but they sufficed to allow readers to imagine they were not just being diverted for a few hours but were wrestling with the great, eternal questions of human existence.
Liberty for Whom?

The racialized history of freedom

By Olúfémí O. Táíwò

“Give us liberty and give them death,” said David Duke at a rally for the Ku Klux Klan in Baton Rouge, La., in 1975. His thunderous words were a play on the famous quotation from Patrick Henry, “Give me liberty or give me death.” Henry’s statement was intended to express his commitment to the well-known American ideal of freedom, which he and his peers took to be at stake in their forthcoming revolutionary struggle with the British Empire. But when Duke gave this speech as the Grand Dragon of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, he had in mind another ideal with deep roots in American history: racial domination.

The two men could hardly have more different legacies. Henry is venerated as a “founding father,” while Duke is reviled as a disgraceful bigot. But any attempt to delegitimize Duke’s appropriation of Henry’s words and the ideal they represent must also contend with an uncomfortable and inconvenient truth: The freedom that Henry, a plantation and slave owner, and his fellow founders took to be worth defending was also linked to the racial domination that organized life and labor in the American colonies. The revolution was a struggle for self-rule, but it also sought this self-rule in order to control the land conquered from Native Americans and the labor extorted from abducted Africans. It was a politics of freedom entwined, from the outset, with a politics of enslavement and exploitation.

Tyler Stovall’s new book, White Freedom, attempts to answer the questions raised by this juxtaposition of Duke and Henry. How, he asks, can we square the “acme of Western civilization,” the ideal of liberty celebrated in the US and French republics, with its “nadir,” that of racial slavery, colonialism, and genocide? In plainer terms, “How is it,” as the English writer Samuel Johnson sardonically asked in 1775, the same year as Henry’s address, “that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of [enslaved] negroes?”

Through painstaking and comprehensive historical research, Stovall addresses these questions by means of the concept named in his book's...
title: white freedom. For centuries, he argues, writers, intellectuals, and politicians have tried various strategies to reconcile the United States’ and France’s brutal histories of racial domination, settler conquest, and slavery with their stated commitments to freedom. Many of these strategies have hinged on an attempt to use one to explain away the other. Those who defend the historical legacies of both countries insist that liberty is their true moral foundation; racism, colonialism, and slavery were transitory imperfections that the march of “progress” eventually brought to an end. Those who view the them as irredeemable often contend the reverse: that racism is, as Stovall puts it, the “true inescapable reality of Western culture and society.” But as he demonstrates, at the heart of the two nations were both a commitment to liberty and a vision of society in which this liberty was unequally distributed and deeply racialized. The result was freedom for those at the top of the racial hierarchy, supported by and premised upon the unfreedom of those at the bottom.

According to Stovall, then, the dueling realities of freedom and slavery, liberty and domination, master and slave, are not just a clash of opposites; instead, they have been and continue to be counterparts in the making of modern history. To be free, Stovall notes, has long meant to be white, and to be white has conversely long meant to be free.

To explain the symbiotic relationship between racism and freedom, Stovall begins by charting the history of liberty and domination in modern North Atlantic history. His first chapter recounts the fascinating history of piracy, particularly in the Caribbean, including how the French and US republics sought to restrict the practice. Among the Caribbean pirates—many of whom had formerly been enslaved—a “rough racial democracy” prevailed. Electing and removing their captains by the principle of “one man, one vote,” many of the pirate outfits were in fact more democratic than the republics from which they stole. But the pirates’ self-government and their freedom on sea also threatened French and US sovereignty: They attacked shipping lanes key to transatlantic commerce; they made coastal territories vulnerable; and their sense of democratic equality posed a challenge to the republics’ racial hierarchies both at home and abroad. For the US and French republics to ensure their reigns, the pirates and their “savage freedom” had to be eliminated.

The drive to develop navies and eliminate piracy on the high seas also came home to roost. Much as the United States and France sought to suppress the pirates, Stovall contends, they sought to dominate and control the children in their own countries, and they did so in the name of a new form of freedom: one defined not by bucking formal power structures (as the pirates did) but by respecting them. Resistant to authoritarian control, the teenager and the pirate alike needed to be introduced to new forms of discipline—systems of domination that American and French society insisted enabled new forms of liberty.

Out of this new definition of freedom also came, Stovall notes, a racialization of those deemed not worthy to receive it. On the one hand was a freedom defined by savagery and subalterns; on the other was a set of natural liberties and rights owed only to adult white Europeans, whether they lived in America or in Europe. As colonization and the Atlantic slave trade both expanded, they became even more integral to justifying the regimes of domination and violence erected by those republics in the pursuit of freedom.

This new notion of freedom was not only racialized but gendered and then also domesticated. While the French revolutionary symbol known as Marianne is famously depicted in Eugène Delacroix’s painting Liberty Leading the People as a bare-chested woman wielding a musket and bayonet in the violence against the old regime, her descendant the Statue of Liberty—given to the United States by France—offers a contrasting depiction of liberty: a serene, robed woman holding a torch rather than a weapon. Freedom, yes, Lady Liberty tells us, but a pacified form of it.

Stovall then turns to the way this new domesticated and racialized mode of freedom fit into the peculiar double movement of world politics over the 18th and 19th centuries. While liberal democracy and expanded social freedoms began to extend throughout the domestic spheres of American and European republics like the United States and France, these same powers expanded their authoritarian colonial control over much of the rest of the world.

How could these nations reconcile their valorization of self-government with their actual practices of slavery and colonialism—the ultimate forms of government by others? This is where Stovall’s earlier story about how freedom became racialized in the 18th and 19th centuries intersects with his story about how freedom became the province of the few and not the many. Racism helped square the circle: The right and privilege of self-government was linked to what was perceived as Europeans’ unique capacity for rational thought. As John Stuart Mill put it in On Liberty, the doctrine of liberty ought to apply only to “human beings in the maturity of their faculties.” “Despotism,” on the other hand, was “a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.”

In France, the tensions between the new republic’s commitment to freedom and its actual violence and domination were well represented by the Marquis de Condorcet. The fiery French radical was one of slavery’s most vociferous European foes, yet he also opposed the immediate emancipation of the enslaved. As with the American founding fathers, slavery as a metaphor for unfreedom was a clear and present evil, but on the actual social institution that structured the lives of Africans throughout the French Empire, Condorcet and his fellow abolitionists demanded a bit of nuance. The Society for the Friends of the Blacks, of which he was a member, attempted to get the National Assembly to pass a motion to end French participation in the trade.
“A masterly study of political struggle…. Yang has written a captivating account, full of personality and drama—and significance…. Worth reading to the last page.”
—David M. Shribman, *Boston Globe*

“Anyone who doesn't understand that we are a nation of immigrants should be given a copy of Yang’s powerful and cogent [book].”
—Bethanne Patrick, *Washington Post*
in the slave trade, but it stopped short of an attempt to end the slave trade itself. Stovall reports that Condorcet also insisted that enslaved Black people were unprepared for emancipation and that he ultimately “foresaw freedom coming to blacks when they merged with and disappeared into the white population through miscegenation.”

