The unsung canvassers who turned the West's biggest red state blue.

SASHA ABRAMSKY

JUNE 28/JULY 5, 2021

Flipping Arizona

RACISM ON WALL STREET
SUSAN ANTILLA

RAOUL PECK’S WORLD
ED MORALES

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Uprooted: A performance artist commemorates China’s Tiananmen Square crackdown in Hong Kong on June 3, after authorities banned an annual vigil there.

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It’s been a while since supporters of abortion rights have had anything to celebrate. States have enacted a staggering 69 anti-abortion bills this year alone, including nine bans. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case on Mississippi’s 15-week ban that is likely to upend Roe v. Wade entirely. But on the eve of Memorial Day weekend came a victory that was decades in the making: President Biden struck from his budget the 45-year-old ban on federal funding of abortion known as the Hyde Amendment.

The ban forces Medicaid patients in most states to raise money to pay for their abortions or—as happens in one out of four cases—to stay pregnant because they can’t. Biden is the first president since Bill Clinton to issue a budget without the ban. In the years after Roe, right-wing forces moved quickly to make abortion as inaccessible as possible, even as it remained legal. The Hyde Amendment was part of that strategy. As restrictions mounted, the mainstream pro-choice movement went on the defensive, focusing on preserving the legal right to abortion, although Black women noted that, because of Hyde, that right could never be fully realized. Tensions surrounding the ban came to a head in 1978, when Faye Wattleton became the first Black president of Planned Parenthood. She took aim at Hyde as part of a sweeping vision that she hoped would put the organization on the offensive. But Wattleton soon faced an uprising from within the group’s affiliates. “The concerns were that we were going to lose our federal funding if somebody didn’t get me under control,” she told The Nation in 1999.

Wattleton weathered the storm and remained in her position for 14 years. But in the 1980s, with attacks on reproductive health care proliferating, the abortion rights movement focused on “choice” rather than access. “These were strategic decisions, taken with the belief that this approach would appeal to the broadest constituency of voters,” Marlene Gerber Fried wrote in the book Radical Reproductive Justice. Black women organizers, meanwhile, mobilized around a broad range of issues related to their health, forming the National Black Women’s Health Project, which would go on, in the early ’90s, to launch a nationwide campaign to repeal Hyde. In 1993, President Clinton omitted Hyde from his budget, but the anti-abortion Democrat in charge of the House Appropriations Committee, Representative William Natcher, soon reinstituted the ban. The campaign against Hyde did succeed, however, in restoring the ban’s exception for victims of rape and incest. “Black women insisted that Hyde would provide a slippery slope to undermine abortion rights and healthcare,” Loretta J. Ross stated in Radical Reproductive Justice. “History has proven our point.”

It has taken almost 30 years for the movement to succeed in pressing another Democratic president to remove Hyde from his budget. During those years, reproductive justice activists have raised money to fund abortions themselves, while successfully persuading the mainstream movement to make the issues of access and affordability central.

The victory is all the more remarkable given its target. Biden has long been among the more conservative Democrats on abortion. He supported the Hyde Amendment until 2019, when it became clear that he was fast becoming an outlier among Democratic primary candidates. That Biden has shifted his position says less about him than it does about the power of the movement that forced him to do so. Since its launch in 2013, the reproductive justice group All* Above All has built a coalition of 130 organizations that oppose the ban as an issue of racial and economic justice. The Black Lives Matter and reproductive justice movements have combined to make support for Hyde a political liability for Democrats. Representative Rosa DeLauro, who convened a hearing on Hyde within days of becoming the Appropriations Committee chair, has promised to omit it from the House spending bill. In the Senate, pro-Hyde Democrats will likely ensure that it remains in place. But even there, All* Above All has been gaining support for the EACH Act, which would lift federal abortion coverage restrictions.

“We started where we thought we’d be lucky if we had 40 people on a bill at introduction,” said Destiny Lopez, copresident of All* Above All. “We now have 155 people in the House, 27 in the Senate. So it’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

Amy Littlefield is an investigative reporter who focuses on the intersection of religion and health care.
big pharma's lie

we cannot trust these companies to make enough vaccines. global scarcity is a choice, not an inevitability.

the world needs more covid-19 vaccines, yet debate rages as to why the world is short on vaccines, and what barriers need to be overcome to make and distribute more. according to the large american and european drug companies currently making covid-19 vaccines, the status quo—vaccine scarcity for all except those who live in a few dozen rich countries—is inevitable and unfixable. their premise is plain: they are the only ones that can make these vaccines, and they are making them as fast as they can. moderna, pfizer-biontech, astrazeneca, and johnson & johnson are on track to ship enough doses to vaccinate a majority of adults in the rich countries and to donate or sell a significantly smaller number to less wealthy countries, at least until next year. these companies insist they would make more doses and reach more people if they could—but, alas, they cannot.

what stops them from making more, they say, are material problems hardwired into the world economy: a lack of quality-controlled factories and ingredients to make vaccines, of freezers, of engineers and other professionals, and so on. “the scarcity of vaccines is not because of intellectual property but because of regrettable production and distribution challenges,” wrote michelle mc summary heath, president of one of the leading pharmaceutical trade groups. and moderna’s ceo said last month, “there is no mrna manufacturing capacity in the world.”

but we doubt big pharma’s premise. numerous independent experts have surveyed supply and distribution chains and concluded that additional vaccine manufacturing could be brought on line in a matter of months. these estimates are much shorter than the 18 months or more that moderna and other market leaders claim is needed. in fact, drug companies in israel, canada, bangladesh, south africa, and denmark have said they have unused vaccine-manufacturing capacity that could be deployed in a matter of months—provided existing manufacturers share their knowledge.

shouldn’t a rational incumbent be “eager to find partners with the capabilities to expand production,” as some scholars have written, so as to sell more doses of its vaccine? aren’t “all of the vaccine manufacturers...trying to increase supply as quickly as possible,” as another has claimed? we are skeptical, for two main reasons.

first, while it is true that these companies can make more money when they partner with competitors to make and sell more doses, such partnerships impose a trade-off. they require the incumbent to share some of its trade secrets—ingredient lists, instructions for production, and so on. manufacturers like moderna and johnson & johnson have done so judiciously, protected by nondisclosure agreements and other legal restrictions. inevitably, though, some knowledge “leaks” to the competitor. incumbents eager to guard their first-mover advantage in the marketplace may refuse the trade-off. indeed, moderna and biontech have told investors that they are applying their mrna technology to develop a wide range of new vaccines and treatments for cancer, influenza, hiv, and other diseases, which could become global blockbusters—unless their global competitors beat them to the punch. meanwhile, according to the financial times, some companies have privately warned “us trade and white house officials that giving up intellectual property rights could allow china and russia to exploit platforms such as mrna.”

second, incumbent vaccine makers might choose not to make enough covid-19 vaccines to vaccinate the world. to put the point bluntly: perpetuating the pandemic is better for business than ending it. this isn’t a conspiracy theory; the companies have acknowledged that profits will be secured over the long term should the virus endure. pfizer’s ceo announced a few months ago that the company sees “significant opportunity” in covid-19 becoming endemic, which could make the vaccines a durable “franchise.” particularly devastating from a public health perspective but particularly appealing from a franchise-building one are so-called variants of concern, which may evade existing immunity. the pfizer executive pointed to these variants in response to a wall street analyst’s question about “the need to revaccinate annually.” moderna’s ceo has similarly stated that the company expects to sell annual booster shots for the foreseeable future, as the virus is “not leaving the planet.”

in other words, demand for lucrative booster shots depends in part on the emergence of new variants, which, in turn, requires the virus to continue to spread. this simple logic gives the incumbent vaccine makers strong incentives to leave people unvaccinated.

we have no proof that drug makers in wealthy countries are stretching the truth when they say that only they are capable of making covid-19 vaccines. but we’ve heard such claims before—and they have been proven wrong.

in the 1990s and 2000s, hiv drug makers based in the united states and europe claimed that manufacturers in other countries lacked the technical sophistication to make the medications safely and reliably. in reality, manufacturers in india and other global south countries succeeded in making these drugs, in high quality...
and on a massive scale, and ultimately did so more efficiently than the original manufacturers.

This time around, Public Citizen, PrEP4All, and other NGOs have presented detailed proposals to scale up Covid-19 vaccine production. These groups are calling on governments to waive (temporarily) the incumbents’ patents, compel them to share manufacturing processes, lift export restrictions, and invest billions in publicly governed vaccine-manufacturing facilities.

Given the incumbents’ incentives to, in effect, manufacture scarcity, we cannot accept their account of what is and what is not possible. Prior to the pandemic, few thought it possible to develop, manufacture, and distribute even a single vaccine within a year. Through unprecedented funding and collaboration across the industry, as well as academic researchers, health care professionals, government agencies, and multilateral organizations all over the globe, the world succeeded in generating multiple safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines.

Now, to get vaccines to everyone who needs them, we need to do even more. We can expand supply significantly by the end of 2021, but only with bold government action that combines big public investment with compulsory transfer of the incumbents’ trade secrets. Other vaccines are in the pipeline, but in view of the dire need in many parts of the world, we should make every effort to scale up global production of the vaccines that we know already work.

What we should not do is accept Big Pharma’s premise, or trust it to solve the pandemic on its own initiative.

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## Back Issues / 1921

### Tulsa’s “Stories of Horror”

In 1921, *The Nation* sent journalist Walter White, the future executive secretary of the NAACP, to Tulsa, Okla., to report on the May 31–June 1 massacre of an estimated 300 Black residents. White came back with one of the most important accounts of what happened a century ago. This short excerpt, describing the violence of the white mob in the city’s thriving Greenwood neighborhood, known as “Black Wall Street,” still makes for searing reading:

> Around five o’clock Wednesday morning the mob, now numbering more than 10,000, made a mass attack on Little Africa. Machine-guns were brought into use; eight aeroplanes were employed to spy on the movements of the Negroes and according to some were used in bombing the colored section. All that was lacking to make the scene a replica of modern “Christian” warfare was poison gas. The colored men and women fought gamely in defense of their homes, but the odds were too great. According to the statements of onlookers, men in uniform, either home guards or ex-service men or both, carried cans of oil into Little Africa, and, after looting the homes, set fire to them. Many are the stories of horror told to me—not by colored people—but by white residents. One was that of an aged colored couple, saying their evening prayers before retiring in their little home on Greenwood Avenue. A mob broke into the house, shot both of the old people in the backs of their heads, blowing their brains out and spattering them over the bed, pillaged the home, and then set fire to it.

Another was that of the death of Dr. A.C. Jackson, a colored physician. Dr. Jackson was worth $100,000; had been described by the Mayo brothers as “the most able Negro surgeon in America”; was respected by white and colored people alike, and was in every sense a good citizen. A mob attacked Dr. Jackson’s home. He fought in defense of it, his wife and children and himself. An officer of the home guards who knew Dr. Jackson came up at that time and assured him that if he would surrender he would be protected. This Dr. Jackson did. The officer sent him under guard to Convention Hall, where colored people were being placed for protection. En route to the hall, disarmed, Dr. Jackson was shot and killed in cold blood. The officer who had assured Dr. Jackson of protection stated to me, “Dr. Jackson was an able, clean-cut man. He did only what any red-blooded man would have done under similar circumstances in defending his home. Dr. Jackson was murdered by white ruffians.”

You can read Walter White’s article “Tulsa, 1921” in full at thenation.com/tulsa.
Men Are Failing

And, historically, that’s actually a precondition for women ascending to power. Can they seize the moment?

NEW YORK STATE SENATOR ALESSANDRA BIAGGI recently said something that so completely encapsulated American patriarchy at this moment, it should be tattooed on every woman’s exhausted face: “We’ve got to move on past talking about the bad behavior of below-average men.” Doing so is made eminently more difficult when they refuse to get out of the way, lining up instead like testosterone-addled lemmings to compete in the pathetic pissing match that now passes for our elections. In this case, I’m talking about the current field of candidates for governor of New York. That includes the incumbent, Andrew Cuomo, who’s resisted calls to resign while arming himself with no fewer than four taxpayer-funded law firms to defend against an equal number of investigations. Every week seems to bring some fresh outburst. Whether he’s undermining the integrity of the New York attorney general’s investigation of a sitting governor despite the fact that he did the same when he held that role ("I’m not telling anyone to have faith in [the results of the investigation]"); contradicting part of the state’s definition of sexual harassment that he himself signed into law ("harassment is not making someone feel uncomfortable"); or slapping down a reporter’s question about the ethics of profiting off a pandemic to the tune of a $5 million book advance ("that’s stupid"); the whole thing is one yawning display of entitlement. Former governor Eliot Spitzer at least knew when to get off the stage, perhaps because he had some sense of shame and a family business that wasn’t politics to fall back on. Cuomo, it seems, can’t do anything else, so why not stick around even if it’s a raging embarrassment for you and everyone else?

On the Republican side, there’s recent entrant and ex-Golf Channel reality contestant Andrew Giuliani. At 35, he’s reasoned that he’s got 32 years of experience ("I’m a politician out of the womb"). In a press conference, he claimed to have spent “parts of five different decades of my life in politics or public service”—a reference to his father’s career, much of which he wasn’t even alive for. We’re watching Chris Farley’s epic Saturday Night Live parody of the 7-year-old Andrew at Rudy’s swearing-in ceremony shouting, “My dad’s mayor!” come to life. Biaggi happens to be the same age as Giuliani, the difference being that she’s about a thousand times smarter, more educated, and more qualified, which still doesn’t amount to the implicit plausibility for the role that comes with being someone’s son. Daddy issues abound in the field, as Cuomo junior hangs on for dear life trying to best Mario’s three terms in office, and the Republicans suck up relentlessly to Donald Trump, their political and spiritual patriarch now banished to Mar-a-Lago like some sort of Florida Prospero: the rightful Duke of America.

