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Texas is considering a drastic solution to the misery of its overcrowded roads.

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Camp Armageddon

The leaders of the Western world—meeting first as the G7 powers in Cornwall, England, on June 11-13 and then as the NATO members in Brussels on June 14—did not exactly initiate Cold War II. However, they did lay the necessary groundwork by describing a world divided along fundamental ideological lines.

On one side, they contend, are the democratic, stability-seeking nations that adhere to international norms and rules; on the other are aggressive, authoritarian states like China and Russia that seek to undermine the rules-based international order. While it might be possible to work across this divide on matters of common concern, such as climate change and nuclear nonproliferation, the West’s main task in the coming decades must be to enhance its capacity to defend itself against the other camp—and diminish the other side’s economic, political, and technological clout.

“We are committed to the rules-based international order,” the final communiqué from Brussels reads. But “Russia’s aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security...[while] China’s growing influence and international policies can present challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance.”

Not since the early days of the original Cold War have Western leaders been so explicit in their depiction of a world divided into two ideologically opposed camps. That earlier global fracturing resulted in extreme military tension and frequent crises, accompanied by recurring “proxy wars” in the developing world. Today senior officials appear determined to avoid such an environment—at least for the time being. Indeed, following his meeting with Vladimir Putin in Geneva on June 16, President Joe Biden told reporters that despite his condemnation of many Russian policies, he was prepared to work with Moscow in devising ways to avoid a military clash—especially one that might trigger the use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, by creating this dichotomy between “us” and “them,” the NATO leadership is providing the rationale for a wide range of military measures that will make such a clash ever more likely.

Ostensibly, the aim of all this summitry was to revitalize the Western alliance in the wake of all the damage wreaked by former president Donald Trump and to restore America’s status as the West’s leading champion. But what is this new chapter really about? The 79 points in the final communiqué make the intent clear: to recast NATO in the image of the US military, with its focus on “great power competition” and a renewed arms race with Russia and China. The vehicle for accomplishing this is the NATO 2030 agenda, a virtual facsimile of the Pentagon’s 2018 National Defense Strategy. Both call for the harnessing of advanced technologies to ensure combat superiority in every “domain” of warfare—land, air, sea, space, and cyber—and both focus on countering China’s geopolitical outreach in Asia and beyond.

For the US military, China represents the leading threat to the Western-dominated world order. But NATO was formed to counter the Soviet Union, and most of its European members view Russia as the principal threat to the alliance. Accordingly, much of the Brussels communiqué is taken up with measures to bolster NATO’s capabilities on its eastern flank, along Russia’s borders. Under pressure from Washington, however, the organization has, for the first time, also designated China as a potential threat requiring an alliance-wide response.

Unless challenged, this outlook will now govern NATO’s organizational structure and the various military forces—including those of the United States—assigned to it. In such an environment, the likelihood of a military clash becomes ever greater, whatever the intent of particular leaders at any given moment. As Bernie Sanders recently argued in Foreign Affairs, the current US drive to isolate China can only “deflect attention from the shared common interests the two countries have in combating truly existential threats.” A new Iron Curtain has not yet come down. But if the presumed logic of the G7 and NATO meetings prevails, it will become increasingly difficult to prevent such an outcome in the years ahead. Progressives must, therefore, reject the false contention that the world can be neatly divided between the upholders and destroyers of the “rules-based international order” and that we, the upholders, must be prepared to risk nuclear annihilation in its defense.
Q&A

Viet Thanh Nguyen

On April 21, the Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen sat for an extended Zoom chat with The Nation as part of the magazine’s biweekly Conversations series. Born in Vietnam and raised in the United States, where his family were resettled as refugees, Nguyen has become an essential literary voice—at once an eloquent champion of the displaced and a trenchant critic of empire.

His conversation with The Nation, titled “Challenging Colonialism in Literature,” has been lightly edited for length.

—Katrina vanden Heuvel

KVH: Could you talk about the importance of understanding the history of anti-Asian violence and anti-Asian racism in this country?