Condorcet and the French radicals were not alone. Most of the Enlightenment’s intellectuals, from Immanuel Kant to the physician François Bernier, offered elaborate theories that affirmed the right to freedom for white Europeans while simultaneously producing cutting-edge racial science. Kant, for instance, wrote that there was only one innate right, “freedom,” which meant “independence from being constrained by another’s choice.” Yet he also wrote approvingly of a critique of a proposal to free Black slaves, since they lacked the mental capacity to be good laborers without being coerced into activity. Likewise, he regarded Native people in North America as “incapable of any culture” and “far below even the Negro” in their adaptability and strength. The embrace of freedom and the embrace of racism were complementary positions, not contradictory ones: The case for freedom for Europeans was also the case for unfreedom for the rest of the world.

In the United States, Thomas Jefferson perhaps best embodied this vision of freedom, even if there were many other contenders, such as Patrick Henry. In 1776, Jefferson famously wrote the Declaration of Independence, which held that “all men are created equal” and endowed with an inalienable right to liberty, even though he owned more than 600 human beings—surely some sort of conflict, should we take his words literally. He also wrote, in 1781, Notes on the State of Virginia, which held that Black Americans—free or enslaved—should be “removed beyond the reach of mixture.” “It is not against experience to suppose,” Jefferson argued, “that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications. Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views the gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them? This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.”

Whether in Condorcet’s France or Jefferson’s America, racism served—rather transparently—to justify those political institutions that were sharply and clearly opposed to the letter of the principles being invoked to legitimize them. By naturalizing European superiority, Stovall shows, Jefferson, Condorcet, and other thinkers could justify a system of freedom for some while complacently accepting the domination of many others—and the “white” in white freedom was society’s way of organizing who played which role.

Some may argue that the examples of Jefferson, Condorcet, and the rest imply that racial domination boils down to errors in thinking about race and justice, or that white freedom is merely an inconsistency in reasoning from abstract ideals and principles to concrete political questions. But what drove the formation of republican freedom and its racialized forms of enslavement and colonization was material more than ideational. These thinkers were explaining an economic, political, and military stratification of society that already existed and that had not waited for such justifications. After all, by the time they were writing, the European empires had been amassing wealth through enslaved labor for several generations. These men were offering highbrow justifications of this system of exploitation only to make it palatable to polite society. As Aimé Césaire explained in his classic “Discourse on Colonialism,” killing and plunder tend to come first and the “slavering apologists” later. The conquistadors spent vastly more effort “justifying” themselves with sword and bullet; putting a flattering rhetorical cloak on naked plunder was a pressing concern only for later generations.

Despite Stovall’s focus on cultural and intellectual history, this primacy of violent domination proves to be a central theme in White Freedom, and in his final chapters he pays close attention to how the West’s pursuit of political power and profits has proved more historically decisive than the doctrines of liberty and racism that its intellectuals devised to justify this pursuit. Britain and France saw World War I, for example, not as a struggle to end imperial domination but as an opportunity to expand it—so long as they were the ones doing the dominating. In the midst of fierce battles in France and what is now Iraq, they signed the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement to divide the Ottoman Empire between them at the war’s end. This did not stop many nations from seeking to free themselves from this domination after the war, as national liberation struggles and revolts erupted from India to Ireland. Nevertheless, the conclusion of World War I marked a return to a politics that saw freedom as an ideal for some but not all. In 1919, in the Punjabi town of Amritsar, British colonial troops raked protesters with machine gun fire, killing hundreds, rather than allow a demonstration against their rule. In Korea, millions of people organized against Japanese colonialism, prompting a similarly violent response that claimed thousands of lives, while in France, the government resorted to the mass deportation of “exotic” Chinese laborers from its colonies throughout the Caribbean and Africa, replacing them with workers from southern and eastern Europe. During the same year in the United States, there was widespread racial violence and terrorism, especially against returning Black veterans, who were more assertive of their right to self-rule than white freedom could countenance. The summer after the war’s conclusion was known in the United States as the Red Summer for its massive wave of violence nationwide, as white mobs looked to restore the racial order.

Or Stovall, this march of white freedom continued into World War II and the Cold War years. Nazi Germany sought to expand its empire while also racially purifying its society at home, and it did so under the banner of freedom for the German Volk—providing one of the book’s most powerful and persuasive demonstrations of the complementary relationship between freedom and race.

Looking to the model of racial domination developed by the United States, the Third Reich passed the Nuremberg Laws, which installed racialized tiers of legal protections, stripping German Jews of their citizenship and barring sex and marriage between “Germans” and “non-Germans.” This program of racialization and marginalization eventually culminated in the death camps—which also drew on techniques of genocide the German Empire had used in Namibia—where millions of Europe’s Jews, a half million of its Romans, and others targeted for their sexual or gender identity or physical or mental disabilities perished. In this way, the Nazis...
brought home to Europe the violence and racial subjugation that the European powers had practiced in their colonies, in what Hannah Arendt called the “boomerang effect” of imperialism.

The defeat of the Third Reich represented a powerful blow to this nakedly racist and authoritarian conception of white freedom. As Stovall shows, however, the postwar consensus that arose out of the Allies’ victory posed another challenge to realizing a vision of freedom cut loose from racism. President Harry Truman presided over the ascendant nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which cast themselves as representatives of the “free world” against the “captive nations” of the Soviet sphere. But this program of freedom curiously failed to include the captive nations of the British and French empires—nations that, as Stovall points out, were not referred to as nations at all.

These captive nations, however, had their own conception of freedom and were willing to fight for it. Figures like Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere challenged the West’s continued embrace of racial domination with a demand for freedom from empire. This led, Stovall writes, to “one of the most dramatic series of events in modern world history,” as the number of member states of the United Nations swelled from 55 in 1946 to more than double that by 1965, the vast majority of them former colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. World War II and its political aftermath challenged the idea of white freedom “to an unprecedented degree in modern history,” he concludes. A new conception of freedom, cut loose from its racialized origins, began to proliferate, even if it remained threatened by both the former imperial powers of Europe and the ascendant one in the United States.

While the concept of white freedom is Stovall’s, the subject of how freedom and race are entwined is not new. Carole Pateman’s insightful analysis of the gender domination inherent to the liberal social compact in The Sexual Contract inspired a similar analysis by Charles Mills in his 1994 book The Racial Contract, which considered how the social compact that safeguards liberal freedoms is also composed of several other compacts that protect the freedom of white people to dominate and exploit the nonwhite peoples of the world. Radical political theorists like Neville Alexander, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Oliver Cox made their own cases for how liberal freedom had become racialized, insisting that, contrary to what many claim, the social structure and political ideals of liberal democracies can coexist with racial domination.