A smart, qualified woman who doesn’t owe her success to a famous father would be a welcome entry against any of these interchangeably absurd men. Are things bad enough that we’ve finally arrived at the point where voters might actually support a female candidate? That’s the “glass cliff” theory of gender equity, first proffered by psychology professors Michelle K. Ryan and Alexander Haslam in a now-famous 2005 paper: that women leaders are disproportionately represented during periods of downturn or crisis. Put more bluntly: For women to secure power, men need to fail spectacularly. The theory explains why women are often favored to lead companies during moments of turbulence—when the chance of failure is higher—and overlooked for safe or successful endeavors. The concept has been extended to explain female political leadership in moments of political crisis, as well as other non-corporate contexts. When an enterprise appoints a woman to its helm, it can indicate an intention to change, writes Eziah Hunt-Earle: “The more decided preference for a female in a failing company may result from a perception that men have maneuvered the organization into trouble and that appointing a female leader may be a method of achieving a desired transformation.”

Cuomo had the same thought when Eric Schnei-derman resigned as attorney general in general to allegations of intimate partner violence: He immedi-ately set about virtue-signaling that it was time for women to lead the historically male office. Voters are primed to support women in these moments in part because of a belief that they’re inherently less corrupt, if not more capable—the long tail of the temperance movement and “fairer sex” stereotypes. The actual evidence for this is scant, and research has found that women are functionally less corrupt only because they’re external to the relevant networks of power. Regardless, they benefit from a purity bias in their favor when it comes to following a man who’s flamed out.

Which brings us to the current attor-
ney general, Letitia James. Although she was Cuomo’s preferred replacement for Schneiderman, he’s recently started attacking her as too politically motivated to properly investigate him. After the comptroller made a referral allowing James to investigate whether the governor had misused public resources to write his book, a spokesman bellowed back: “This is Albany politics at its worst—both the comptroller and the attorney general have spoken to people about running for governor and it is unethical to wield criminal referral authority to further political self-interest.”

There’s no indication that James is doing anything other than her actual job. Indeed, Cuomo himself was an attorney general with designs on running for governor when he investigated then Governor Spitzer. And it’s very hard to imagine a Black woman getting away with soliciting underlings for sex, lying about Covid nursing home deaths, cashing in on her crimes, and refusing to resign after nearly the entire New York congressional delegation, both of the state’s US senators, and the majority leader of the state Senate called for her to do so. Should James decide to run, she’d be a serious political threat, considering that Cuomo needs her base—the disproportionately Black and female voters in New York City—to win another term.

Below-average men can achieve great heights. But the right woman under the right circumstances just might bring this one down.

**Are the Democrats Capable of Defending Democracy?**

Bolstering voting rights is both urgent and popular—but the party might not have the unity and fortitude required.

N HIS FIRST ADDRESS TO CONGRESS ON APRIL 28, JOE Biden invoked the January 6 insurrection, saying, “The images of a violent mob assaulting this Capitol, desecrating our democracy, remain vivid in all our minds.” He added, “The insurrection was an existential crisis—a test of whether our democracy could survive. And it did. But the struggle is far from over.”

These were uncharacteristically bold words from Biden, but they are not hyperbolic. On January 6, a sitting president incited a mob to attack Congress in order to sabotage the certification of his successor. Shocking as that was, it was only the flash point in a larger war against democracy. In truth, Donald Trump’s clown coup had little chance of succeeding. The more serious threat lay in the fact that he was able to do something so reckless and yet remain the standard-bearer of his party, someone whom most congressional Republicans still wouldn’t vote to impeach.

Though Trump has left the White House, the Trumpification of the GOP continues apace. Those few brave but hapless Republicans who stood up to Trump, like Congresswoman Liz Cheney, are finding themselves pariahs in their own party, stripped of their positions and scorned by party loyalists. The GOP has embraced the Trumpian Big Lie that the election was stolen, an idea endorsed by 53 percent of Republicans according to a May Reuters/Ipsos poll. Trump is not so much an ex-president as a pretender to the throne, the exiled king of Mar-a-Lago whom elected Republicans cross at their peril.

The Big Lie is behind the efforts of state-level Republicans to roll back voting rights. As Geoffrey Skelley reported in *FiveThirtyEight*, “In the aftermath of the 2020 election, Republican lawmakers have pushed new voting restrictions in nearly every state. From making it harder to cast ballots early to increasing the frequency of voter roll purges, at least 25 new restrictive voting laws have been enacted, with more potentially on the horizon.” The most disturbing innovation in this rollback of democracy is the idea that state legislators could be empowered to overturn election results and pick their own presidential electors. In that scenario, Biden or another Democrat could win the popular count in states that carry over 270 electoral votes and still be deprived of the presidency.

According to *Washington Post* columnist Perry Bacon Jr., “If Republicans win the governorships of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin next year, taking total control in those key swing states, they could impose all kinds of electoral barriers for the next presidential election. The Republicans are
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laying the groundwork to refuse to certify a 2024 Democratic presidential victory should the GOP hold a House majority.”

Only the complacent would dismiss this as fanciful. Considering all the antics Trump pulled to try to overturn the 2020 election—and the fact that most elected Republicans are now going out of their way to grovel in front of him—2024 will almost certainly be an even bigger test of American democracy.

Democrats have a very narrow window of opportunity to shore up our democracy against the ongoing GOP threat. The good news is that the party has put forward two very strong measures—HR 1 and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act—which are the most robust pro-democracy reforms in a generation. Taken together, they would make it easier to vote, make voting more secure, limit the power of dark money in politics, and push back against antidemocratic shenanigans like gerrymandering.

Such measures are all extraordinarily popular with the general public. Writing in The New Yorker in March, Jane Mayer reported receiving a recording “of a private conference call on January 8th, between a policy adviser to Senator Mitch McConnell and the leaders of several prominent conservative groups—including one run by the Koch brothers’ network—reveal[ing] the participants’ worry that the proposed election reforms garner wide support not just from liberals but from conservative voters, too. The speakers on the call expressed alarm at the broad popularity of [HR 1’s] provision calling for more public disclosure about secret political donors.”

The two voting rights acts proposed by the Democrats are both necessary and popular. Even with their narrow hold on power in Congress, it should be a no-brainer to push them through. Alas, it’s very hard to pass a pro-democratic measure in an antidemocratic system. Joe Manchin, with his cult of bipartisanship, is one major stumbling block. The West Virginia senator, as Luke Savage notes in The Atlantic, “has reiterated his opposition to H.R. 1 on the deeply spurious grounds that any prospective voting-rights legislation ought to pass with bipartisan support—a DOA line of reasoning even when it comes to the watered-down version of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act that Manchin himself is proposing.”

Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema supports HR 1 but, like Manchin, is also a fetishist of the filibuster. Since neither bill can be passed by reconciliation and both lack Republican support, the only way for either to get through the Senate is by overturning the filibuster. The core truth is that Manchin and Sinema are committed to the old order, even if following the established path leads to a successful Republican coup.

Ultimately, this issue is a test of how serious Biden and the Democrats are about their own rhetoric. If American democracy is indeed facing an “existential” crisis, then Biden should pull out all the stops to win over Manchin and Sinema: offer them any inducements that he has available—and threaten them with severe punishments for not toeing the party line. This is what Republicans are doing to recalcitrant members like Cheney and Mitt Romney. If the GOP can be in deadly earnest trying to undermine democracy, we have every right to expect Democrats to be just as organized, just as dedicated, and just as ruthless in preserving democracy.
Q&A

Alice Sparkly Kat

In Postcolonial Astrology: Reading the Planets Through Capital, Power, and Labor, Alice Sparkly Kat interprets the stars through history, politics, and postcolonial theory. Throughout their nuanced and intricate analysis, astrology is a tool to break political and social norms: A look at the relationship of Mars and Venus complicates gendered power dynamics, while a study of the sun becomes a history of surveillance culture and the politics of who gets to be seen. Though some might be hesitant to view astrology as political, Postcolonial Astrology encourages readers to study the heavens in order to better understand their own values, views, identities, and desires for the future.

—Mary Retta

MR: You write in the book that astrology tends to have a mainstream resurgence during times of conservatism or fascism. Do you think the Trump era and the last several years of conservative policy help explain astrology’s current popularity?

ASK: Historically, there’s often a link between right-wing leaders and a rise in astrology’s popularity, which is something that I was really surprised about. There was a resurgence of astrology between the two world wars when fascism was thriving in Europe, and astrology was also very popular after the Civil War. I don’t know if Trump had an astrologer while he was in office, but Reagan did—and so did Hitler.

It’s hard to spot when it’s talking about emotional stuff so often, but there’s a lot of astrological stuff that feels right-wing. The ideas of naturalizing gender and manifesting wealth that I write about in the book are conservative. But obviously a lot of people use astrology to break free of those kinds of constraints, so it really depends on how you practice it.

MR: Though you write about astrology as a political force, that’s not how astrology is often practiced. Do you think there are any limitations to contemporary mainstream astrology?

ASK: Yes, definitely. The most popular type of astrology right now is usually horoscope columns, which are usually written by white women, though this is starting to change. Horoscopes today can often be very limiting—there’s something about horoscopes as a genre that’s like, “You’re going to talk about relationships and career,” and that’s it. As a form, I think horoscopes can do much more, but we don’t always get to see that. I know astrologers who say that horoscopes are like a recipe, or your medicine for the month: They can be a poem, a collage, a series of questions. I write monthly horoscopes, and I usually try to leave my readers with questions, a way to introspect, and a way to interrogate their relationship to capitalism.

MR: For as much as astrology has grown in popularity, there are still a lot of skeptics. What would you say to people who think astrology is fake or believe that astrology can never be political?

ASK: I think it’s a personal choice. I’m not an evangelical—I don’t think everyone has to believe in astrology. I don’t “believe” in astrology, I think it’s a social agreement, and I believe there’s something really mystical about imagining something together. It’s a consensual space too, so if you don’t like astrology, there’s nothing wrong with that.

I want people to talk about astrology in a more political way, because it’s already this intimate language—it’s already political. So let’s make it explicitly political. I want people to be more aware of how astrology exists as a political form.

MR: You pose a question in your book: “What would you look like if you were able to do the naive act of imagining yourself in a world without capitalism?” How do you think astrology helps us imagine this?

ASK: Astrology is all about imagination. It gives you agency and the ability to share imaginative spaces with other people. That takes so much trust and time—that’s where the magic really happens.

One of the biggest ways astrology helps us imagine a world without capitalism is through forging meaningful relationships. So much of capitalism is about creating and maintaining a sense of alienation. So if you can find a way to trust someone and share a creative space with them really authentically, that’s already a huge step forward.

“Astrology is already this intimate language—it’s already political.”
The Laziness Myth

BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

Republican governors are done sympathizing with the millions of unemployed Americans. In March 2020, Congress expanded unemployment benefits to offset the steep, sudden loss of jobs caused by Covid-19. But as of late May, more than three-quarters of GOP-led states said they would prematurely end the extra $300 payments, broadened eligibility, and longer benefit period.

Lawmakers in these 24 states say they are responding to claims by business owners that more generous unemployment benefits make people unwilling to come back to their jobs. But that complaint is more fantasy than fact.

Economists have put out reams of studies on the question of whether larger unemployment benefits make people hesitant to work. The findings are nearly unanimous: They don’t. One paper found that increasing unemployment checks in the pandemic didn’t cause a drop in employment. In fact, people kept looking for jobs at the same rate as before, and employers didn’t struggle to find employees any more than usual. We also have a recent test case: During the Great Recession, employment in states with more generous benefits looked about the same as in states with stingier ones. And when extra benefits abruptly expired last July, there was no sudden increase in the number of people working.

Why might this be? Even if an unemployment check is higher than what someone used to earn at work, we all know it’s temporary. A job, on the other hand, offers ongoing income, on which we smartly place a higher value.

What’s also clear is that the significantly higher unemployment benefits Congress offered during the pandemic have kept people from going hungry. When Congress finally passed a new increase in December after the previous one had lapsed, and also added another round of stimulus checks and increased food stamp benefits, the number of people living below the poverty line fell by 15 million.

Taking that lifeline away won’t goose the economy. There are good reasons some Americans find it difficult to work. For one, many families still don’t have child care. Only about half of schools have fully resumed in-person classes, and many child care providers haven’t reopened or returned to normal capacity.

And while we’re all relieved that the number of Covid cases is dipping, only around half of adults are fully vaccinated. The very states that are yanking away unemployment benefits are among the most sluggish at vaccinations. Meanwhile, mask mandates are disappearing even though service workers have no way to tell which customers are vaccinated and which aren’t.

Work, therefore, isn’t safe. And yet most employers refuse to pay a premium to bring people back. While wages in leisure and hospitality jobs have risen recently, they’re only just returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Even with these constraints, Americans are, in fact, heading back to work, even if it’s not as briskly as some would like. New unemployment claims have been steadily dropping in recent weeks and fell 48 percent between January and late May.

But apparently that progress isn’t fast enough for Republican governors. Collectively, the states that say they will pull out of the enhanced federal benefits are expected to kick as many as 4.1 million people off the rolls this month.

This should come as no surprise. Conservatives have long been hell-bent on trying to force Americans to work by threatening to take away lifelines if they don’t. They have, for example, touted work requirements in cash welfare assistance, a stick meant to coerce the poor into taking jobs in order to receive financial assistance. We’ve learned since they were insti- tuted that they don’t increase work. What they do is leave more people impoverished.

Even before Congress passed extra unemployment benefits, Republicans were warning that they would punish people for not working. In April 2020, early in the pandemic, then Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia said he didn’t want workers “to become dependent on the unemployment system.”

GOP lawmakers at all levels seem determined to create a pool of workers so financially desperate that they’ll work for whatever meager pay employers deign to offer. It’s a barbaric way to treat people, and it betrays a bleak vision of our fellow Americans.

There is no crisis of laziness. The only real crisis is that we haven’t ensured that people can go back to meaningful, remunerative work.
Palestinians shelter on May 24 within the ruins of a building destroyed by Israeli air strikes in Gaza. Residents returned to damaged or demolished homes, and clean-up operations continued as the cease-fire appeared to be holding, marking the end of 11 days of fighting that killed more than 250 Palestinians, many of them women and children, and 13 Israelis.