VTN: We have to remember that anti-Asian violence in this country has been systemic—it’s not just been directed at individuals. So we think about things like the incarceration of Japanese Americans—that was an act of anti-Asian violence. We think about the murder of six Sikh Americans in 2012 at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wis. There have been specific incidents of anti-Asian violence that have been seared in the Asian American memory—things like the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 in Detroit by two autoworkers who mistook a Chinese American for a Japanese person and were taking out their frustration and their rage at Japanese economic competition on this person.

In this era of Covid-19, part of the American imagination has been stimulated in the wrong way by people saying that Covid is the “China virus” and the “kung flu,” which reawakens this deep well of both anti-Asian feeling and xenophobia, and feelings that are very specifically directed at the Chinese. But, of course, people who are racist can’t really tell the difference between one Asian person and another, so all Asian Americans suffer as a result of this rising tide of anti-Chinese feeling as well.

KVH: You wrote something very interesting the other day: “Bipartisan political rhetoric about Asia leads to anti-Asian violence here.” Could you say a little more?

VTN: I think that the process of demonizing others overseas and other countries is completely tied to the demonization of people domestically—which is why, for example, a war that we’re engaged in overseas, or even things that we don’t call “wars” but just “conflicts,” inevitably rebound on people within this country that are assumed to appear like or look like those people that we’re targeting overseas. Which is why, after 9/11, people who looked Muslim, who looked brown, who looked like they were somehow associated with the Middle East themselves became targets of racist violence in the United States. When we talk about anti-Asian violence in general, I think one of the things that we have to acknowledge is that the greatest acts of anti-Asian violence that this country has committed have been through wars.

Even with a Democratic administration in place under Obama and now Biden, who are obviously at least verbally committed to anti-racism and multiculturalism, if we as a country still insist on saying...
One of the things we have to acknowledge is that the greatest acts of anti-Asian violence that this country has committed have been through wars.

along with 130,000 other Vietnamese people who were very lucky to make our way out of the country. I arrived in the United States at 4 years old at a refugee camp in Fort Indiantown Gap, Penn. This is where my memories begin.

What happened is that, in order to leave one of these refugee camps, [most Vietnamese people] had to have an American sponsor. No sponsor was willing to take my entire family, so my parents went to one sponsor, my 10-year-old brother went to another, and 4-year-old me went to a third. That’s where my memories begin, howling and screaming as I was taken away from my parents. It was being done for our own good, because my parents needed to have time to get on their own feet. But when you’re 4 years old, you don’t really understand that. So I felt that as abandonment.

It wasn’t totally negative. I mean, it gave me the necessary emotional damage that a writer requires, and I spent my life trying to normalize things. But what it really meant is that I, like many other refugees, simply tried to forget about the past, tried to get on with our lives, and I see all over the emotional damage and trauma that resulted from that experience. Which is why I know—because I was only away from my parents for a few months, even though it felt like years to a 4-year-old—that when we have people coming in at our southern border, families are being divided much more traumatically, and children are being lost, and separations are going on for many, many months and years, that these children and their parents are going to be forever scarred by this experience.

VTN: You were a student of the great Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston.

What we’re saying is not only that we, as writers, need to uncover this history and these emotions, but the country as a whole needs to do the same.
Blaxhaustion

After saving Biden’s campaign from defeat, and with it the country, Black voters hoped for just a little support.

Black people delivered the presidency to Joe Biden. His campaign was an embarrassing structure fire until Black voters in South Carolina showed up to save it. They understood—correctly, it turns out, and over the objection of many younger Black pundits like me—that this is a deeply racist country and that a majority of white people would vote for a Republican, as a majority of them have in every presidential election since Nixon honed the Southern strategy. They saw Biden as the candidate best situated to appeal to the minority of white voters who could abide Donald Trump’s bigotry but couldn’t stand his incompetence. And, with a major assist from Kamala Harris to shore up the underrepresented communities who were sick of racism and patriarchy, Biden was able to defeat Trump.

On the surface, Black Americans have gotten what we wanted out of Biden: Namely, he won. Trump is no longer president. The openly white supremacist policies of Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, Jeff Sessions and Bill Barr, no longer emanate from the executive branch. Black people have saved America from itself—again.