Outside the academy, the critical notion of white freedom has influenced much of the Black activism of the past century to the present day. Ida B. Wells, for instance, outlined many of the same connections between freedom and race. In her turn-of-the-century speech “Lynch Law in America,” she rejected a description of lynching as the “sudden outburst” of an “insane mob,” characterizing it instead as “the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an ‘unwritten law,’” above and beyond the written law, that allows and even demands violence against Black and Indigenous people, while rezerving the freedom-preserving written law for whites.

Half a century later, Aimé Césaire and an ascendant generation of anticolonial activists leveled similar accusations at the French Empire and the broader constellation of Western powers that enabled it, with Césaire writing that the “great thing” he held against such “pseudo-humanism” is that its very concept of human rights is “sordidly racist.”

While Stovall’s account of freedom and race is a compelling one, he might have done more with this deeper critical tradition, if only because so many of its advocates put forth visions of a freedom liberated from the shackles of racism. For example, along with the Caribbean pirates and France’s Marianne, he might have considered how maroon society and the liberated colonies offered alternative conceptions of emancipation. While Stovall provides a thoughtful answer to the question “What does it mean for freedom to be white?,” the reader may also want one to the question “What does it mean for freedom not to be white?”

Nonetheless, White Freedom’s strengths resonate far more than its weaknesses. The book is a treasure trove of historical detail, but it’s also written clearly and persuasively, such that the overarching themes of race and freedom consistently ring louder than the minutiae. Its focus also helps Stovall to provide a coherent narrative about a political history of multiple countries spanning multiple centuries. His history of American and French racial politics outside of their domestic sphere is commendable, making these empires accountable for their total domains of control and influence, including their oft-ignored colonial endeavors and effects on global politics.

White Freedom is also a worthy addition to the recent surge of work rethinking the connection between race and other fundamental aspects of our social system, from the discussions of The New York Times’ 1619 Project and critical race theory to leftist debates about racial capitalism. The recent global protests against racism and police violence suggest that these issues may continue to powerfully shape politics for quite some time.

Stovall concludes with a juxtaposition of two US presidents: Ronald Reagan, who demanded in 1987 that the Berlin Wall be torn down in the interest of freedom, and Donald Trump, who demanded—along with the House Freedom Caucus—that the United States build a wall along its border with Mexico. In both cases, “freedom” represented a specific vision: a social order dominated by the United States. Reagan’s speech called for the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the rise of a new world order of unregulated capitalism upon which white freedom was built. In the ensuing era of unchallenged capitalism, Trump sought to build a wall that would free Americans from the burden of sharing their zones of wealth and domination with the Global South.

White freedom, Stovall reminds us, has a history, but it is no mere historical idea: Its defenders inherit a balance of power and the political advantages that centuries of white freedom have helped shape. But we inheritors of a different legacy—the efforts of those who forced white freedom into key retreats over the past centuries, thereby increasing the political freedoms of most of the people on this planet—are also alive and well. As the late Nipsey Hussle once said, “You build walls, we gon prolly dig holes.”
NOT SO LONG AGO, THERE SEEMED TO BE SOMETHING radical in rejecting the future. Looking back, it’s easy to see why. In the 1990s, history was over; the United States and capitalism had won. Strutting conservative televangelists and smug liberal technocrats took turns running the world. Globalization promised more of everything: more productivity, more innovation, more wealth. Economic prosperity and regressive moralism went hand in hand. The nuclear family was once again sacred, and non-normative sexuality remained stigmatized: Don’t ask, but also don’t tell. Conservatives—as well as some liberals—supported any policy that promised to protect children, born and unborn, so they might take advantage of the bright future that awaited them. Meritocracy was supposedly thriving, even as inequality prevailed everywhere.

In response, a reasonable nihilism emerged in the era’s counterculture. If conservatives, and even some liberals, were “pro-life” and “focused on the family,” all in the name of a bountiful future provided to us by the end of the Cold War, then what positions should radicals take? Against globalization, against procreation, against the nuclear family, sometimes against children themselves—these politics took shape in the late 1990s and early 2000s in some radical circles. The literary scholar and theorist Lee Edelman presented one version of them in a 1998 essay, which became part of his 2004 book *No Future*. In the book, Edelman argued that American society’s fetishistic attachment to its children always came at the expense of queer people and other marginalized adults. Present happiness was sacrificed at the altar of some idealized future. Queer resistance, he argued, worked against this kind of “reproductive futurism.” Instead of fighting for our children, we should fight against the future itself. “Fuck the social order,” Edelman wrote, “and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrified; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”

**Adjunct Hell**
*The rise of a new kind of campus novel*

**By Maggie Doherty**
When I first read Edelman’s book as a graduate student in literature, it thrilled me. I loved how he eviscerated so-called family values, extolled by liberals as well as conservatives during the 1990s and early 2000s, and how his book promised that joy could be found outside of social norms. Now, 17 years after the book’s publication, the argument lands differently: “No future” has become more of a lament than a rallying cry. The future is no longer something to protect or reject; it’s something that’s slowly being taken from children and adults alike. We’re facing climate apocalypse, widening inequality, and a global pandemic. Is it any wonder that birthrates and rates of happiness are down in the United States, while rates of mortality and suicide have been rising? Can any of us honestly imagine the future?

This is the question posed by two new novels about adjunct professors trying to make ends meet: Christine Smallwood’s debut, The Life of the Mind, and Lynn Steger Strong’s second novel, Want. In The Life of the Mind, we meet Dorothy, a PhD living in “adjunct hell.” She teaches “two or three or sometimes four” English courses at the same New York City university where she earned her doctorate. In between classes, she tries to “write the sample chapter that would get her the [book] contract that would get her the job that didn’t exist.”

In Want, we meet another struggling adjunct, who has a lighter teaching load—only one course a week—but, in typical adjunct fashion, also has a second job, as a teacher at a charter high school. Only part of the book explores her work as an adjunct, but this is entirely appropriate: She’s a part-time academic, earning a fraction of a full-time professor’s pay. When she’s introduced to the wealthy couples who have hired her husband, a carpenter, to build closets or cabinets in their Long Island homes, she struggles to explain her career to them: She’s a professor, “except no health insurance.” She calls herself a “professor of failing to find a way to make a living wage.”