**By the Numbers**

- **43%** Increase in the average ransomware payment since 2020
- **$350M** Estimated value of the cryptocurrency payments hackers received from ransomware victims in 2020
- **$90M** Value of Bitcoin payments the cybergang DarkSide received from 47 victims over a nine-month period
- **$4.4M** Value of the Bitcoin payment DarkSide received from Colonial Pipeline in May after the cybergang hacked the company
- **$4.6M** Average initial amount demanded in ransomware attacks
- **2.1M** Estimated number of health records compromised by data breaches in April 2021

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**SNAPSHOT/Fatima Shbair**

**Nowhere to Go**

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**Kevin McCarthy Changes His Tune Re Trump and January 6**

The speakership would be for Kevin

His version of a place in heaven.

He seems to think to reach that level

A pact’s required with the Devil.
Flipping Arizona

The unsung canvassers who turned the West’s biggest red state blue.

SASHA ABRAMSKY
EARLY ON THE MORNING OF JULY 20, UNITE HERE LOCAL 11 COPRESIDENT Susan Minato crammed her suitcases, computer, and other necessities into her gray SUV rental and set off on a 371-mile drive from her home in the Mount Washington neighborhood of Los Angeles to Sun City West, on the northwestern edge of Phoenix. She was on a mission: to knock on as many doors as possible and help flip Arizona blue for Joe Biden.

It was the height of the pandemic, and at the time Arizona was one of the world’s Covid hot spots; nowhere else in the United States had infection rates as high. But Minato, a small, feisty woman who has worked with the union on organizing efforts for nearly 30 years, wasn’t one to shy away from potential danger. For months, she had taken the lead in pushing sometimes reluctant coalition partners, in Mi AZ (Spanish for “My Arizona”) and other networks, to join with Unite Here in developing a comprehensive ground game for in-person canvassing in the battleground state.

Minato took only one bathroom break and made one gas stop—just over the state line, since Arizona’s gas prices are cheaper than California’s. Five and a half hours after setting off, she arrived at a large salmon-pink ranch house, with a brick wall surrounding the building and a wrought-iron entry fence. The house, with its crushed-rock garden and two-car garage, was in a solidly conservative neighborhood, a quiet area of plush, recently built homes, where large American flags proudly fluttered in the desert breeze in many of the front yards. It belonged to Minato’s sister and had the added advantage of being not far from where her elderly mother was living at the time. It was a 45-minute drive northwest of Downtown, where Unite Here’s Phoenix offices were located.

Minato, whose union represents hotel, restaurant, airport, and entertainment venue workers, planned to spend four months living there while she coordinated her army of canvassers.

It was the height of the pandemic, and at the time Arizona was one of the world’s Covid hot spots.

Unite Here Local 11, which operates in Southern California and Arizona, has been at the forefront of progressive activism in Los Angeles for more than three decades. In 1989, an insurgent campaign for president by Maria Elena Durazo (now a California state senator) wrested control of the local from a more conservative leadership, setting the stage for it to swing leftward in the following decade. The majority of the Unite Here activists who subsequently took center stage were women, opposed to the anti-immigrant stance of the state’s then governor, Pete Wilson, and determined to make their mark on California politics.

Today, a generation on, the walls of Unite Here’s LA offices—in a brick-and-glass block shared with several other labor and economic justice organizations, on a quiet street just north of Downtown’s soaring skyscrapers—are decorated with memorabilia from a who’s who of good fights. There are United Farm Workers posters, photographs from large May Day union rallies, posters showing Cesar Chavez and Robert F. Kennedy together. There are other posters calling for boycotts of non-union hotels and placards demanding protection for residents with temporary protected status. In pride of place on the rear wall of Minato’s airy office, opposite a war-room white board detailing the ongoing political operations, is a poster urging one and all to “Disobey Trump.”

Durazo’s 1989 campaign had captured the imagination of the Rev. James Lawson, one of the icons of the civil rights movement, who was instrumental in guiding Martin Luther King Jr. along the path of nonviolent direct action. Sixty years old by then, Lawson was teaching at the University of California, Los Angeles, and hosted regular sessions at the Holman United Methodist Church on training community organizers and union personnel in nonviolence methods. He took the new Unite Here leadership under his wing and began strategizing with them on how best to push their political and economic agenda, to broaden access to the franchise, and to expand the movement for “equality, liberty, and justice.”

More than 30 years on, at the age of 92, his hair a shock of white, Lawson still meets regularly with the union leadership and holds workshops—though during the pandemic those meetings have largely been reduced to Zoom encounters. He is proud of how instrumental Local 11 has been in helping shift California politics to the left. Its organizing efforts, he says, “have been contagious and infectious.”

But the local’s reach isn’t confined to California. Since 2007, it has also been one of the biggest players in the long campaign, conducted by an array of racial justice groups like Somos America (“We Are America”) and trade unions, to turn deep-red Arizona purple and then, ultimately, blue. Its canvassers were instrumental in flipping a number of city council seats in Phoenix in the years after 2007. By 2013, they had turned the nine-member council blue, and in 2019, they succeeded in getting one of their own, a fiery union organizer and onetime hotel housekeeper named Betty Guardado, elected as a councilwoman representing the sprawling Maryvale district. They played a key role in unseating Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio in 2016, after narrowly failing to defeat him four years...
Twenty-eight-year-old Maria Hernández grew up with her four younger siblings, her then undocumented parents, and her grandparents in a home in the Maryvale neighborhood of Phoenix, before moving to Los Angeles to work for Local 11 a few years back. Maryvale was a disproportionately Latino, working-class neighborhood on Phoenix’s west side, its potholed residential streets lined with low-lying bungalows with shingle roofs. In spring, the stunning yellow blossoms of the paloverde trees added beauty to the neighborhood. But other than that, there wasn’t much to soften the hard contours. Its main drags were home to auto repair businesses, payday lenders, car-title loan companies, fast food outlets, and the other low-end stores seen in impoverished communities around the country. It was a run-down place where people were born poor and too often died poor. Working with the Unite Here local, however, Hernández suddenly felt a sense of possibility.

“Growing up in Arizona, you felt the hatred to people like you, like your parents,” she remembers, crying as she talks. “You grow up really fast. You grow up thinking it’s normal to be scared of the cops, because you have figures like Joe Arpaio.” The notorious longtime sheriff of Maricopa County had won election after election primarily through immigrant-baiting and pulling tough-on-crime stunts like reintroducing the chain gang and forcing male inmates to wear pink boxer shorts. “I’d be so scared every time my dad would go to work,” Hernández says. “I’d wonder if he would come back. Same with my mom.”

In 2010, after years of anti-immigrant legislation and voter-passed propositions, Arizona’s Republican governor, Jan Brewer, signed the harsh SB 1070 into law. Among its many draconian provisions, it mandated that law enforcement officers demand residency papers from anyone they deemed likely to be undocumented—a blank check for racial profilers like Arpaio. SB 1070 was a precursor to the politics that, six years later, Trump would attempt to imprint on the nation.

In the wake of the bill’s passage, Hernández’s mother, tearful and scared, wanted to move the family to another state. By contrast, Hernández, then in her junior year at Trevor G. Browne High School, wanted to fight. “It was a political awakening for myself,” she says. That year, thousands of high school and college students around the city took part in walkouts to protest the legislation. It was a strategy they would continue as Arizona politics heated up over the coming years.

They had their sights set on the biggest prize of all: Arizona’s 11 Electoral College votes, which they knew could prove pivotal in the presidential race.

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Soon after SB 1070’s passage, Hernández got an internship with Unite Here’s Campaign for Arizona’s Future, where she worked with dozens of young organizers who were committed to taking Arpaio down. “It showed me I had a voice, that I could lead people—that someone like me, the daughter of immigrants, could make
a difference through bottom-up organizing,” she recalls, sitting in the LA office in a “Take Back the Senate” sweatshirt, her long black hair pulled back tightly in a bun, her ears adorned with large gold hoops. “I was in the movement. I started to see a shift, something I had never seen before: people coming together to vote out hate.”

In 2012, Unite Here registered about 35,000 people to vote in Arizona, most of them from the poor, minority neighborhoods of Phoenix. They didn’t quite win, but they came pretty damn close.

For Marisela Mares—who at the time was a self-proclaimed “flamboyantly gay” 14-year-old boy and would subsequently transition to being a woman—that 2012 campaign was an epiphany. Students at Mares’s Cesar Chavez High School, in the new southside development of Laveen Village, walked out in protest against Arpaio’s policing tactics and then, en masse, began organizing their community to try to vote him out. Mares recalls telling people, “I’m not old enough to vote, but I’m here because you are old enough to vote.” She would go on to explain what was at stake for her personally: how her undocumented grandparents had self-deported back to Mexico as the anti-immigrant squeeze intensified; how immigration agents had raided her family’s home; how Latinos in the city were routinely being racially profiled and humiliated.

Shortly after that election, a then 19-year-old Hernández encountered Arpaio and State Sen. Russell Pearce, SB 1070’s extremist architect, in the halls of the state capitol. She told Arpaio that he didn’t represent the will of the majority of Arizonans and that, the next time around, they would make sure to vote him out. The octogenarian Arpaio glared at her and strode off. Sure enough, four years later, Unite Here’s campaign defeated the self-proclaimed “toughest sheriff in America.” “We did it,” Hernández says, recalling Arpaio’s defeat by 10 percentage points, her voice brimming with emotion. “We got rid of the man who, for so many years, instilled fear in our community. Housekeepers, cooks, dishwashers, folks like me—young people, a coalition of diverse folks, a coalition of people he, for so many years, had tried to keep down—we rose up and said, ‘Bye-bye, you don’t serve us.’ This coalition, we’re going to do the impossible. We don’t ask ‘Can we do it?’ we ask ‘How do we do it?’ and then we do it.”

**Arizona Presidential Elections**

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**Across generations:** The Rev. James Law, now a mentor to Unite Here’s leadership, being led into a police wagon at a protest in 1960.
Buffalo, N.Y. He had moved out to Flagstaff, Ariz., after high school to go to college. There, he met the woman he would marry, and the couple decided to make Phoenix their home. But the politics were a challenge: He was Black, she was brown, and the state’s leadership at the time veered perilously close to white supremacy. “To raise multiracial kids in a state where there’s so much discrimination, very often ingrained in state law, I had to make a decision: whether I was going to stay here and fight to make things better or go somewhere else. I wanted my kids to see, if the fight is difficult, that’s where we should be.”

In 2020, the fight was about as challenging as any Wells could have imagined. Sometimes pro-Trump residents threw stones at the canvassers, let dogs out on them, even physically assaulted them.

Marilyn Wilbur, 49, is a retired Air Force veteran with six tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, who suffered traumatic brain injury and eye, jaw, and shoulder damage after the vehicle she was in was blown up. Having left the military in the wake of these injuries, she took a job as a food worker at Arizona State University in Tempe. When the pandemic hit, she was furloughed. Now, with the election fast approaching and with rising medical bills for the counseling sessions her autistic son needed, she decided to supplement her military retirement and VA payments by working as a team leader for Unite Here, in charge of 22 canvassers. She was, as she puts it, the alpha of her wolf pack.

“My third day, I knock on a door,” Wilbur recalls, sitting in the union’s offices, dressed in gray slacks, a red Unite Here T-shirt, and gold hoop earrings, a small stud above her upper lip. “This guy comes to the door; he’s tattooed, intimidating, bald-headed. He says, ‘What the fuck do you want?’” When she told him that she was canvassing for Biden and for Senate candidate Mark Kelly, the man came at her and, his hands on her chest, pushed her to the ground and spat on her. As she lay there, stunned, in a midtown yard not far from the Unite Here offices, she continues, “He says, ‘I don’t want you on my property, you stupid nigger bitch.’ All he saw was my color—he didn’t know I’d been blown up in Iraq. All he saw was my color.”

The canvassers called the police, but when Phoenix’s Finest came, the man denied having assaulted her, and eventually the officers dismissed it as a case of he-said, she-said and left without arresting him. “It lit a fire under me: ‘You want a fight? You got a fight,'” Wilbur says. “After that, I was determined to help the union turn Arizona blue.” When she called her 93-year-old grandmother, Viola, who was then living in the small town of Holdenville, Okla., to tell her about the incident, her grandmother—who had marched, been arrested, and been beaten during the civil rights years—simply said, “Don’t quit. If you quit, you lose. You’re fighting for change, for democracy, for the people.”

Wilbur didn’t quit. And, for the most part, when she knocked on doors that summer and fall, decked out in her PPE, always stepping back six feet from the door after ringing the bell, she received a sympathetic hearing. If she or the other canvassers were invited into the homes of the people they were speaking with to break bread, they explained their Covid protocols and politely declined. At the end of the day, bone weary, the union members would go back to their homes or rented apartments and safely space out, each one eating in their own bedroom, none of them gathering in the shared space to watch TV together. Over those five months, Minato avers, not a single canvasser got sick with Covid while on the job.

Susan Minato and the other Unite Here canvassers from the Los Angeles area—unemployed cooks, concession stand workers, bartenders, and the like—would remain in Phoenix through the November election. “A lot of things inspired me to go out there,” says Ana Diaz, who was brought to California from El Salvador by her parents as a 9-year-old in the early 1980s. Diaz, now a single mom, works as a bartender at the Bank of California Center and the Los Angeles Convention Center. She has heavily tattooed forearms—a green owl on her right arm, a fish on her left—wears beaded necklaces, and tints her hair purple.

Diaz had first canvassed in Arizona in 2018, working on the Sinema campaign. Now, in 2020, she felt the stakes were even higher. Originally slated to head to Phoenix in March, she stalled for time because of the pandemic, hoping against hope that things would swiftly ease up. Then, in August, after she had wet her feet by getting out of the house and volunteering at local food banks, she felt she couldn’t wait any longer. “I was tired of Trump, tired of his treatment of immigrants, tired of hearing his bullshit. It angered me. He didn’t care about our community, about humanity. He cared about his rich friends. What about us—working people?”

Diaz got in her car and drove to Phoenix. There, in temperatures that regularly soared past 115 degrees, she donned a mask and a face shield, loaded up with hand sanitizer, and began knocking on doors. “People at first were iffy: ‘What are you doing? You guys are crazy! Why are you here?’” she recalls. But “once we started talking to people, they started remembering us, respecting us from prior campaigns.” At the same time, however, “it wasn’t all pretty in pink. After dark, we didn’t know if somebody would let his pit bull out on you, shoot you. It got scary at times, but I didn’t want to let the fear get to me. My mind was set on one thing: ‘I need to defeat this asshole—he’s done too much to working-class people.’”