Biden promised to remember who put him in power, and when it comes to how his administration looks, he more or less has. But when it comes to what his administration does, the results so far have been predictably underwhelming. The white, right, and mainstream media love to tag Biden as some kind of secret socialist, quietly pushing an anti-cop agenda at the behest of Black Lives Matter and conducting critical race séances in the White House basement. But this administration is not radical, not anti-racist, and not moving nearly fast enough to advance actual policies that will secure the fundamental rights of the people who put it in charge.

Not all of that is Biden’s fault. The For the People Act, which would nullify many state laws aimed at suppressing the Black vote, and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act are stalled in the Senate because a few Democrats lack the courage to do what’s necessary to bring them to Biden’s desk. So too is the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, a bare minimum attempt to ban some forms of police brutality.

But some of this is Biden’s fault. While a Democratic-controlled Congress refuses to pass legislation, Biden could affect policing at the federal level—today, if he wanted. He could ban excessive-force tactics, like choke holds, from federal law enforcement. He could recall military equipment that has been gifted to local forces. He could stop agencies like the FBI and the ATF from seeking or executing no-knock warrants. He could do something about ICE: abolish it, disarm it, retrain it, punish it for human rights violations—literally any “reform” would be better than what we have now. Biden has released a comprehensive plan to deal with domestic terrorism but nothing to deal with state-sponsored terrorism carried out by American police.

When it comes to securing voting rights, Biden should be using his power aggressively. He should be expanding the courts, flooding them with judges who respect the 15th Amendment and its promise of equal franchise. He should throw out the census taken by the previous administration, which undercounted communities of color in an effort to further vitiate their political power, and conduct a new count. (This would not be the first time a census was effectively tossed.) Every shred of executive power should be marshaled toward securing the next election against Republican attempts to disenfranchise voters of color. Lawyer Marc Elias has lawsuits going in 14 states trying to disrupt these attacks on voting rights, and Biden’s Justice Department should join all of them.

Instead, Biden has adopted a cautious, moderate approach that relies on herding senators like cats. The New York Times reports that over three people have died at the hands of law enforcement every single day since March 29. More than half of those are Black or Latinx. Unless the Covid vaccine makes me bulletproof, I’m going to need more from the Biden administration than efficient distribution of medicine.

Biden defenders plead for more time, but I don’t think any of us expected him to solve all of these problems in six months. Instead, we merely hoped that he and his team would be “on top of it,” that they’d prioritize bringing relief to Black Americans from the constant attacks on our rights, freedoms, and dignity.

Unfortunately, while the Biden administration is slouching toward justice, Republicans have responded to their loss of power at the federal level by doubling down at the state level. GOP governors have passed the most dizzying array of voter restrictions since the end of Reconstruction. They have launched a frontal attack on education, effectively arguing against the inclusion of Black history in the narrative of the
country we built without compensation. Our representatives of color are threatened and harassed in the Capitol by white Republican congresspeople. Black people are under attack.

About a year from now, Biden and the Democrats will be back in Black and brown communities, begging for votes. They'll tout the vaccine and the stimulus bill, which certainly helped people of color along with everybody else. But they'll have no record of achievements that specifically protected Black and brown people from the unremitting attacks we face from white-wing lawmakers, police, and judges.

It’s all so tiring. Black people are required to invest sweat, tears, and often blood merely to participate in this democracy, and when we do—when we literally save this country from a deranged cult of know-nothing authoritarians—the reward is watching our most desperate concerns get shunted to the side so white people can feel normal again.

I do think Biden cares about the concerns of the Black voters who put him in office. I just think that Republicans care about the concerns of the white supremacists who keep them in office more. Trying to get Democrats to bridge that gap is exhausting.

OES THE WORLD NEED MORE PEOPLE? NOT IF YOU ASK the glaciers, the rain forests, the air, or the more than 37,400 species on the verge of extinction thanks to the relentless expansion of human beings into every corner and cranny of our overheated planet.

There are now 7.9 billion of us, and growing—50 years ago there were fewer than half as many. I’d say we’ve more than fulfilled the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply.