Both books can be read as twists on the campus novel, a genre mastered by Mary McCarthy, David Lodge, and Zadie Smith, among others. Both provide doses of academic satire. Smallwood makes satire central to her project, introducing us to insecure grad students who, in her words, read aloud “in the same tone one uses for driving directions or a recipe.” She describes “paradigm-shifting” work in literary studies that seems trivial to the untrained eye (and often to the trained one). In a scene so funny I cried from laughing, she describes a grad student’s dissertation on “the politics of doors.”

Strong, meanwhile, is great on the small details of the literature classroom: the dead silence in response to a question, the student spooning yogurt from a large plastic tub throughout the first hour of class. When her narrator, unnamed for most of the novel, teaches Imre Kertész’s Kaddish for an Unborn Child to her students, one complains that book’s main character is “mansplaining Auschwitz to his wife.”

But The Life of the Mind and Want are not typical campus novels—because for most of us the prototypical campus experience no longer exists. Capitalism and corporatization have ravaged the university, making the stakes of academic work extremely high rather than comically low. For working-class students, first-generation students, graduate students, and adjuncts, the experience of academia is primarily one of insecurity. Contemporary students still go to college or graduate school to get an education, but once there, they realize that their degree likely won’t help them find a stable job or a secure social position.

In this sense, these adjunct novels are versions of the bildungsroman, the novel of education—but here education means learning just how precarious your future is. Will these adjuncts be able to pay their rent, afford health care, bear and care for children? Will they have anything like the future they dreamed of when they were young? The protagonists are stuck in limbo; there’s nowhere to go but down. Processes that should be linear and finite (a course of study, a school term, a pregnancy) become unpredictable and unending. In both novels, plot—the literary structure that signals progress—gives way to an atmosphere of anxious uncertainty, one familiar to many of us who came of age during a moment of financial and ecological crisis.

Maggie Doherty is a lecturer at Harvard and the author of The Equivalents.
of it. At one point she takes a smartphone picture of her vagina, searching for the source of some rogue bleeding. At another, she requests a sonogram of her empty uterus, only to be disappointed to see that what she thought were tendrils of wispy somethings were in fact just “dead pixels.”

Dead pixels and dead embryos are coupled with a dead-end career: As an adjunct, Dorothy is socially dislocated and pushed outside of time. She’s neither at the conclusion of her graduate studies nor at the beginning of an academic career. She’s neither single nor married, neither broke nor financially stable, neither a mother nor childless by choice. She’s on the faculty but not a professor. When she’s mistaken for a student, Dorothy announces that she’s a professor, then immediately questions this identity: “She didn’t believe herself. She looked down at her clothes. They were shabby and studentish. Her hair was unwashed. She was probably shiny.” Her graduate school friends who have secured tenure-track jobs treat her with an infuriating mix of condescension and pity. Her former adviser—a woman who “always operated in total confidence that her orders would be obeyed”—treats her like a daughter, or a serf.

Dorothy may not be an adult like her wealthy friend Gaby, whose purpose in life is raising her son (and looking good for a successful career living at the end of the end of the world). Instead of feeling or acting, she obstinately “passes” or “waits” time. Her former advisor; it’s one of very few instances of overt emotional expression, and it’s fake. Instead of feeling or acting, she observes. She notices, for instance, that her mother “had told her so many times that she was not a plant. Of that much she was certain. The paragraph—like the apocalypse it forecasts, like the novel itself—is anticlimactic: It begins with a titanic of literary studies but ends with a dictionary search on a smartphone. The slip into free indirect style also shows Dorothy’s penchant for understatement. At the same time, there’s a wonderful excess to the writing: the grandiose, the quotation from a literary work that dripped and dribbled out and was flushed away. The word the doctor has used was “blighted.” It sounded like something the government bailed out, a Midwestern crop failure. The dictionary on her phone said that “blight” referred to a plant disease. But Dorothy was not a plant. Of that much she was certain.

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texts, language, art, to what we might call the life of the mind. The novel is a critique of academia and its abhorrent labor practices, but it is also a celebration of humanistic learning. There are citations from and sometimes lively discussions of Pierre Bourdieu, Silvan Tompkins, Lauren Berlant, and Franco Moretti. Reading these books doesn’t help Dorothy become a functioning member of society, but Smallwood suggests that maybe that shouldn’t be the point of reading anyway.

In this sense, Smallwood is close to Edelman: There’s a kind of ecstasy to be found when the future is foreclosed and all the productive activity of bourgeois life begins to appear pointless. Dorothy experiences this ecstasy while grading her final papers: one about dying coral reefs, another about the death of the novel. “She felt a thrill spread like hot milk throughout her body as all the endings that had ever been piled up before her,” Smallwood writes. Dorothy gives each paper an A- before “dumping each one carefully, respectfully, into the trash.”

We don’t know what the future holds for Dorothy: another term teaching the Apocalypse? A new adjunct gig? A tenure-track job? (Probably not the last.) The elegant yet abrupt ending suggests that we shouldn’t waste too much time wondering either. We can simply close the book on Dorothy; her future is itself foreclosed.

If Dorothy faces a crumbling world with detachment, Strong’s narrator attaches herself to it all the more fiercely. She hates the ethos of the charter school where she works but loves her students. She can’t stop teaching college literature, even though it pays nothing. “It feels good sometimes, pretending, that other people—showing them their whiteness and the places we were raised from and sometimes lively discussions of Pierre Bourdieu, Silvan Tompkins, Lauren Berlant, and Franco Moretti. Reading these books doesn’t help Dorothy become a functioning member of society, but Smallwood suggests that maybe that shouldn’t be the point of reading anyway.

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Under Torn Paper Mountains

Misadventures in the 1960s-70s US Southwest, Marine Corps, hippies, the Poor People’s Campaign, and a fraught passage to Mexico.

In the 1960s and 70s a young man faces the Vietnam War, then becomes part of the emerging hippie generation with all its attendant idealism and hope for social change. An adventure story in a peculiar way, a novelization of true stories, of wanderings and musings and pain and passion in the southwestern deserts, with a few hard lessons along the way. This is not a suggested path for others, but some nuggets may lie among the sag�s and ruins left behind. And some of it is true.

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I Always Meant to Tell You… …letters to a younger brother (deceased)

by Perry Robert Wilkes

The author writes through his grieving process in the face of losing three remarkable and much loved family members—his only brother, Steve, Steve’s wife, and their younger son—in the crash of a small plane in his only brother, Steve, Steve’s wife, and their remarkable and much loved family members—

Much of the writing was done in a small Mexican seaside community where the family had vacationed together. It is the way Perry chose to heal from his own pain.

As an ongoing conversation with Steve, it is also a reminder to anyone struggling with the loss of someone dear that the conversation need never end, because true love has a story to tell and a voice that can never be stilled.

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Available from Bookworks in Albuquerque, NM, your favorite local bookseller, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com.