Over the five months they were in Phoenix, the local’s canvassers knocked on hundreds of thousands of doors (union officials put the number at 800,000, including repeat knocks).
and talked to 190,000 people, of whom roughly 150,000 gave positive responses indicating they supported Biden for president and Kelly for the open US Senate seat. This was after registering many thousands of new, often young voters earlier that year. These numbers were in addition to the 40,000 they had already registered in Maricopa County in 2018 and the 10,000 in 2019. No other Arizona door-knocking operation came close to theirs in terms of scale. Done largely out of the spotlight, their work was as crucial to turning Arizona blue in 2020 as the work of Stacey Abrams and Fair Fight was in Georgia. Given how the GOP, in one state after another, has worked since the election to make it harder for poor and minority residents to vote in future contests, the intensive, in-person methods that Unite Here perfected in Arizona under the most trying of circumstances will be vital in upcoming elections if progressives are to succeed in the face of the GOP’s increasingly antidemocratic machinations.

When people said they were too hot to walk or drive to the mailbox to send in their ballots, some of the canvassers would offer them bottles of water, fans, even hand-held misters. When they said their vote wouldn’t make a difference, the canvassers explained to them just what was at stake. When they couldn’t find their ballots, the canvassers helped them contact county election officials to request new ones. When they wanted to vote in person but feared catching Covid, the canvassers offered them face shields. As the election neared, a growing number of low-propensity voters in Maricopa County cast their ballots.

Joseph Silva, the deputy operations director of CASE Action, trawling through the election data on his laptop, estimates that up to 28,000 people that Unite Here’s canvassers spoke with voted in 2020 after having sat out the two previous election cycles. Since Biden won the state by less than 11,000 votes, these additional votes were critical, he says. “If you flip Maricopa County, the rest of the state is going to flip,” explains the 32-year-old Silva, who has a BA in history from UCLA and has been a Unite Here staffer in Phoenix since 2017. “We were talking to new voters, young voters, people of color, newly registered voters, a lot of suburban flip voters in more contested areas. But our secret weapon has always been low-turnout voters. And there was no other way to get to them than at their doors.”

That urgent message resonated with Unite Here members throughout Arizona and California. “I drove out, took the Cadillac. I got there in September,” says Jaime Gomez, a 31-year-old cook sitting in the Garden Grove office of the Unite Here local in Orange County, a 40-mile drive south of the Downtown LA office, and smiling at the memory. Gomez has been the breadwinner for his extended family since his father began suffering from congestive heart failure a few years ago. It has made him understand the precariousness of many families’ finances, the closeness to poverty that so many experience on a daily basis.

In 2018, Gomez drove to Arizona to work as a low-level canvasser. In 2020, with more experience under his belt, he was a team leader. Every day at 7 am, he and the other leaders would caucus via Zoom, going over the canvassing agenda for the day and then sending out their teams.

Two weeks in, he remembers, despite pro-Trumpers at times trying to attack the canvassers on the streets, he felt in his gut that they were on the cusp of something huge. “Oh, man—are we really winning right now?” he remembers thinking. “Are we doing this?” It’s a cascading effect, building upon itself,” he adds. “Not just talking to people about voting, but about how the pandemic is being handled. People were starting to call in, reach out to us. They wanted to know how they could vote.”

By Election Day, he felt it was a done deal. So did Josh Wells. He remembers thinking, “We turned Arizona blue. No one else was willing to go out and talk to people. We went out there, we talked to people, and people changed.”

In the days after the November election, with most of the networks declaring the result still too close to call, Minato and her team worked on vital vote-curing efforts, following up with people whose ballots were at risk of being discarded (continued on page 23)
Culture War in the K-12 Classroom
The Trump-era GOP’s insatiable appetite for red-meat issues has led to a wholesale attack on public education.

BY JENNIFER BERKSHIRE

WHEN NEW HAMPSHIRE TEACHER MISTY CROMPTON LEARNED that she had become campaign fodder for a local school board race, she says, “I immediately thought of the California privilege teacher.” Crompton is referring to a third-grade teacher in Cupertino, Calif., who became a right-wing-media punching bag after a lesson she’d taught about white privilege went public. “I thought, ‘They’re going to try to tar me with that same brush.’”

Crompton, who has taught middle school social studies in Derry for 21 years, would seem an unlikely target for culture warriors. She hasn’t even taught since August 2020, when she was awarded a paid sabbatical by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, a prize granted annually to an exceptional teacher in the state. But what Crompton saw as a once-in-a-career opportunity to study success stories from school districts around the country and help New Hampshire become an “equity leader,” conservatives viewed as a nefarious plot.

“The message is ‘Let’s get rid of the parts and the people in public education that we don’t like.’”

—Cornell University professor Noliwe Rooks

Right now, a Derry teacher is training to change our social studies curriculum to teach Critical Race Theory (Marxist ideology) in our schools with no community input,” warned campaign postcards sent to voters in this southern New Hampshire mill town. Then a Republican state representative from Derry, Katherine Prudhomme O’Brien, weighed in, complaining to school board members that Leaders for Just Schools, a program Crompton is part of, was linked to Black Lives Matter. “I know a lot of people like Black Lives Matter. They don’t realize it’s a Marxist organization,” warned O’Brien, who also invoked the Cambodian genocide.

This spring, New Hampshire has witnessed an extraordinarily acrimonious debate about public education. GOP lawmakers, who took control of the legislature in 2020, have prioritized controversial—and deeply unpopular—legislation, including a sweeping expansion of a program that provides tuition vouchers for private schools and a ban on discussing “divisive concepts,” such as racism or sexism, in the public schools. Crompton, an outspoken opponent of both measures, says, “I became a pawn in the culture war and in the scheme to discredit public schools.”

She isn’t the only one. Fueled by the Trump-era GOP’s insatiable appetite for red-meat issues—and finding fertile ground in a public politically polarized by the pandemic—the culture wars are raging, upending school board races, reshaping local politics, and now threatening public education itself.

Every generation has its “school culture war thing,” says Adam Laats, an education historian at SUNY Binghamton and the author of The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education. “You see the same combination of national issues and local anxieties—these ‘You won’t believe what we saw in our son’s textbook’ stories surfacing again and again.”

Take the sudden reappearance of concern over socialist indoctrination. Laats points out that a virtually identical panic emerged in the 1950s: “There’s no more Soviet Union, no more [Fidel] Castro, but once again you have this fear of the government taking over that’s this high-anxiety issue.”

But in at least one respect, the current culture war convulsion differs from its antecedents, Laats says. “The big difference is Trump. He provided a center and a symbol for all of these old ideas to coalesce around.”

In the waning days of Trump’s term, the commission he convened to further the cause of “patriotic education” released its long-awaited 1776 Report—a rejoinder to The New York Times’ 1619 Project. Though widely panned as plagiarized propaganda, the report has also proved to be extraordinarily influential.

“It’s the idea of the past as a refuge,” says Noliwe Rooks, a professor at Cornell University and the author of Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education. “The message is ‘Let’s get rid of the parts and the people in public education that we don’t like.’” She sees parallels between the current attacks on critical race theory and the collisions that resulted from the rise of Black studies in the late 1960s. “Students succeeded in forcing changes to curricula and on campus. But that little bit of progress they made around equity and innovative programs resulted in a backlash that destroyed all of that little bit of progress,” Rooks says.

Divisive Concepts

IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, GOP LAWMAKERS in one state after another have introduced legislation aimed at keeping discussions of social justice out of the classroom. Bills prohibiting the teaching of critical race theory and other “divisive topics” have already passed in Utah, Texas, Oklahoma, and Tennessee and are under consideration in at least 15 other states.
In Missouri, a proposed amendment sought to outlaw what its author describes as the “erroneous and hate-filled 1619 Project.”

“It said ‘1619 Project,’ but the aim was much broader. It would affect every part of history and literature,” says Jessica Piper, who teaches 11th-grade American literature in Maryville, Mo., a town of 12,000 on the Iowa border.

Piper would seem to be exactly the sort of teacher that legislators around the country are targeting. Her students read Clint Smith’s poem “How to Make a Cardboard Box Disappear in 10 Steps,” with its stark imagery of lives lost to police brutality, as part of a history lesson on racial violence. In 1931, a mob of more than 2,000 Maryville residents lynched a man named Raymond Gunn, burning him to death on top of the local schoolhouse. “There’s no historical marker, so the students didn’t know anything about it,” Piper says. This year, for the first time since she began using the poem in class, a parent complained.

Piper recently decided that this will be her last year in the classroom. She’s running for the state legislature as a Democrat in a long-shot bid to unseat a Republican who, when he last faced an opponent, won by 80 points.

In Iowa, as in Missouri, lawmakers have made the culture wars the centerpiece of their legislative agenda. So far this session, legislators have sought to ban transgender student athletes, implement an ideological test for state-funded faculty, and prohibit the teaching of “divisive concepts” at public schools and universities.

“They went with the Trump 1776 agenda,” says Nick Covington, a high school social studies teacher in Ankeny, a city north of Des Moines. “They’re carrying that banner, and it has a chilling effect on everything.”

The bitter aftermath of the presidential election has also roiled the city. Two Ankeny residents were among the participants in the January 6 Capitol attack. And voting on a school funding question in March was disrupted for hours after police found a live pipe bomb at one of the facilities being used as a polling station.

Covington says the deep divisions outside his classroom are increasingly affecting what happens within it. This year he has been the target of repeated complaints from a small group of parents. The trouble started in January, when Covington streamed live news reports of the Capitol riot in his European history and economics classes. A parent called the school and claimed that Covington had directed students to his personal social media account, where he’d called Trump supporters Nazis, all of which Covington vehemently denies.

This spring, after Covington showed a Vice News report on the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va., as part of an AP history unit on nationalism in Europe, parents contacted the school board and the superintendent and demanded that he be sanctioned. Though he’d taught the same lesson for three previous years without incident, Covington was ordered by school administrators to stop talking about current events.

“I’m basically waiting for the other shoe to drop,” he says.

Deep Divide

The pandemic’s profound disruption of public education was already upending state and local politics, as Republicans eagerly capitalized on parents’ frustration over shuttered classrooms. Now the culture wars are further exacerbating this tense climate.

Jessica Piper’s small Missouri town recently saw the emergence of its first-ever PAC: Northern Missouri Citizens for Reflective Government. The group, which backed conservative candidates for local offices, put most of its energy into attacking an education professor who was running for a seat on the school board in Maryville. Ominous campaign ads depicted Jill Baker, a former schoolteacher, posed between cutouts of Joe Biden and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, spouting anti-Trump sentiments and stressing the importance of teaching social justice in elementary schools. She lost in a landslide.

In Elmbrook, Wis., the Waukesha County Republican Party recently threw its weight behind James Gunsalus, a first-time school board candidate who claimed that Covid was no more serious than the flu. According to Gunsalus, Elmbrook’s schools, long among the highest-ranked in Wisconsin, were in free fall as teachers embraced “leftist indoctrination” over academic content, teaching students that “all white people are racist” and that “some people must be censored or canceled.” He lost by only 5 percent of the vote against an incumbent, coming within 600 votes of victory.

In the North Texas community of Southlake, a fast-growing and rapidly diversifying city near
Dallas, candidates for the school board, the city council, and mayor, backed by a PAC opposing the school district’s efforts to incorporate more cultural awareness into the curriculum, all captured around 70 percent of the vote. “Southlake Says No to Woke Education,” proclaimed a Wall Street Journal headline.

“Every single right-wing person that ran won,” says Megan Walsh, who graduated from a local high school in 2017 and is a leader in the Southlake Anti-Racism Coalition, a community group whose advocacy inspired the adoption of the Cultural Competency Action Plan, which the winning candidates have pledged to eliminate. “We’re back to square one.”

Pandemic Fallout

Municipal races that once turned on hyper-local issues have been politicized and nationalized by right-wing culture warriors. But the long reach of the pandemic is at work here too. Debates over diversity plans and critical race theory are further dividing communities that were already split over the response to Covid.

“It’s all morphing into the same thing,” says Lindsay Love, a school board member in Chandler, Ariz. The first Black board member elected there, Love has been a frequent target of conservative activists and received death threats for her position that schools should remain closed until Covid levels dropped. “You hear people comparing children being masked to slavery and referring to mask supporters as Marxists,” Love says.

“You have lost [the] trust of parents,” declared a furious father at a recent board meeting. “Mask mandates, forcing vaccines, canceling prom, limiting graduation, critical race theory. The list goes on. When is enough enough?”

The school culture wars came early to this part of Arizona. After the district adopted a new program that included training teachers on race and equity issues, conservative parents revolted, charging that the equity training “marginalizes white people.” Tucker Carlson has devoted two segments to Chandler.

“Chandler is getting more diverse, and they don’t like that,” Love says.

Love worries that the culture wars could end up undermining Arizona’s public schools. The state’s GOP lawmakers are attempting to enact a massive expansion of the state’s school voucher program—even though voters overwhelmingly rejected a similar effort just two years ago. Under the proposed measure, two-thirds of students in Arizona would be eligible to use state funding to pay to attend private and religious schools. “There’s this constant refrain that our schools are broken, that they’re liberal indoctrination camps. It feeds into this push to get parents to opt out of the public schools,” Love says.

Arizona legislators recently approved their own ban on teaching controversial issues. The Unbiased Teaching Act prohibits teachers in the state’s public and charter schools from talking about racism or sexism in the classroom. Teachers who disregard the ban can be fined up to $5,000.

(continued from page 19)

because they had filled out a line incorrectly or had a signature on the form that didn’t quite match the one in the county’s files. Gomez says that he helped 10 voters cure their ballots. With hundreds of Unite Here canvassers helping to cure several ballots each, a whole heap of votes ended up being counted that would have been discarded otherwise, in a state ultimately decided by 10,457 votes.

On November 10, when it became clear that her work in Arizona was done, Minato, along with hundreds of other LA organizers, left. Largely under the radar, courting a minimum of publicity, they had helped craft one of 2020’s most extraordinary political stories. They had developed a template for how, with the right kind of organizing and outreach, solidly red states around the country—even those with a long history of voter suppression efforts—could be turned blue.

After a brief spell back in Los Angeles, many of these canvassers headed east again, this time to Georgia. As the Senate runoff races there intensified, the canvasser-activists once again played a crucial, albeit out-of-the-spotlight, role.

“I feel honored I was able to do that,” says Chris Smith, a 52-year-old African American man with a shaved head and a baritone voice. Born in Virginia and raised in New York, Smith, who works a series of unionized bartender jobs at stadiums around the LA area, spent nearly eight weeks between November and January canvassing in Georgia, with 15 of his family members and friends, as part of the Unite Here team. “I feel like I got away with something,” he says. “I wasn’t supposed to have a voice. And I did it. It’s amazing to have that voice.”

On the Sunday after the November election, a triumphant Ana Diaz got into her Toyota Venta and made her way from Arizona back to Los Angeles. As she drove through the desert, she cried with happiness. “I was so proud of myself. We had made a change. My kids mom goes around from place to place, state to state, and she saves the world.” For Wilbur, there’s no greater validation. “It makes my heart feel elated. To him, I’m a superhero. We’ve shown what the power of coming together can do. We helped people show they wanted a change, helped people realize they have a voice, that they count. Wow, we did it. I was part of it. We just helped make history.”

Unite Here’s skills at canvassing in a pandemic were crucial to tipping the balance in Georgia’s Senate contests.
At 3:30 am on a warm fall morning in 2009, Glenn D. Capel, a stockbroker at Merrill Lynch, was speeding down the Interstate in his Lexus LS 400 from his home in Greensboro, N.C., toward Candor, 75 miles away. A half-hour earlier, his 84-year-old mother had called from her home in the rural town and said that her heart felt “heavy” and that she had pain going down her left arm. “I’m on my way,” he had told her.

In the cardiologist’s office hours later, Capel stepped outside the room where his mother was being monitored to check his voice mail before the 9:30 am opening of the stock market. It was then that he was dealt the day’s second blow.

“Your services will no longer be required,” said his boss, Darby Henley Jr., in a message that had landed around 8:30 am. The personal items in his office would be boxed and sent to his home, the boss said.

“I went through a number of feelings, from shock, sadness, disappointment, and anger, and finally I cried,” remembers Capel, who was one of only two Black brokers at Merrill in North Carolina.

Three years earlier, Capel had added his name to a class-action racial discrimination lawsuit against Merrill, which he now believes put a target on his back. At the time, only 2 percent of Merrill’s brokers nationwide were Black. With the
Instead of responding openly and potentially nipping racism in the bud, companies often play hardball with those who complain.

This story was reported in partnership with Type Investigations with support from the Puffin Foundation.

Race and reprisal: A Black Deutsche Bank employee’s attempt to complain about racist treatment resulted in a written warning—to the employee.

Race and reprisal: A Black Deutsche Bank employee’s attempt to complain about racist treatment resulted in a written warning—to the employee.

The firing of Capel, a one-time star broker who boasted two master’s degrees and a pristine regulatory record with no customer complaints, Merrill’s already meager tally of Black brokers was further reduced.

Capel says the company fired him because he allowed a client to pay a $262 hotel bill in violation of a rule that limited gifts from clients to a value of $100, though he tried to pay the difference. Henley did not respond to requests for comment on the firing.

A month after Capel was dismissed, Merrill sent a document to securities regulators that said he had been terminated for—in all caps—"DISHONESTY."

And, just like that, his career in financial services was extinguished.

More than a decade later, Capel is still out of work, but Wall Street is vowing to change. In the wake of last summer’s unrest, Merrill parent Bank of America and other giant financial institutions rushed to make commitments to racial justice and in several cases broke an industry-wide silence, releasing statistics that exposed the paucity of Black people and other minorities in their workforces. Merrill, for instance, revealed in August that 780 of its 17,500 brokers are Black, a figure of 4.5 percent. That’s a 125 percent increase since 1994, when 2 percent of its brokerage force was Black. But in an industry with sparse Black representation, it is easy to double or even triple a minority group’s numbers. More illuminating is that the Black segment of the firm’s brokers—also known as financial advisers—grew only 2.5 percentage points over those 26 years.

The most meaningful industry changes over the past year have come on the heels of intense public pressure. In April, the giant asset manager BlackRock caved to the demands of the Service Employees International Union and agreed to begin a "racial equity audit" in 2022 that would analyze the company’s “impacts on non-white stakeholders and communities of color.” It already had been under a thick cloud of bad press over how it treated its Black employees.

Whether sincere or motivated by image concerns, Wall Street’s heightened passion for addressing the racism in its midst has opened an important conversation about recruitment, promotion, and pay policies in one of the nation’s most lucrative businesses. Missing from the dialogue so far, though, are some key questions: When racism does occur, how do firms treat Black employees who complain? And what happens to Black people when they take their complaints to arbitration or to court?

There’s no doubt other people of color face racism and mistreatment in financial firms, but in light of the industry’s public pronouncements supporting the values of the Black Lives Matter movement, The Nation and Type Investigations chose to focus specifically on the treatment of Black workers. In every complaint or lawsuit we investigated, we also sought employers’ responses, though in some cases they declined to comment.

We scoured court records looking for patterns in how firms handled grievances; spoke with academics, employment lawyers, and other experts; and mined a public database kept by a securities regulator to see how Black people fared in closed-door arbitration—forced on many Wall Street workers to protect their employers from public exposure in court.

What we found is that financial firms go to great lengths to keep complaints of racial discrimination quiet and push complainers out the door. Instead of responding openly and potentially nipping racism in the bud, companies often play hardball with those who complain.

Black people who are forced to use Wall Street’s arbitration system face bleak prospects: Our analysis of 32 years of data shows that among 31 Black people who filed racism complaints, one settled and only two prevailed.

New court cases keep coming. In one, filed in New Hampshire Superior Court in December, Elizabeth S. Evans, a Black Latinx woman who worked at Fidelity Investments, depicted an atmosphere of rampant racism and sexism at the firm’s complex in Merrimack, N.H. Her suit described white male colleagues who said that slavery was great for the US economy, that Black people “give...
Morgan Stanley revealed under pressure that only 2.2 percent of its executives, senior officials, and managers were Black.
when asked how he would advise a Black broker who was thinking about lodging an internal complaint. “I’d tell them to start looking for another job,” he said.

Racism exists in every industry, of course. But on Wall Street, where the potential earning power is vast, Black people face formidable barriers. They make up 13 percent of the US workforce, but they occupy only 2.9 percent of the industry’s financial adviser jobs, according to a January report by Cerulli Associates. Those who manage to get jobs can wind up losing them after enduring racist remarks, managers who deny them privileges enjoyed by their white colleagues, and social isolation that is both painful and distracting. The financial industry is a sharp-elbowed business that requires a thick skin to survive, but the brutality aimed at Black people exacts a different kind of toll. Capel and his colleagues gave an example of the day-to-day degradation in their complaint: A Merrill Lynch manager was photographing his brokers for a bulletin board display and suggested to a Black broker that he needn’t have his photo taken. “I can find your picture down at the precinct,” the manager quipped.

Shades of Kafka:
Glenn D. Capel’s finance career evaporated following inscrutable allegations of impropriety.

ON HIS DESK AT MERRILL LYNCH’S OFFICE IN GREENSBORO, Capel once displayed a treasured award: a foot-long pewter statue of a charging bull sporting a brass Merrill Lynch nameplate. “You know the big Merrill Lynch bull?” he asks. “Well, I won the bull.” Capel says he racked up the most assets under management in the firm’s 1999 training program, which earned him the pewter prize.

Prior to the falling-out with Merrill, Capel’s had been a classic American success story. He was raised on a tobacco and hog farm in rural North Carolina, where his father was a steelworker at an Alcoa aluminum plant.

Capel says he was an honor roll student at East Montgomery High School in Biscoe, N.C., where he was cocaptain of the football team. He landed a sports scholarship at North Carolina State and had aspirations to be an NFL linebacker, but when his father had a massive heart attack in his sophomore year, Capel took a year off to go home and take care of his family. He later earned a bachelor’s degree in business communications and master’s degrees in business and health care administration.

As much as he loved football, for years he’d dreamed of becoming a stockbroker. In his teens, he read Bottom Line, a business magazine his father subscribed to, and became intrigued with the idea of working on Wall Street.

But when Capel got his big break as a broker at Merrill Lynch’s Greensboro location, he quickly got a taste of the bosses’ seeming disdain for Black people’s success. “When I’d get a sizable account, management was always asking, ‘How did you get that account?’” he says.

He said he made Merrill’s President’s Club in his second year on the job, and he and 75 other brokers in his region got a free trip to a posh hotel in Quebec. It was not the celebratory time he’d expected. Capel knew some of the other brokers, but he was the only Black person in the crowd, and no one socialized with him. To pass the time while others partied, he escaped to the hotel’s workout room and lifted weights. It all takes a toll, he says. “The suffering, the social distancing, the isolation, is very hurtful.”

The financial industry requires a thick skin to survive, but the brutality aimed at Black people exacts a different kind of toll.
employees failed to opt out, including several Black brokers who would later be forced into private arbitration.

Brokers use several arbitration forums for employee disputes, including the commercial operations at the American Arbitration Association and JAMS. The two forums release only bare-bones information about their awards, but the public can get a fuller picture of how Black people fare in arbitration from the Wall Street-funded Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. Along with its role as a regulator, FINRA also runs an arbitration program for its members and offers an online database where the public can use keywords to search records of final awards dating back to 1988.

We searched that database using a number of terms, including “race,” “racism,” “racist,” “African American,” and “Black.” We got hundreds of results, many of which had nothing to do with a racism claim and some of which were racism claims by other minority groups. We wound up with a list of 31 cases in which we were certain that the claimants were Black.

Only two of those Black complainants, or 6.4 percent, won their claims. Another complainant settled. In two other cases, the arbitrators denied the racism claims but awarded damages on other grounds, including retaliation.

I did a similar search of that database looking for sexual harassment and hostile environment cases in 2018 and unearthed what I then considered extreme results: Among 97 cases brought by women and decided by FINRA arbitrators, only 17 complainants won, or 18 percent. (Men who brought sexual harassment cases won 29 percent of the time.) I’ve reported on Wall Street civil rights cases since the mid-1990s and wrote a book about sexual harassment in finance, Tales From the Boom-Boom Room. Gender discrimination was and remains a serious issue in the industry, but when it comes to arbitration, Black people fare much worse by comparison.

Another striking takeaway is how little the nature of racism allegations by Black people on Wall Street has changed over the years.

In the past decade, Black brokers at Edward D. Jones, Wells Fargo, and JPMorgan accused their bosses of assigning them to the least lucrative locations. (In March, Edward D. Jones reached a $34 million settlement with Black brokers who had sued the firm.) Black brokers at Morgan Stanley alleged in a 2015 lawsuit that they were left out when management distributed the accounts of departing salespeople. A Black broker at JPMorgan said in 2018 that he was interested in working at several desirable locations, but a manager said they wouldn’t be a good “fit” for him because of his ethnicity. (Harlem would be a better fit, he says they told him.)

Those cases don’t sound much different from the racism complaints filed at FINRA a quarter-century ago. Back in 1993, Stephen Collins, a broker at Great Northern Insurance Annuity Corp., complained that his bosses told him he didn’t project an image that clients could accept and assigned him to a mostly Black area of Pittsburgh. Great Northern said Collins was terminated because he failed a securities licensing exam by a significant margin. He lost his case in 1994.

Merrill Lynch broker Anthony H. Hoskins said he was told in the early 1990s that he didn’t “fit the typical Merrill Lynch broker profile” and “wasn’t what Merrill Lynch was looking for.” He lost his case. FINRA arbitration is “controlled by the industry for the industry,” he said in an interview with The Nation. “How are you gonna win?”

FINRA keeps the legal papers filed in arbitration cases under lock and key, but every so often the details become public, either because a claimant files in court despite an arbitration agreement or because a firm strikes back in the courts after losing.

Both of those factors were at work in the racial and gender discrimination case that broker Cindy R. Davis brought in 1994 against Shearson Lehman Brothers. Davis, one of the two Black people we found who won their FINRA cases, filed a complaint in federal court, but Shearson successfully fought to have it moved to arbitration. After Davis won, Shearson went to court to ask that part of the award be vacated.

That opened the door for Davis to file a public response that exposed damning arbitration testimony. Davis’s branch manager, Glenn Dropkin, was a defendant in the case, and Davis’s lawyer asked Dropkin’s boss whether there could be any evidence strong enough to bring him around to believing Davis over Dropkin. “If you received information that Mr. Dropkin had called Ms. Davis a n**** and there were witnesses present who confirmed it, would you believe it?” her lawyer asked. The boss’s answer was no.

On July 14, 2006, Glenn Capel awoke at 6 am and did what he does every morning: He prayed, took a shower, and got dressed to go to the Merrill Lynch office five miles away. He was feeling a bit anxious as he pulled into a parking space. He stopped at the newsstand in the lobby, picked up a half-dozen copies of that day’s New York Times, and took the elevator to the fourth floor, where he had a prized office overlooking a pond that drew flocks of swans and ducks.

Capel had agreed to speak with the Times about the historic racial discrimination
lawsuit that had been filed the previous November—one he would soon join as a named plaintiff. In the story, he was quoted saying that it had been “a lonely struggle” being the only Black person among 40 brokers at the branch. His photo was in the business section.

He closed the door to his office to read the paper. Soon there was a knock on his door. His boss, Henley, and a compliance manager entered the room. He recalls Henley asking, “How could you do this to us?” and adding that the entire office was on pins and needles because Capel had complained publicly.

For over an hour they were encamped in Capel’s office, haranguing him with questions and comments. When they finally left, Capel made his way out to his car, figuring he’d have a late lunch after an emotional morning. That’s when he saw the shattered glass of his car windows scattered all over the parking lot. He called the police and his insurance company and then decided to call it a day at 2 PM.