The Life of the Mind and Want both beautifully sketch those feelings, which more and more of us are coming to know. There’s the anxiety of wanting or having children without a future on offer, for you or for them. There’s the envy of those who have lucked out or gamed the system or inherited wealth. And then there’s the strange awe those of Dorothy’s generation (and mine) feel at living through the end of an era—of stable employment, pension funds, affordable education, and any chance of containing a looming ecological disaster—and then past it. Such feelings, as Ngai theorized, are not necessarily located in individuals. Instead they float freely, as they do throughout these novels; they might describe each book’s tone, as well as the experience of reading it.

A life made, or half-made, under conditions of academic precarity is often a paranoid, anxious, stupefying life—stupefying in part because, in some sense, you chose it. As any director of graduate studies will remind you, no one forced you to go to graduate school. You went because you thought, like Strong’s narrator, that books were the answer to life’s problems. Or maybe because, like Dorothy, you thought you might become the kind of “scholar who taught at a top-tier research university and wrote books for the general reader that would be reviewed in the daily paper.” For whatever reason, you chose a less remunerative (and possibly less evil) path than your peers who went into management consulting or tech. What you did not choose, at least not knowingly, was a life of permanent gig work and near-poverty wages.

These conditions can also generate another feeling, one that’s found less frequently in Want and The Life of the Mind:

child’s joy at seeing her mother wearing a purple dress.

Rather than a story of a miscarriage, Want has one about an unplanned pregnancy carried to term. There’s less about ecological degradation; the crises are more acute and closer to home. While Smallwood’s novel is a study of waste, written in a prose style marked by excess, Strong’s novel is all about lack. Her prose is spare, as if performing the deprivation the book’s title suggests. Her tone is lyrical, even elegiac at times; there’s less irony than we might expect from a narrator with a PhD. Here she is, recalling her first pregnancy:

The first time I got pregnant it was an accident…. I’d never before that been sure I wanted kids—I knew we were too broke to have her; I was still in grad school—I ached for her as soon as I saw that word form. I had an emergency C-section, and my student health insurance didn’t cover C-sections—or it covered C-sections, but only partially. We owed the hospital thirty thousand dollars…. My body almost single-handedly bankrupted us. It also, with a little bit of help, made and then sustained the two best things in our lives.

This kind of paradoxical feeling characterizes much of the novel. The narrator is both desperate and grateful, cursed and lucky, envious and content. On some lev-
el, she knows it’s absurd to stay attached to her current existence: How can you love a life that’s been deemed a failure to her current existence: How can you love a life that’s been deemed a failure? And yet the narrator refuses to give up her commitment to her students, to books, to a way of living that still makes room for the life of the mind, despite her financial precarity. This is one way, though not the only way, to resist the logic of late capitalism.

I was in a PhD program in English right around the same time as Dorothy and Strong’s narrator. I read many of the same books Dorothy did: Bourdieu, Berlant, Moretti. I also read Ugly Feelings, by the scholar and theorist Sianne Ngai. It was given to me by my then adviser, who proffered the book as an example of what one could do with a dissertation—if one were a genius, that is. Published in 2005, the book came out one year after Edelman’s No Future, and it presaged the opposite end of his exuberant nihilism. Like Smallwood’s and Strong’s novels, Ngai’s book is a study of those “minor” feelings that develop under capitalism. These are feelings experienced by the powerless, those whose agency is, in Ngai’s words, “obstructed”: feelings like envy and anxiety, paranoia and irritation, and two of her own coinage, “animatedness” and “stuplimity.” Ngai warns against overestimating the radical potential of these ugly feelings, but it’s possible that by better reckoning with them, we might be able to create opportunities for collective resistance.

The Life of the Mind and Want both beautifully sketch those feelings, which more and more of us are coming to know. There’s the anxiety of wanting or having children without a future on offer, for you or for them. There’s the envy of those who have lucked out or gamed the system or inherited wealth. And then there’s the strange awe those of Dorothy’s generation (and mine) feel at living through the end of an era—of stable employment, pension funds, affordable education, and any chance of containing a looming ecological disaster—and then past it. Such feelings, as Ngai theorized, are not necessarily located in individuals. Instead they float freely, as they do throughout these novels; they might describe each book’s tone, as well as the experience of reading it.

A life made, or half-made, under conditions of academic precarity is often a paranoid, anxious, stupefying life—stupefying in part because, in some sense, you chose it. As any director of graduate studies will remind you, no one forced you to go to graduate school. You went because you thought, like Strong’s narrator, that books were the answer to life’s problems. Or maybe because, like Dorothy, you thought you might become the kind of “scholar who taught at a top-tier research university and wrote books for the general reader that would be reviewed in the daily paper.” For whatever reason, you chose a less remunerative (and possibly less evil) path than your peers who went into management consulting or tech. What you did not choose, at least not knowingly, was a life of permanent gig work and near-poverty wages.

These conditions can also generate another feeling, one that’s found less frequently in Want and The Life of the Mind:
A Solitary Trade
Jhumpa Lahiri’s spartan new fiction
BY JENNIFER WILSON

HE PROTAGONIST OF JHUMPA LAHIRI’S “INTERPRETER OF MALADIES,” the title story in her 1999 debut short story collection, is a multilingual tour guide named Mr. Kapasi who speaks, to varying degrees, English, French, Russian, Portuguese, Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Gujarati, and Italian. One day, he drives a young Indian American couple and their children to visit a temple on the coast of the Bay of Bengal devoted to the Hindu sun god Surya. On the long drive there, he tells them about his other job as an interpreter in a doctor’s office. The wife, Mrs. Das, becomes fascinated by this, telling him she finds the idea of translating for sick and frightened patients “romantic.” Mr. Kapasi revels in this attention and starts seducing Mrs. Das with stories about “the young woman who had complained of a sensation of raindrops in her spine” and “the gentleman whose birthmark had begun to sprout hairs.” He is thrilled by the notion of a love affair with her, and his head spins with hope: It is a feeling “he used to experience long ago when, after months of translating with the aid of a dictionary, he would finally read a passage from a French novel, or an Italian sonnet, and understand the words, one after another, unencumbered.” That Lahiri would compare
the sensation of falling in love to feeling at ease in a language should have signaled then that all was not well. The daughter of Bengali immigrants who settled in Rhode Island, Lahiri saw firsthand the way her parents’ accented English was held against them in America. Though she later achieved success as a writer in the language herself, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Interpreter of Maladies, the heavy burden that English imposed on her family remained a source of resentment. “For practically my whole life,” she would later write, “English has represented a consuming struggle, a wrenching conflict, a continuous sense of failure that is the source of almost all my anxiety. It has represented a culture that had to be mastered, interpreted.... English denotes a heavy, burdensome aspect of my past. I’m tired of it.” Yet Bengali, the primary language of her early childhood, created nearly as much uneasiness for her. Like many other heritage speakers, Lahiri is not entirely fluent in her first language. “I don’t know Bengali perfectly,” she has said. “I don’t know how to read it or even write it. As a result, I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language, too.”