He was at home with his wife and two kids a few days later when the phone rang. He didn’t recognize the voice, but he will never forget what he heard. “You and your family need to be careful,” the man said, and then hung up.

William P. Halldin, a spokesman for Bank of America, which purchased Merrill in 2008, said the firm takes complaints of discrimination or inappropriate behavior very seriously and has a comprehensive process for filing and investigating such reports. He added that the firm was “not in a position to comment on things that allegedly were said 11 years ago or more and haven’t previously been reported to us.” Henley, who is now an executive at Truist Investment Services in Charlotte, did not respond to e-mails and voice mails seeking comment.

Capel began keeping the upsetting details from his wife because he didn’t want to add to her stress. But the pressure eventually undermined their marriage. Choking back tears, he says that his wife told him, “I don’t have the thick skin you have. I don’t think I can go through this.”

They got a divorce. He gave his keys to his mortgage company and walked away from the house in Greensboro because he couldn’t make the payments. Today he splits the rent on an Annapolis townhouse with a fellow church member.

Making up for some of his pain was the $250,000 award for being a named plaintiff in the lawsuit, plus the “more than a million” dollars for his individual claim. That’s a substantial amount of money by most standards, and Capel was grateful for it. But to a man who grew up on a tobacco farm in North Carolina and then worked his way to success on Wall Street, the journey has been particularly painful, and the settlement money he received at 50 doesn’t match the revenue he’s lost over the past 11 years. “My best earning years have been taken away from me,” he says.

In 2019, he managed to get Merrill to delete the reference to “dishonesty” in his industry records, arguing successfully to a panel of FINRA arbitrators that Merrill had defamed him.

Even with the damaging reference removed, he fears that his role as a leader in a high-profile class-action suit lingers as a threat to his career. Capel says he’s sent out well over 100 job applications since his firing. When we met in February near his Maryland home, I asked whether he’d thought about pursuing a job outside of the brokerage industry. He paused for a moment, Googled his name on his iPhone, and leaned over to show me the results: The third entry under his name was the New York Times article about the class-action racial discrimination case that had featured his photo and remarks. “Employers look and they say, ‘This guy’s very talented on paper, but is he a troublemaker?'”

Cape’s story didn’t have to end that way. But multiple obstacles would have to be overcome to change the system that has ruined his Wall Street career and those of many of his Black peers.

Regulators would need to play a more aggressive role. To some degree, that is already in the works at the Securities and Exchange Commission, where President Joe Biden has appointed a new chair, Gary Gensler, who took office in April and is sympathetic to so-called ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance) matters. His predecessor, acting chair Allison Herren Lee, had made clear in a public statement as commissioner last year that she thought that more rigorous disclosures on climate change and diversity issues were warranted. So far, though, the agency has focused mostly on climate change. If the SEC wanted to take a stronger stance on racism, it could require that companies disclose a tally of their internal racism complaints each year and reveal whether investigations found for or against the employee.

At the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Biden’s new chair, Charlotte Burrows, is seeking to undo some of the damage caused by her Trump-appointed predecessor, filling open jobs and putting a renewed focus on systemic discrimination cases. Even so, the agency has brought few big cases against Wall Street firms. In an interview in the fall, before she was named EEOC chair, then Commissioner Burrows told me that cases filed against financial companies compete with those brought by employees in less lucrative industries who can’t afford a lawyer. In late April, USA Today revealed that the EEOC itself...
was being accused of racism by its Black employees in Dallas, prompting Burrows to order a review of the allegation.

As a self-regulatory organization for the financial industry, FINRA has been mute about its members’ settlements of alleged egregious civil rights violations over the years—and remains so. A spokesperson did not respond to specific questions as to whether FINRA might have the authority to pursue discrimination cases, but noted that its focus is on “investor protection and market integrity.”

FINRA’s own officials, however, have made comments in adjudicatory documents that suggest racism cases would be well within its reach. In cases heard by its Office of Hearing Officers and National Adjudicatory Council during the past five years, FINRA officials have said that its rules provide broad authority over members “even against unethical conduct that may not be unlawful,” including “unethical, business-related conduct,” regardless of whether it involves a security.

Bill Singer, a veteran Wall Street lawyer in New York, says FINRA thus far has not prosecuted racism cases despite its broad authority. “I would argue that by not prosecuting it, FINRA is condoning it,” he says.

On April 29, FINRA published a notice seeking comment on any aspects of its rules and processes that might create “unintended barriers” to greater diversity in the industry. The positive efforts are a start, but they are not game-changers for Black people who are subject to unresponsive or punitive complaint systems at work.

In February, two former BlackRock employees—Essma Bengabsia, an Arab American woman, and Mugi Nguyai, a Black man—published an open letter to the firm’s CEO asking BlackRock to fix its internal investigations process and publicly disclose a tally of employee complaints in its diversity, equity, and inclusion report. BlackRock sent a memo to employees on March 2 saying that it would set up a separate team to improve its investigations process. It is the only reform we could find that attempts to address the flaws of a complaint system.

A sign of real change would be if the failures of industry leaders to reckon with racism in their ranks took a meaningful toll on their reputations. That has yet to happen.

Morgan Stanley, for example, has been the target of multiple lawsuits—including the one by Marilyn Booker—and has employed strong-arm tactics to force arbitration on its employees. Yet, even with racial justice at the front of the public’s mind, this history has not tarnished the company’s image as an industry leader.

In December, CEO Gorman landed on a Bloomberg Businessweek list of the 50 people who defined 2020, a rarefied roster that included Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, racial justice activist Colin Kaepernick, and infectious disease official Anthony Fauci. A full magazine page devoted to Gorman lauded him for his takeover prowess and Morgan Stanley’s high stock price. A member of the firm’s board called him “one of the great CEOs, not just in banking but one of the great CEOs, period.”

Even in the year of George Floyd’s murder, the firm’s civil rights failings didn’t get so much as a mention.

Susan Antilla is an award-winning investigative journalist and author who has written about employment discrimination and investor fraud for publications including The New York Times, Bloomberg, and The Intercept.
To Our Readers

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The Past Has a Future
Raoul Peck’s world

BY ED MORALES

VER THE PAST 20 YEARS, RAOUl PECK has emerged as one of his generation’s leading filmmakers and intellectuals. Beginning with Lumumba and Sometimes in April, his unflinching examinations of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961 and the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Peck has shown us the horrors of late-stage decolonization and postcolonialism. With his last two feature films, I Am Not Your Negro, about James Baldwin, and The Young Karl Marx, he produced startlingly original and moving portraits of two of his main muses, setting the stage for his latest work, an epic four-part docuseries for HBO, Exterminate All the Brutes.
For Peck, each of his films is as much a vehicle for political argument and posing philosophical questions as it is a way to offer alternative historical narratives. Even as he attempts to reinvent the documentary genre through innovative storytelling, employing a kind of dreamlike melancholy akin to jazz improvisation, as he did in Negra, he is a formalist committed to inventing new cinematographic modes. Although he built his career by assuming the role of journalistic or directorial objectivity and prefers to show rather than tell, he’s unafraid to step out from behind the camera and challenge the underpinnings of those Western myths that shaped his education and continue to define so much of contemporary political life.

With Exterminate All the Brutes, a hybrid documentary that combines rare archival footage, stunning still photography, first-person narration, and scripted, harrowing set-pieces, Peck embraces formalistic play and experiment in a way he hasn’t in the past, successfully merging feature-film-style vignettes with documentarian flourishes of text, image, and collage. The series’ four-hour-long episodes—“The Disturbing Confidence of Ignorance”; “Who the F*** Is Columbus?”; “Killing at a Distance or… How I Thoroughly Enjoyed the Outing”; and “The Bright Colors of Fascism”—do not so much focus on themes as use them as jumping-off points that allow Peck and his characters to riff on the jagged edges of colonialism, slavery, the mass displacement and destruction of Native Americans, and the normalization of genocide. While this might seem an impossibly broad task, Peck makes his nonlinear lament work, the coherent force residing in its investigation of memory and a precise distillation of visual and aural affect.

Exterminate All the Brutes begins by exploring the mindless brutality of the colonial project. We are introduced to a leader of the Seminole Nation (played by Caisa Ankarsparre) and Gen. Sidney Jessup, one of Andrew Jackson’s henchmen (played by Josh Hartnett), and follow them as the Seminole leader seeks to hold on to territory she shares with Maroons. When Jessup stops her in the middle of a field, she confronts him bluntly: “You call human beings property? You steal land, you steal life, you steal humans? What kind of species are you?” Jessup replies, “This kind,” and then pulls out a gun and shoots her.

The camera pulls away from her in silence, and Peck later explains why: “Our job as filmmakers is to deconstruct these silences.” At the end of the second episode, he embellishes a graphic rendering of Choctaw people dying in snowdrifts with a quote from Tocqueville, who witnessed the Trail of Tears: “No crying. All were silent.” A cringe-worthy sequence focusing on a photo shoot of the journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley and his enslaved adopted child Kalulu uses silence to reveal a kind of terror. In fact, the continuing silence of those who have benefited from colonialism in the face of such violence and exploitation is the series’ most chilling silence of all.

Peck himself, however, is noticeably not silent. Early on, he acknowledges the necessity of putting himself into the story, his gravelly citizen-of-the-world voiceover replacing Samuel Johnson’s sonorous gravity in I Am Not
Your Negro. Using home-movie footage of his family’s trip to the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City, Peck begins to tell us his own story. “It’s not about you, unless the story is bigger than you,” he intones, adding, “Neutrality is not an option.”

As the series develops, we come to realize how far from neutrality Exterminate All the Brutes is—and with good reason, given its subject. The show is a relentless attack on racism, genocide, colonialism, and the extractive nature of imperialist and post-imperialist forms of capitalism. It tells the story in *longue durée* to remind us of the immensity and depravity of this history, from the dawn of African slavery to the marketing of displaced Native Americans’ land to the rubber plantations of the Belgian Congo that helped satiate the growing European thirst for bicycling. It’s about what Walter Mignolo called “the darker side of Western modernity.” Like *I Am Not Your Negro*, the style is fluid, nonlinear, fond of using Barbara Kruger/Jenny Holzer–inspired text slogans, at times zanily posted, as on an egregiously darker side of Western modernity.” Like *I Am Not Your Negro*, the style is fluid, nonlinear, fond of using Barbara Kruger/Jenny Holzer–inspired text slogans, at times zanily posted, as on an egregiously racist clip from the Hollywood staging of *On the Town*, or paired with Anita Ward’s post-disco classic “Ring My Bell.”

In some ways, Peck’s style resonates with Adam Curtis’s story-driven hybrid docs, in which he uses BBC-footage collages and flashing title cards layered with an ironic musical soundtrack to frame big ideas and dark truths about empire. Curtis’s latest, *Can’t Get You Out of My Head*, tries to explain the current apocalyptic overhang by juxtaposing historical figures like Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, New York Black Panther Afeni Shakur, Soviet dissident Eduard Limonov, and conspiracy theorist Kerry Thornley. Curtis incorporates more Black characters than usual, and the ending of episode two concludes with a fiery Stokely Carmichael speech punctuated by the Me-los’ “Where Were You?” But Peck’s style embodies a Black historical materialism—one that charts the passage of time through the lens of Baldwin and Marx rather than Freud. Like Curtis, he knows the Western world prefers a fantasy to reality, but he is also interested in how this fantasy is realized in hyperreality. “I know this story is painful, but we need to know it,” he says with sober recognition at the end of episode one, after flashing clips from *Apocalypse Now* and Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, and he isn’t kidding.

*Exterminate All the Brutes* is not an easy series to watch: Much of what we see is disturbing, from a montage of photographs listing various genocides to the uncomfortable staging of Hartnett as an enforcer on a Congo rubber plantation cutting off a rebellious worker’s hands, to the more psychological revelations of the way this sort of violence is embedded in quotidian culture. In one sequence, Peck moves from home movies of Adolf Hitler kicking it in the countryside with Eva Braun to an explanation of how settler colonialism “requires violence and the elimination of natives,” before reaching a climax of sorts with a quote from William Carlos Williams: “The land, don’t you feel it? Doesn’t it make you want to go out and lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves to steal from them some authenticity as it must be clinging even to their corpses?”

When Peck comes across a reference —“kill the brutes”—to Kurtz’s dictum in H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, he lingers on the idea that Wells’s protagonist found a kind of titillating terror in smashing and killing the subhuman Morlocks. Moving on to Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, he muses about the scientist “civilizing the animals with torture.” “The nightmare is buried deep within our consciousness,” Peck adds. “It says who you are and what you have become.”

As we come to the series’ end, *Exterminate All the Brutes* forces us to consider how American mythology accepts the westward expansion as a tragicomic struggle between cowboys and Indians, when in reality it was soaked through with bloody carnage. It suggests that behind the manufacture and distribution of benign household products lies the figurative or literal dismemberment of slave labor. Peck argues that buried in the Western mindset is the notion that the burden of privilege and of imposing civilization requires the frequent spilling of blood.

Each of Peck’s films is an essay and historical argument as well as a study in narrative and form. the hybrid aspect of *Exterminate All the Brutes* works well, for the most part, from a scene set in the Congo in 1895, where Hartnett is bathed by an expressionless Black female slave as Ella Fitzgerald croons “The Man I Love” in the background, to a scene in London where people of color dressed in 21st-century fashions walk out of an 1866 lecture on racial categorization by the Darwinist philologist Frederick Farrar, to a scene in which a Black priest watches while young white slaves are whipped. The vignettes serve as a way of increasing the viewer’s uneasiness, as a rote recounting of atrocities gives way to a gnawing uncertainty about how they might be depicted in one of Peck’s fictional set-pieces.

The richly textured layers of the series also reflect the auteur himself, whose detached analytical narrative slips at times into a personal, confessional style, and whose earlier films were already a cross between genres. In the third episode, he wrestles with a Du Boisian “double consciousness,” even a triple or quadruple one—as a Brooklyn Black man taught never to go on the wrong side of the tracks; a “good soldier, a perfectly well-educated student of Western humanistic civilization”; a Haitian who has traveled extensively in Africa; and a precocious student who learned about Marx while studying film in Berlin, where he lived for 15 years. Peck is aware of his relative privilege, but he also remains wedded to an internationalism that allows him to see the tentacles of slavery, colonialism, and domination in the Americas, Europe, and Africa rather than a project confined to just one area of the world.