In 2012, Lahiri moved to Rome and began to write exclusively in Italian. It was a language she had studied on and off since her 20s. (In graduate school, she wrote a dissertation on representations of Italian architecture in 17th-century English drama.) In Italian, she seemingly found something like a way out from English and Bengali. “I had to joust between those two languages,” she explained, “until, at around the age of twenty-five, I discovered Italian. There was no need to learn that language. No family, cultural, social pressure. No necessity.”

Lahiri published her first book in Italian, Il Altre Parole, in 2015. A memoir about her relationship with language and her decision to learn Italian, the book was translated as In Other Words by Ann Goldstein, famous to Anglophone readers as the translator of Elena Ferrante. In 2018, Lahiri published her first novel in Italian, Dove Mi Trovo, which now appears in English as well, in Lahiri’s translation, as Whereabouts.

A quietly bracing work of fiction, Whereabouts follows a lonely, middle-aged woman wrestling with what it means to live alone. The woman remains unnamed throughout, a fascinating move for Lahiri, whose 2003 novel, The Namesake, hinged so much on the importance of names as carriers of generational hope and trauma. The setting of Whereabouts is likewise ambiguous; the most we can safely assume is that it is set in an Italian city popular with foreign visitors in the summer. Thus the main character not only lives alone but is unmoored from any defined cultural geography that would place her within a specific community.

By default, then, the novel marks a dramatic departure from Lahiri’s earlier work, which explored themes of immigration, identity, cultural belonging and unbelonging. In Whereabouts, such questions have been eschewed in favor of something more abstract, disembodied, unidentifiable. In this way, Lahiri forsakes not just English and Bengali but the dynamic these two languages represented for her. Now free of her mother tongue and its primary antagonist, Lahiri looks beyond the immigrant experience for sources of conflict and tension, or so it would seem.

If Whereabouts is intended to mark Lahiri’s freedom from her vexed relationship to language and identity, one wonders why it is also such a sad and lonely story. The novel is composed entirely of the reflections of a single woman, commentaries about the strangers who pass in and out of her life—shopkeepers, people sitting across from her on the train, recollections of family members she infrequently or never sees. Could it be that the result of extricating oneself from identity is not, as is often suggested, universalism but rather a doleful solitude?

Whereabouts
By Jhumpa Lahiri
Knopf
176 pp. $24

Whereabouts is a novel about passing the time and filling up the empty parts of the day. The narrator reflects on getting lunch at her local trattoria, attending the baptism of a colleague’s child somewhere along the coast, buying stockings, visiting her favorite stationery store. At one point, she purchases tickets to the theater and tells us, “This is how I fill up the pages of my agenda, the one I buy at the end of every year at the same stationery store, always the same size and number of pages. Little notebooks in various colors that, with the passing of years, inevitably repeat: blue, red, black, brown, red, blue, black, and so on.”

It is across these little pages that the novel takes us. The recurring characters seem like strangers, even when they are the narrator’s friends, and rarely does one make more than a second or third brief appearance. The closest we get to another major character is the husband of a friend who lives in the neighborhood, but that relationship too is defined by how remote they are even in their closeness, by what it could be rather than what it is. “We have a chaste, fleeting bond,” she remarks. “Two kisses on the cheeks, a short walk along a stretch of road. Without saying a word to each other we know that, if we chose to, we could venture into something reckless, also pointless.” But, at least as far as we know, the recklessness is not acted upon.

Though Lahiri’s prose has always been elegantly understated, the language in Whereabouts is pared down further still. Perhaps this is born out of a forced economy of expression, but the result is refreshing—the kind of exactitude that comes when you use only the words you need. The language feels not thin but reserved and mature, like that of someone who has grown tired of small talk.

Yet interestingly, those are precisely the types of conversation the narrator is relegated to by virtue of her social world. The novel is full of people she sees every day but does not really know. Many of the scenes feature the narrator and her retinue of familiar strangers alone while together, isolated but in shared spaces. “Twice a week,” she says, “I go to the pool. In that container of clear water lacking life or current I see the same people with whom, for whatever reason, I feel a connection. We see each other without ever planning to.” There are also the people who sit alongside her at her favorite trattoria: “I eat alone,” she tells us, “next to others eating alone.” At one point, she attends an academic conference (she is a professor, but it is unclear precisely what

she teaches), but much of the chapter’s focus is on a philosopher staying in the next room at her hotel. The two form a habit of meeting at the elevator: “Without planning to,” she explains, “we wait for each other every morning and every evening, and for three days our tacit bonds put me obscurely at peace with the world.”

The narrator of Whereabouts treats this way of life as something to be parsed, studied, and practiced. “Solitude: it’s become my trade,” she reflects, adding, “As it requires a certain discipline, it’s a condition I try to perfect.” “Solitude” is the right word; the narrator’s existence certainly could not be called “independence.”

The latter term feels too intertwined with feminism and a politics of liberation, and this is not the story of someone who is contemplating the historical or political implications of rejecting motherhood or marriage. What interests her is the fabric of solitude, how it’s stitched together, how absence feels against the skin.

As the novel progresses, we learn that the narrator’s choice to live in solitude is a response to family drama more than any romantic one. Her solitary life is something the narrator has cultivated as a reaction to her unhappy childhood, a childhood that orbited between an overly attached mother and a distant, unaffectionate father.

Her mother, the narrator recalls, has “always been afraid of being alone.” Throughout her childhood, she “kept me close to her side, she never wanted us to be apart, not even briefly. She safeguarded me, she protected me from solitude as if it were a nightmare, or a wisp.” The narrator becomes determined not to be this way but still worries that she is choosing to live alone out of fear: a fear of needing someone too much, or a fear of not knowing how to need someone at all.

Her late father, on the other hand, never settled easily into the configuration of family. “How can I link myself to another person?” she asks when visiting his grave. As if confronting him, she brings up scenes from her childhood, when he would keep both her and her mother at arm’s length: “Even today I see you walking three feet ahead of her... You, who chafed at the collective we created, who only wanted to subtract yourself, always, from the equation, throwing it off-balance.” When asked to intervene in arguments between mother and daughter, her father always responded, “Why ask me? I have nothing to do with it.” It is a rejoinder that has stayed with her into adulthood, making her at once wary of connection and ravenous for it.

Halfway through the novel, the narrator sees a young man selling things in her neighborhood—vintage magazines, old silverware, paintings. She asks who the objects belonged to, and he explains that his father could not bring himself to throw away his mother’s things after she died, but he had died too this year, so he was finally cleaning out. The narrator returns each day to buy something new, and slowly her life is filled with the detritus of someone else’s marriage. She begins to drink coffee from the couple’s “chipped cups.” She reads their old magazines on her sunlit balcony, learning “all about the actors and gossip and goings-on of another generation.” Her “spartan life perks up a bit”; surrounded by the wares of another family—their literal and emotional baggage—she feels comforted: “These new acquisitions entertain me, they keep me company.”

So much of Whereabouts is like this. The main character moves in and around the intimate lives of families, just not the ones related to her—a fitting subject for a novel written in another tongue.

Ahiri’s earlier novels revolved around the overlapping tensions of family and community, and they wrestled with these questions against a backdrop defined by its incredible cultural and geographic specificity. The Lowland, her previous novel, was named for a marshy territory in the Kolkata neighborhood where the two brothers at the center of the book grow up (one joins India’s radical Naxalite movement and the other pursues graduate studies in Rhode Island). In The Namesake, Lahiri’s first novel, she portrayed the immigrant experience in heart-wrenching detail, documenting how the pressure to assimilate could pull parent and child apart.

By contrast, family exists in Whereabouts largely as a pretext. Parents, lovers, and friends appear
and disappear. Interactions last as long as it takes to drink a cup of espresso. That Lahiri would choose this subject matter for her first novel in Italian, a language she is not bound to by family or any form of communal identity, feels apposite. In her memoir *In Other Words*, Lahiri observed that as she began to write in Italian, she felt herself moving beyond the specificities of place and all that geography entails. “Today,” she added, as if relieved, “I no longer feel bound to restore a lost country to my parents. It took me a long time to accept that my writing did not have to assume that responsibility.”

In turning to Italian, Lahiri has joined a long tradition of “exophonic writers”—those who adopt, for varying reasons, a different language. Most often, exophony is the result of migration, colonialism, or commercial pressures. With his work banned in the Soviet Union, Vladimir Nabokov was forced to turn to English in order to have a viable career as an author. “My private tragedy,” he wrote in the afterword of *Lolita*, “is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English.” While Chinua Achebe defended his choice to write *Things Fall Apart* in English rather than his native Igbo, he conceded that the need to do so was a tragic conundrum for the postcolonial author. “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal, and produces a guilty feeling,” he acknowledged in his famous essay “English and the African Writer.”

**The Broken Bell**

I like, winter nights, to find in a heat lamp
That beats and fumes, old memories
Rising in the banging
Of church bells through snow spray.

Blessed be the bell of liberty
That, ancient, keeps trying to ring,
Tossing out his faithful cry
Like an old soldier in his bunker

On the eve of battle. My soul’s broken,
And when I want songs of trouble,
It often happens that his voice weakens

Like the death rattle of a forgotten man
By a lake of blood, under a pile of the dead,
Who dies, without moving, in struggle.

*(after Baudelaire’s “La Cloche Fêlée”)*

DAISY FRIED
Not long after the publication and surprise success of her first novel, *The God of Small Things*, in 1997, Arundhati Roy was invited onto a live radio show in London. The appearance did not go to plan. As she recalled in a 2018 lecture:

The other guest was an English historian who, in reply to a question from the interviewer, composed a paean to British imperialism. “Even you,” he said, turning to me imperiously, “the very fact that you write in English is a tribute to the British Empire.” Not being used to radio shows at the time, I stayed quiet for a while, as a well-behaved recently civilized savage should. But then I sort of lost it, and said some extremely hurtful things. The historian was upset, and after the show told me that he had meant what he said as a compliment, because he loved my book. I asked him if he also felt that jazz, the blues, and all African American writing and poetry were actually a tribute to slavery. And whether all of Latin American literature was a tribute to Spanish and Portuguese colonialism.

To give the empire any credit for Roy’s book was obviously absurd. Her novel arrived 50 years after Britain’s formal exit from the subcontinent. But the historian’s comment pointed to an even more inchoate judgment. “English is as good or as bad as the idea of India itself,” Roy noted in her lecture, and it was similarly fractious in her life. Her parents spoke English during their brief time together; Roy began learning it at as a young girl, after her first language of Baganiya. In a country of nearly 800 languages, Roy observed, English became “a practical solution” to the problems created by colonialism, namely a regional resistance to the vastly more politicized language of Hindi.

Roy cited Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalism as proof that an endogenous language can be used to maim and oppress. On the flip
side, she argued, B.R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* showed that a text written in an imperial tongue could simultaneously connote and dismantle “privilege and exclusion.” Thus, “English has continued—guiltily, unofficially, and by default.”

The question of speech and empire, and what language a colonial subject should use, is a constant subtext in the poems, essays, and fiction of the avant-garde modernist Yi Sang. During his short life, Yi wrote in his native Korean and his received Japanese, while experimenting with, and thus subverting, the rules of both languages. Japanese gave Yi a measure of freedom: He read the French Surrealists and Dadaists in translation and adopted their unsentimental style to process his own dislocation under empire. Through colonial exchange, he absorbed European culture and American imports, from Jean Cocteau to Coty perfume to MJB coffee. Japanese was his awkward portal to a wider world, much as English was for British subjects and their descendants, like Roy. As Yi wrote in a story about an imagined trip to Tokyo, “With a foreign language as big as the ocean under my armpit, I couldn’t easily become hungry.”

A new book of Yi’s poems, essays, and short stories, newly translated by the trilingual team of poet-translators Jack Jung, Sawako Nakayasu, Don Mee Choi, and Joyelle McSweeney, helps capture his global oeuvre and shows how he both mined and tore apart colonial grammar. His synthetic, surrealist lexicon described his mélange of East Asian and European styles helped formulate an artistic model for subverting the empire from within.

Yi Sang: *Selected Works*

By Yi Sang
Edited by Don Mee Choi
Translated by Jack Jung, Don Mee Choi, Sawako Nakayasu, Joyelle McSweeney
Wave Books.
224 pp. $25

Yi Sang was born Kim Haegyong in 1910, the first year of Japan’s occupation of the Korean peninsula. His father was a printer who’d become a barber after losing several fingers in an accident; his mother gave birth to two more children after Yi. As a toddler, Yi was taken in by his more well-to-do paternal uncle, who had no son, and was raised as his heir. Yi showed a gift for draftsmanhip from an early age and dreamed of becoming an artist. But his adoptive father worried that he’d starve and urged him to study a more practical subject. He agreed to train as an architect, adopting the pen name Yi Sang in East Asian fashion, and landed a comfortable post in the colonial government in Seoul.

As a civil servant employed by an occupying power, Yi made the most of his circumstances. He did the work he was hired to do, drawing up plans for construction projects. He also designed magazine covers, painted, and composed poetry and prose off the clock. Having attended school in Japanese, as nearly all Koreans did at the time, he was able to enter state-sponsored competitions that required him to write in the official language.