Among the many themes developed here, Peck is particularly effective in weaving a narrative thread between the construction of race and racism and the current state of endless worldwide war. He begins with the “originators of the project,” the late medieval Spanish, and
their classification of Black and Indigenous people as “other.” He visually quotes Jean-Daniel Verhaeghe’s film Dispute in Valladolid, about the 16th-century de las Casas–Sepulveda debate that found Indigenous people worthy of religious conversion, shifting enslavement practices toward Africans.

Later, Peck offers a reading of how “the West” distinguished itself from “the rest” through the development of weapons: first cannons, then automatic rifles that “killed long before the weapons of their opponents could reach them.” In another extended passage, he explores the genealogy of the US arms industry, beginning with America’s first corporation, the Arsenal of Springfield, founded at the Springfield (Mass.) Armory in 1777, where the assembly line and interchangeable parts became the essence of America’s industrial revolution. The military-industrial complex, a term coined by Eisenhower almost two centuries later, is nicely illustrated by a montage of revolving-door figures like Norman Augustine of Lockheed, John C. Rood of Raytheon, and former vice president Dick Cheney, among others.

Peck also follows the story of how, in the 19th century, scientific racism became the law of the Western land. After Darwin’s theory of evolution proved useful to race scientists like Herbert Spencer and Georges Cuvier, “genocide became the inevitable by-product of progress,” Peck argues. The idea of “killing at a distance” emerged out of the easy Dutch and British victories against the Spanish Armada; continued in the late 19th century with Winston Churchill reporting for the Morning Post on the lack of excitement in the British subjugation of Sudan in 1898; and had its climactic moment, of course, with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which Peck punctuates with Elmore James’s plaintive guitar riffing on “The Sky Is Crying.” “The only language they seem to understand is the one we use when we bomb them,” President Truman’s recorded voice says over the music.

For Peck, the horrifying mass slaughter at the end of World War II comes out of the horrifying evolution of weapons and imperial tactics that allowed the West to dominate in the first place. Now we are back at the beginning—at Lindqvist’s insistence that the Nazis’ atrocities against Europe’s Jews, Romani, Slavs, and homosexuals stemmed from the centuries of genocide and racialized violence in the Americas and Africa that preceded them, and that they represent, as Aimé Césaire observed in Discourse on Colonialism, how fascism was colonialism turned inward on Europe.

What comes next? Exterminate All the Brutes does not say, other than that “the past has a future we never expect.” The key, for Peck, is that we must refuse to forget what happened. We cannot let that past fade from our memories in the future, either. As Baldwin said to Dick Cavett on a late-night talk show excerpted in I Am Not Your Negro, “All your buried corpses now begin to speak.” I think of George Floyd and the other Black Americans killed by the police over the past year, and how throughout this film, Peck also allows us a way of hearing them speak, too—and how this speech may help us construct a better future.
ACISM IS NOT REGIONAL. I OFTEN HEAR PEOPLE REFER TO it as though it were trapped in the South. White Northerners who are appalled by the blatant racism around them will say things like “This isn’t Mississippi” or “Take that attitude back to Alabama.” But whether white Northerners like to recognize it or not, slavery was in every colony in the United States for more than a century and a half. It was part of the fabric of America—all of America. After South Carolina, New York had the largest enslaved population; by the mid-18th century, one in five people in New York was Black. It is important to note that the North was not the utopian refuge that public memory likes to romanticize it as. Prosperous Black communities in places like Philadelphia during the antebellum period were more the exception than the rule. And even the City of Brotherly Love experienced several major anti-Black riots in the 1830s and ’40s.

Another frequent misconception when it comes to antebellum Northern politics is the myth that most Northerners were abolitionists. There is an important distinction between those in the North who were antislavery and those who were abolitionist. Many in the North hated slavery for how it undermined the value of free labor, and some also detested it for its brutal practices, but being antislavery did not make one an abolitionist committed to the immediate end of the institution of slavery. And even among abolitionists, not all believed in the fullness of Black humanity or the equality of the races. It was entirely possible during the antebellum period to hold both antislavery and anti-Black sentiments. As Frederick Douglass noted, “Opposing slavery and hating its victims has become a very common form of abolitionism.”

Throughout the 19th century (and even now), racist ideas about Black poverty and Black criminality guided the laws of the day—and this was true in the North as well as the South. States like Ohio and Illinois did not want to be held responsible for the well-being of African Americans, who they be-
lied would drain their resources or compete with white people for labor and wealth. Northern state constitutions were often ambiguous about defining citizenship and civil rights. Free Black Americans had to continually contest anti-Black laws and norms that left Black people with no guarantees as to how they might obtain and maintain equal protection under the law.

Just as the long history of racism in the North tends to be forgotten, so too does the long history of those who sought to dismantle its racist and anti-Black laws. While it is common to cite the civil rights movement or perhaps the Reconstruction period as the first attempt at securing an egalitarian United States, these struggles began much earlier. Historian Kate Masur’s Until Justice Be Done: America’s First Civil Rights Movement, From the Revolution to Reconstruction helps exhum the often neglected history of both Northern racism and slavery and those Black freedom struggles in the 19th century that sought to abolish them. A clear and compelling account, Masur’s book pushes us to rethink our understanding of anti-Blackness in the North and the activism that helped free Black people through the constitutional amendments that abolished slavery and granted them citizenship and equal protection under the law. Despite legal setbacks, unfavorable court decisions, and white supremacy, Black and white activists and advocates in the 19th century managed to make their belief in fairness and inclusion concerning Black civil rights the mainstream view.

Many have written about the 13th and 14th amendments, but the origins of their underlying principles can be found, Masur argues, in the 18th century and in an often ignored history of Black activism that goes back as far as the early days of the American republic. Her earlier book, An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle Over Equality in Washington, D.C., focused on this history in the context of the District of Columbia—both in terms of its local government and as the seat of the national government. In Until Justice Be Done, Masur widens her geographic scope and considers how the struggle for equality manifested itself all over the country, particularly in the Midwestern states. By doing so, she reminds us that Black activism and the fight for civil rights were found not only in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. She also reminds us that until the North recognized the need to dismantle its own racist and exclusionary practices, it held no moral high ground over the Southern slaveocracy.

Until Justice Be Done begins with the American Revolution, when the rhetoric around freedom and equality forced its participants to consider what these values might mean for Black Americans. Between 1774 and 1804, all of the Northern states came to abolish slavery, but the position of free Black people living outside the South remained complicated. Few Northerners wanted Black people around them, let alone to give them the equal rights of citizens. Ohio, a state that initially was only 1 percent Black, became the first in the North to adopt “Black laws,” and many more soon followed. These discriminatory practices kept Black people from voting, testifying in legal cases that involved white people, or freely living their lives without the sanction of one or two white landowners vouching for them. In the North, Black people were treated as a burden. For many African Americans, therefore, freedom did not equate to belonging; as Masur notes, with the exception of “a tiny handful of visionary radicals...northern whites were monolithically antiblack.”

During the early years of the American republic, anti-Black laws spread in the North and came to shape the country’s politics and culture. State after state, such as Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, adopted various restrictions intended to limit Black freedom and require documentation for Black settlement. These restrictions made Black people vulnerable to loss, theft, and damage. Free Black people who hoped to shape the legislative process were often denied the right to vote or participate in political life and thus found themselves dependent on white Northerners to vote for their interests and further the principle that all men deserved universal rights. Historians have neglected or glossed over these barriers and the details of how Black people and their allies fought to change them prior to the Civil War and Reconstruction.

One aspect of Masur’s book that is particularly welcome is her decision to center her narrative on the efforts of Black Americans to achieve a national consensus surrounding citizenship and civil rights. As much as we love Frederick Douglass, there were many other, unsung Black activists operating outside of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia who were as determined to speak out and act up and as vital to the struggle for emancipation. Writing about the mostly unknown Black activists in Ohio and Illinois, Masur describes how they worked tirelessly to repeal racist laws and create enclaves of Black achievement. She reveals how they not only changed laws but won over white allies, who took up these causes as their own. The repeal of the Black laws in Ohio, for example, was a victory that many hoped would be repeated in other Midwestern states, such as Illinois and Indiana.

he stories of these Black activists are central to Masur’s narrative. Men like John Mercer Langston, an attorney and one of the first African Americans elected to public office, as a town clerk in Ohio; William Howard Day, an Oberlin graduate, newspaper editor, and secretary of the National Negro Convention; and David Jenkins, a leading Black activist and editor of a weekly newspaper, all played essential roles in repealing the Black laws and fighting for Black freedom. One of the most interesting people in Masur’s book is Gilbert Horton. In 1826, he was a 26-year-old free Black man who was part of the crew on a ship called The Macedonian. Horton’s father had worked for years to purchase his son’s freedom, which happened when Horton was just 5 years old. As he traveled as a seaman, however, Horton’s freedom was always at risk when he entered the slave states.

After *The Macedonian* docked in Norfolk, Va., he traveled to Georgetown in Washington, D.C., where he was arrested on suspicion of being a runaway and held in the local jail until an investigation could be completed.

Horton repeatedly insisted that he was a freeman, but without “evidences of freedom,” he was certain to be sold into slavery if his “owner” did not come forward. Advertisements were sent out nearly every day with his description in an attempt to find this person. Thankfully, the advertisements reached Horton’s family in New York, who immediately began to advocate for his release. The country’s first Black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, founded by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm in New York City, was a voice for free people of color who had been wrongly imprisoned and sold into slavery, and Horton’s case became a cause célèbre in their campaign to urge Black readers to stand up for their status as citizens.

The case brought larger issues to the fore, such as abolishing slavery and the slave trade in the nation’s capital. It also raised the question of whether free Black people were indeed citizens, entitled to the same “privileges and immunities” under the Constitution as white people. While one might expect the nation’s capital to be a beacon to free Black people, it was instead a place where the defenders of slavery had ramped up laws that targeted them. The district, like the various slave states, put the onus on free Black people to prove that they were free. The Black press and its allies protested such laws in Washington, which, they contended, violated the US Constitution.

Horton’s case became a national controversy. Masur is astute at taking episodes like this and weaving them into her discussion of the country’s larger political history. During the same period, for example, the Missouri debates of 1820–21 highlighted the role and contributions of Black women and free Black men. Mary Ellen Pleasant, an abolitionist and activist whose work earned her the moniker “the mother of human rights in California.” Several of Pleasant’s high-profile cases ended in major victories for civil rights, including her suit against railroad companies in San Francisco. In *Pleasant v. North Beach & Mission Railroad Company*, which went all the way to the California Supreme Court. After almost two years of litigation, San Francisco outlawed segregation on the city’s public transportation. Yet despite us African Americans, often assisted by white allies, employing direct and subversive tactics to invoke their citizenship and challenge a system upheld by the absurdity of race. As a result of such tactics, a bill was passed in Massachusetts to safeguard the rights of Black sailors, while new legal challenges would test the constitutionality of laws in other states and further the idea of seeking an act of Congress to create changes on the federal level.

By detailing these legal cases and state statutes, Masur’s book is also in conversation with the ideas of Chris Bonner’s *Remaking the Republic: Black Politics and the Creation of American Citizenship*, which argues that until the states and the federal government found a consensus on the terms of citizenship, “black people suffered under this ambiguity.” Black people in America knew they were human beings, and they knew they were citizens of the United States—or, at the very least, entitled to such citizenship. This history details the various efforts Black leaders had employed to transform the country’s practices and policies. Activism in the North was not just about abolishing slavery; it was also about repealing state-level Black laws that prevented African Americans from experiencing true liberation.

“**Our warfare ought not to be against slavery alone.**”

...
the contributions of such women, Masur’s book is largely a story of men. The neglect of Black or other women is an unfortunate but all too typical feature of the field. Scholars often blame the lack of sources, but how sources are read also plays a major role in the way women—and Black women in particular—are silenced.

Nevertheless, Until Justice Be Done reminds us that, despite the popular conception of American history, change and progress are not inevitable in the United States. We are not marching confidently toward a more egalitarian and democratic society. Without constant activism and radical pressure from the bottom up, even the advances that have been won are not secure.

Today, Black people face many of the same legal barriers they did in the 19th century: segregated schools, limited relief for the poor, unfair trials, and voter suppression. Although the Black laws have been repealed, anti-Black sentiments have remained—in the North as well as the South. In fact, most of the recent police killings and shootings of Black people that have captured national attention have taken place in the North and particularly the Midwest: Tamir Rice in Ohio, George Floyd in Minnesota, Laquan McDonald in Illinois, Jacob Blake in Wisconsin. Recently, a study found that the top 15 cities ranked as the worst for African Americans were nearly all in the North and primarily in the Midwest (Fresno, Calif., was the sole exception). In my own state of Massachusetts, a state labeled as progressive, Black people are only 7 percent of the population and yet make up 27 percent of the prison population. The Boston Globe’s Spotlight team revealed several years ago that the average net worth of white families in Boston is over $247,000, whereas for Black people that figure is just $8.

Such appalling statistics have a deep history, but so does Black activism. I think it’s fair to view the social and political mass organizing in Missouri, Wisconsin, and Illinois as ongoing and necessary because Black laws were repealed but anti-Black sentiment has persisted. The fight for fair treatment within the criminal justice system, as well as access to certain neighborhoods and even health care, are rooted in the long, hard fights that Black activists and their white allies took on over 200 years ago.

Until Justice Be Done does not offer a recipe for obtaining equal recognition and treatment for Black people, but it does illustrate how they and their allies envisioned a path toward building a better world. By examining how free Black people living in the North had to navigate hostile terrains and discriminatory laws while simultaneously pushing for the end of slavery, it also reminds us that emancipation and equality are not the same thing. This book is not about abolitionism; much like being antislavery, being in favor of abolition wasn’t enough. Freedom requires civil rights, political rights, and economic rights. As the Black abolitionist Joshua Easton declared in 1837, “Abolitionists may attack slaveholding, but there is a danger still that the spirit of slavery will survive, in the form of prejudice, after the system is overturned. Our warfare ought not to be against slavery alone, but against the spirit which makes color a mark of degradation.”