Yi soon joined the group and, for the few remaining years of his life, created dozens of enigmatic, imagistic poems and stories. His writing was often edged, knifelike, with damning portrayals of the destitution and spiritual homelessness of colonial life.

In 1934, through a Guinhwae connection, Yi began to publish “Crow’s Eye View,” which he envisioned as a 30-poem series, in the *Chosun Central Daily* newspaper. (Chosun, also spelled “Joseon,” was the last kingdom of Korea; it is still what North Koreans call the peninsula.) The series’ title, written in the traditional Chinese used by Koreans of the time (and still sprinkled throughout modern Korean), borrows from a common idiom nearly identical to the English “bird’s-eye view.” But Yi used the character for “crow” instead of the generic “bird” and incorporated symbols of his own.

The poems themselves are jarringly peculiar, even today, and in their original form resemble a merger of experimental calligraphy and mathematical proof. Yi combined words with modified numbers and ornaments, proving poet Elisa Gabriert’s argument that punctuation (think: Emily Dickinson’s feral dashes) may be the “bare-minimum” criterion for what makes a piece of writing poetry. The fifth poem of “Crow’s Eye View” reads:

> A single trace shows erasure of both left and right.

**GREAT WINGS FLIGHTLESS**
**GREAT EYES SIGHTLESS**

This is an old tale of a man collapsing before a short, fat god.

Can burning organs be distinguished from a drowning cattle shed?

Next comes the utterly Dada number six, which begins:

Birdie parrot [*] 2 horsies

2 horsies

[*] Birdie parrot is a mammal.

How I—I know of 2 horsey is how ah I do not know of 2 horsey. Of course I keep hoping.

And here is the surreal entirety of number 13:

My arm is cut off while holding a razor. When I examine it, it is pale blue, terrified of something. I lose my remaining arm the same way, so I set up my two arms like candelabras to decorate my room. My arms, even though they are dead, seem terrified of me. I love such flimsy manners more than any flowerpot.

What any single line means is unclear. But taken together, the poems convey a sense of violent absurdity.

“Crow’s Eye View” was received the way a properly avant-garde work should: as an insult or a threat. Like Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, which famously caused a place spike:

Yi’s homeland was less a specific place than an ecstatic world of ingenues, mirrors, blood, geometric shapes, equations, and talking animals.

he surviving photos of Yi, with his elfin ears and curly hair, are beguiling. The great poet is just a boy in a dark student uniform, or a young man in short sleeves, a necktie, and suspenders, arms crossed, judging the world. What if Yi had lived a long life? Long enough to return from his trip to Tokyo and eventually make his way to Paris, home of the first Surrealists?

Surrounded by French architecture, cafes, couture, and bookstores collecting the writings of the world, Yi might have joined circles of artists practicing genre-bending crafts—similar to what many possible worlds. In 1934, around the age of 24, never having set foot outside occupied Korea, he wrote “*Words* for *White Flower*,” a dour love poem set in a rice paddy aerated by an out-of-place spike:

1

My face becomes a strip of skin before your face in moonlight my words of praise for you are left unsaid but like a sigh they tickle open sliding paper door and creep into your hair smelling like camellia fields and transplant seedlings of my sorrow

2

Wandering in a muddy field your high heels made holes it rained and the holes filled with water…

In “*Two People*,” from “Bird’s Eye View,” published in Japanese in 1931, Yi swaps city for countryside but retains the visceral. He combines Western hero and antihero into a brief, electric pastiche:

Jesus Christ began his sermon in shabby clothes.

Al Capone captured the Mount of Olives for what it was and went on his way.

Sometime after the 1930s——.
At the neon-lit entrance to a certain church, a chubby Capone sold tickets while stretching and shrinking the scar on his cheek.

Yi’s work is every bit as otherworldly as André Breton’s. His poem “Paper Tomb—door, but I cannot trade myself in.” My family is trapped inside the sealed ly.” “I burn like a straw effigy in the night. inside is barely alive,” Yi writes in “Family, until it was forced to dissolve after the arrest of some two dozen members.

Yi was no realist, but neither did he abandon the world around him. His stories and poems are formally absurd yet populated by the everyday: the urban poor, unhappy couples, strivers, gamblers, predatory businessmen—stock characters under the colonial gaze. Yi’s work is similarly rich in allusions to landmark buildings and mass-market products, all the raw materials of a stolen city (Seoul) patterned after a colonial metropolis (Tokyo).

Yet the up-to-date expansiveness that Yi imagined before going to Tokyo, he came to judge with comedic severity. The grand Marunouchi office building, with its arched entrances and zippy elevators, “was at least four times bigger and far more amazing in my mind,” he writes in his essay “Tokyo.” In the Ginza shopping district, a model of central planning, he recalls, “I went to an underground public toilet by a bridge, and while excreting I recited all the names of my friends who bragged about visiting Tokyo.” Yi’s poems and fiction also express a critique from below, in subterfuge. Selected Works includes “Spider & Spider Meet Pigs,” an experimental short story about a spider man and woman that also manages to discuss gendered labor, violence in military camp towns, and casino capitalism (and achieves a sense of claustrophobia by doing away with the spaces between words).

Paul Éluard, the French Surrealist and member of the French Resistance during World War II, believed that good artists had common cause with the working class. “Poets, worthy of their name, refuse, as the proletariat does, to be exploited,” he wrote. “Real poetry is included in all that does not conform to that morality which, in order to maintain its order and its prestige, builds only banks, barracks, prisons, churches, brothels. Real poetry is included in everything that delivers man from that terrible wealth which has the appearance of death.”

Yi may not have identified with the peasants of the Korean countryside, but he practiced his own brand of politics. In Guinhwae, he found comrades and an artistic home not unlike what KAPF sought to build. The year before his death, he took up his father’s trade as a printer and published the first and last issue of a Guinhwae journal called Poetry and Fiction. The members who outlived him found no postcolonial freedom in the middle decades of the 20th century. The Japanese occupation morphed into World War II, which morphed into national bifurcation and the Korean War. Park Taewon, Bong Joon-ho’s grandfather, went north, perhaps hoping to make art in a leftist paradise. The same is thought to be true of Kim Kiriim, who went missing during the Korean War.

Yi himself never made it back. But his homeland is less a nation than an ecstatic world of moneyed ingenues, mirrors, blood, camellias, geometric shapes, equations, talking animals, razor blades, and missing fathers. Beneath these objects and signs are layers of existential questions, the literary scholar and critic Kwon Young-min recently observed: “Why should people live this way? Why must poetry be made this way? Why do some lives travel such mazy, jagged roads?” For Yi’s fellow subjects under Japanese rule, in languages native and imposed, these questions must have resonated with particular force. They still do, today, refracted through his weird distillations of love and empire and the urban mundane.
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