Saying I Am a Survivor in Another Language

We are in the moment before we decide, for the first time, to have sex.

We fill our mouths with salami and wine.
I am careful, peeling wax paper off glazed sponge cake baked by nuns who live down the street.
One nun, this morning, took my hand in hers while she told me that the most important ingredient is the silence of prayer.

I cannot tell you this, but I held onto her while she walked me through a village made of thick paper. A train with a real light and human figurines hot-glued to look like they were heading somewhere.
I was terrified. I didn’t touch a man for seven years.

Asleep. Your eyelashes open against my chest. You are the first person to not know this.

TANEUM BAMBRICK
It’s All in the Angles
Joan Didion’s long view
BY HALEY MLOTEN

ANCY REAGAN ONCE CLAIMED THAT SHE Couldn’t GET fair press coverage from the women sent to write about her. Perhaps, she speculated, these journalists were jealous of her, “a woman who wears size four” and who has “no trouble staying slim.” Her theory was put to the test when The Saturday Evening Post sent Joan Didion to profile her in 1968, the year that Ronald Reagan, then the governor of California, would lose the Republican presidential primary to Richard Nixon. If not a competition of looks or a comparison of waistbands, then what could have accounted for the resulting article? “Pretty Nancy” followed the style that was then becoming distinctive of Didion’s journalistic prose: a blunt, self-assured series of descriptions and observations that lead the reader to believe she was just writing down what she saw. Here is Nancy pretending to pluck a rhododendron blossom. Here is Nancy finding her light. Here is Nancy wearing “the smile of a woman who seems to be playing out some middle-class American woman’s daydream, circa 1948.”

Nancy, of course, did not like Didion’s profile. She found it sardonic and judgmental and accused Didion of having written the piece before they even met. She couldn’t understand it, she said later. She thought they were having a nice time. What is it about Joan Didion that seduces and then betrays? In her writing she promises little, and in her public life she offers even less. The title of Didion’s new essay collection, Let Me Tell You What I Mean, almost seems like the kind of cruel joke one might find in one of her pieces. Has a writer ever been less likely to say just what she means? Across the 12 works included—which span Didion’s entire career from her column in The Saturday Evening Post in the late 1960s and ‘70s to one-off essays and reports for The New Yorker to speeches given at her alma mater, as well as introductions to other people’s books—the impression one gets is that of reading a magazine made up of all leads and kickers. This is the case with “Pretty Nancy,” too. It contains many of Didion’s trademarks. Her sentences often exist as aphorisms, all the more brutal for being brief; her choice of weapon tends to be the direct quote. These tendencies capture something true about her writing in general: Her essays show a writer who attempts a close reading of the powerful...
people and strange circumstances she encounters but then, when understanding proves difficult, draws back to look at them from a great, flat distance.

In Blue Nights, her 2011 memoir about grief, family, and work, Didion said that when she and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, worked on dialogue for their screenplays, they would mark the time a character spent speaking before coming up with the words themselves: What was said was not as important as the rhythm and length of the speech. Her essays also have this novelistic approach. As Hilton Als notes in his foreword to Let Me Tell You What I Mean, “a peculiar aspect of Joan Didion’s nonfiction is that a significant portion of it reads like fiction.” This appears to be the case, however, not because Didion is too imaginative in her journalistic renderings but rather because of her sense of control over the material and her certainty of its meaning, as though nothing happens without her permission.

One finds echoes of this approach in the way Didion circles around the California governor’s wife, the tension hovering in the sharp point she holds back from making. There are inferences into what kind of person Nancy is, what kind of mother her teenage son might see her as, what kind of sycophantic circle a political family might live within. In many ways, Didion casts Nancy in a film of her own making. The writing could serve as cues for a character in a screenplay rather than as descriptions of a real-life woman in a magazine profile.

Let Me Tell You What I Mean includes a kind of corollary to “Pretty Nancy,” Didion’s 2000 profile of Martha Stewart (or, more to the point, of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia LLC), another story of a woman in the business of promising domestic harmony. “This is getting out of the house with a vengeance, and on your own terms,” Didion writes, “the secret dream of any woman who has ever made a success of a PTA cake sale.” Didion’s sentences have a way of taking a person at face value and seeing the way subtle truths lie under glossy surfaces.

Other profiles are of groups, like her essay on a meeting of Gamblers Anonymous, in which she writes that she had to leave as soon as she heard the people there speak of “serenity,” because it is a word she associates with death. There is a profile of a building, too—San Simeon, the castle William Randolph Hearst built with his newspaper fortune. Here, Didion’s classic cruelties are put to good use, showing her disdain for the wealthy who never had to learn how to use their money wisely: “San Simeon was... exactly the castle a child would build, if a child had $220 million and could spend $40 million of it on a castle.”

When writing about what she likes, Didion finds herself drawn to her subjects with an intimate approach; she writes about them as if she is sharing their secret. In “Alicia and the Underground Press,” the subject is alternative newspapers, but the essay is really about the purportedly objective mainstream press and Didion’s fatigue in the face of it—she much prefers a journalistic tone that mimics a conversation between friends. “These papers ignore the conventional newspaper code,” she explains in what, for her, can be read as praise, and instead “say what they mean.” When a writer at an underground newspaper has a thought, Didion adds, they say so, and best of all “quite often in lieu of who, what, where, when, how.”

But as the reader continues through the essays in this collection, her writing can also take on the feeling of being alone in someone else’s living room: She is going through their homes in search of a secret. In her article about the Hearst castle, she critiques the childishness of grown men, and in “On Being Unchosen by the College of One’s Choice,” she critiques the overgrown precociousness in children. As with a face in profile, the angles are everything.

Didion loves other people’s words, to turn them over and examine them from all sides. This does not necessarily mean that she is faithful to what they said: “Why I Write,” a speech she gave at UC Berkeley and included here, is now frequently quoted in essays about Didion for its unrelenting admission that she considers writing a hostile act. She also returns in the speech to the cinematographer’s lens:

Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind... The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what’s going on in the picture.

The questions such a collection of essays demands—for example, why these pieces, and why now?—invite a cynical answer that is then attached, inextricably so, to the thought itself: Because these are the pieces that haven’t been recently collected; because these are the pieces that can be sold either to the completist or to the casual reader. If this book does have a theme, it is one indistinguishable from what many readers already know about Didion: that all of this writing is less about the topic than about how Didion feels about it. This unanswerable approach can almost lead the reader to the point of hypnosis—no matter the subject, her preferred subtext is what she won’t tell and we can’t know. Nancy Reagan probably had many reasons to feel betrayed by Didion’s article, but the reason she was insulted had nothing to do with Didion’s insincerity: She evades, but she does not lie. In her writing, she may not tell us what she means, but we can certainly sense how she feels.

Betrayal, of course, is possible only when a loyalty has been broken. Who, readers might ask, does Didion stand with? What is she for or against? In a 1972 essay, “Seduction and Betrayal,” Elizabeth Hardwick said that these two illicit actions have become a question more of psychology than of ethics. “We ask ourselves how the delinquent ones feel about their seductions, adulteries, betrayals, and it is by the quality of their feelings that our moral judgments are formed... In novelistic relations, where the pain inflicted is only upon the feelings of another person, everything is blurred.”

Haley Mlotek is a writer, editor, and organizer who is writing a book about divorce.
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—Claudia Sole, Calif.

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When New York Review Books reissued this essay along with some of Hardwick's other essays in 2001, Didion made the following observation in her introduction:

At the time Seduction and Betrayal was first published, a reviewer in The New York Times complained that if the book had a fault, it was that its author failed to “make sufficient distinctions between the real and the literary.” That there are no such distinctions to be made, that the women we invent have changed the course of our lives as surely as the women we are, is in many ways the point of this passionate book.

This fuzziness that both Hardwick and Didion describe—of novels that seem like biographies, of news reports that read like fiction—is perhaps the only way to read Didion’s work. Every profile is of a character; every article invents a story. As she told a student reporter for Berkeley’s Daily Californian in 2001:

The whole way I think about politics came out of the English Department. They taught a form of literary criticism which was based on analyzing texts in a very close way. If you start analyzing the text of a newspaper or a political commentator on CNN using the same approach of close textual analysis, you come to understand it in a different way. It’s not any different from reading Henry James.

For Didion, politics, like a novel, pulls from life but also can exist as fantasy, and can therefore be read like literature.

With this, a key is handed to those inclined to read Didion like code. A woman can accept her fate or she cannot, Didion seems to say again and again; she can escape the narrator altogether. The future awaits us either way. A woman with no loyalties is a Madame Bovary. A woman who cannot help her loyalties is an Anna Karenina. A woman who is the last to discover her own loyalties is an Isabel Archer. And a woman who will write book after book and essay upon essay without ever claiming her own loyalties is a Joan Didion.

Reading Didion’s latest collection is enough to convince anyone that her writing is often more evocative than empathetic, more interested in style than in meaning. For some this might be primarily a literary feature of her writing, but for Bustillos this has made her journalism often read like “an unrelenting exercise in class superiority.” And it is true that Didion’s politics, while often contradictory and strange, were not all that inscrutable or indiscriminable. She was a woman who loved Barry Goldwater, who told her friends that Nixon was too liberal, who unironically embraced a gently nostalgic interpretation of Americana and never missed an opportunity to cite a Hemingway sentence or a John Wayne scene. Her ideology is right there for the reader—laid out on the page, waiting for your interpretation.

But a reader is not a voyeur, and an audience has its own autonomy. Didion’s calculated vanity turns other people into a reflection that somehow manages to show nothing; this does indeed look, to a certain type of romantic, like seduction. She puts herself in view and then shuts the blinds. This may frustrate some readers, but it is hardly an act of “betrayal.” I often think about a line in Robert McKee’s popular and frequently skirted screenwriting manual, Story, in which he says that he is always surprised to see audiences who want to know everything possible about a character over the span of one film. You couldn’t know everything about a person in an entire lifetime, he reminds us. What makes you think you can get it all in a 90-minute movie?

There was a time when reading Didion made me feel like I had swallowed something that burned—that I could taste what it might be like to make someone sick with desire—and she retains that sense of being both divisive and adored; she will remain a powerful observer of our times and someone whose style people are quick to turn into metaphor. You could read every Joan Didion book ever released, study every sentence, look for her name in the margins of other biographies and in the bylines of archived clippings, in the credits rolling past on the screen, and still, you might know nothing.
Magical Realism

The stunning dismissal of the climate emergency and ecological breakdown in Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System That Rules the World, as Alyssa Battistoni points out in her excellent review of Branko Milanovic’s new book “[Diminishing Returns,” May 17/24], is typical of the economics profession, especially in the United States. Milanovic recently blogged that proponents of degrowth are engaged in “magical thinking” because they allegedly advocate measures that have no political chance. It may be so to propose policies that violate political realities, yet it is magical thinking an order of magnitude greater to propose policies that violate physical, chemical, and biological realities.

Alan Richards

Past as Prologue

Re “Free Dr. Seuss!” by Jeet Heer and “Clearing the Shelves” by Katha Pollitt [April 19/26]: Trying to see how and why earlier generations came to what we now consider unfortunate judgments is a valuable exercise. For one, it guides us toward the humble recognition that our current assured and confident views will in turn be replaced by today’s values out, obsessions with judging confident views will in turn be replaced by today’s values. Rather than swallowing the sins of the past with a wink and shrug, we might make better choices about the texts we teach. There is no excuse for fostering a questionable nostalgia for Dr. Seuss when there are so many talented authors of color writing nuanced, beautiful, and authentic stories from a wide variety of perspectives, opening windows onto new worlds or allowing students to be reflected in what they read.

Tina De La Fe
LANSING, MICH.

If we ban offending books, we erode the most important skill we can teach: reading critically. Adults should be commenting and questioning as they read to children, not just to point out the flaws in a particular book, but to teach them how to question and analyze what they read.

Susan Abraham

Correction


Comment drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

Letters
One hundred years ago, on May 31 and June 1, 1921, a mob of white people killed an estimated 300 Black residents of the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Okla., and torched the area. For years, the massacre was hardly taught in schools, but that is finally changing. A longer version of the comic by illustrator and artist Lynn Bernstein is available at thenation.com/tulsamassacre.

1. The Mob: On May 31, The Tulsa Tribune reported the arrest of a Black teenager for the “attempted assault” of a white girl, code for attempted rape. Within hours, thousands of outraged whites gathered at the courthouse, as did Blacks, who came to protect the accused teen. Men on both sides were armed.

A white man took it upon himself to disarm a Black man, and the gun went off. As one witness said, “All hell broke loose.”

2. The Invasion: At 5 PM on June 1, a white horde, including law enforcers, descended on Greenwood, Tulsa’s Black neighborhood. Airplanes dropped explosives on buildings. Men armed with rifles forced Black residents into internment centers and then looted their homes before burning them to the ground. When martial law was finally declared at 11:30 AM the next day, Greenwood had been obliterated. About 300 Black Tulsans were dead, and 10,000 were made homeless.

3. The Aftermath: The June 1921 grand jury report determined that the crowd of white Oklahomans at the courthouse were merely curious spectators who were “quiet until the arrival of armed negroes, which precipitated and was the direct cause of the affair.” Greenwood had been a mecca where Black laborers could find employment and Black professionals could prosper. It had modern homes and excellent schools. Its downtown rivaled any white downtown with its banks, restaurants, theaters, and shops. This rankled many whites, especially those less prosperous.

4. Epilogue: Eventually Greenwood was rebuilt, but it was never the same.

2001. An Oklahoma commission report acknowledged that government agents both contributed to the violence and failed to punish the perpetrators. It also found that Blacks had ample reason to believe the accused teen would have been lynched.

2007. Indictments against the alleged Black participants were dismissed.

2008. Tulsa’s mayor, Kathy Taylor, apologized to the remaining survivors.

2019. A state bill approved $1.5 million for the centennial of the massacre, less than the $1.8 million in damages filed in 1921 (about $27 million in today’s dollars).

2020. The US Senate failed to pass an anti-lynching bill. There are still no federal anti-lynching laws, despite 120 years of trying.

—Lynn Bernstein
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