In spite of all the signs indicating that slowing population growth would be a good idea, the world’s most populous country is aiming for the opposite. In May, the Chinese government relaxed its two-child quota; now couples can have three. China’s population is getting old: The median age has risen from 24.9 in 1990 to 38.4 today. Who will care for the old folks? Who will pay into the social welfare system to support retirees? It doesn’t help that the one-child policy, in operation from 1980 to 2016, encouraged the killing and abandonment of girl babies and the forced abortion of female fetuses, leading to a huge surplus of men, many of whom will never find women with whom to raise a family. The most recent statistics are not encouraging: In 2018, among youngsters 10 to 19 years old, there were about 120 boys per 100 girls. China is not alone. India’s statistics are similar, and a growing gender imbalance due to sex-selective abortion and other factors exists in many other countries, from Armenia to Vietnam.

Still, an extreme preference for sons combined with a preference for small families is only one reason the birth rate has fallen in the past few decades all over the world, except in sub-Saharan Africa. The improved status of women is also crucial. For most of recorded history, after all, most women were kept uneducated, married off as teenagers, and allowed no rights and few choices. They were little more than breeding stock and cheap labor for their husbands’ families. Their only hope for social power and respectability lay in producing legitimate children, preferably male, who lived to adulthood. This was called “nature’s way.”

Modern birth control allows women to have fewer children, which women almost everywhere prefer, while modern medicine and sanitation mean more people live into old age. In theory, women could nevertheless decide to have three, four, or more kids. Conservatives, and some leftists too, maintain that this is their true desire—or would be, were they not so selfish. On the right, patriarchal self-help guru Jordan Peterson claims feminism deludes women into careerism instead of motherhood, citing the Virgin Mary as a model for all; on the left, Jacobin’s Connor Kilpatrick hymns the praises of East Germany and argues that women’s desire for children is...
**Good News for Americans, Bad News for Big Pharma.**

Millions are expected to benefit from a new technology that’s proven to relieve severe joint discomfort in a matter of days.

**US-** Several pharmaceutical companies could lose millions in revenue as consumers move to a new alternative for joint discomfort.

The alternative, an oral supplement, was recently developed by a Seattle-based company.

They become one of the first to use a brand new technology that’s back by over 8-million dollars in research grants.

The technology is a major advance in health.

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thwarted by liberalism, handmaid of capitalism. But everything in modern urban life works against big families; even Mormons have smaller families nowadays. Not only do modern economies, higher education, and urban living enable women’s independence, giving them all kinds of ideas, but modern economies also require a large class of educated people. The days of producing children to be your farmhands are over, but raising an educated child is expensive and time-intensive. Modern economies also depend on consumption, which just about everyone (officially) frowns upon but ultimately means encouraging people to enjoy life, expect material comfort, cultivate interests, and seek new experiences.

The New York Times’ Ross Douthat thinks people should have one more child than they think they want, even if it would make their lives more difficult and painful. But he’s a devout Catholic; for him, suffering and self-denial are virtues. I don’t think there’s much chance of that catching on: The logistics are just too difficult. Moreover, many modern economies do a poor job of producing the kinds of material and social goods that would make having more than one or two kids feasible: decent affordable housing, excellent day care and schools, flexible schedules for parents, quality health care, and so on. But even societies with generous social provisions have not managed to produce bumper crops of babies. Sweden’s fertility rate is 1.85 children per woman, barely higher than that of the United States at 1.78. Government can only do so much. Within the traditional nuclear family, the work of domesticity and parenthood is still placed squarely on women’s shoulders; as Covid showed us, when push comes to shove, she’s the one making the sacrifices.

Isn’t it funny how population issues always come down to women? First they had too many children; now they are having too few. If only men—Catholic priests, for example—could have babies, I’m sure they’d do a much better job of it. Not only are women not having enough kids, the women who population boosters think should be doing it most are having the fewest. In the West, the comparatively low birth rate of white educated middle-class women was already of concern to Teddy Roosevelt at the turn of the century. The perceived need for population growth comes up against not only the lives of modern women but also xenophobia and racism. It may just be that countries will have to open their arms to the rest of the world whether they like it or not. Japan, historically unwelcoming to foreigners, has a median age of 48. Maybe instead of forcibly sterilizing Uighur women, China should be rewarding them and welcoming their babies.

Maybe the problem is less that there are too few kids than that there are more kids than adults can take care of, some in war zones and refugee camps and slums. Millions of poor children are essentially thrown away, along with their mothers, by their societies—illiterate or barely literate, with zero prospects, suffering from all kinds of illness and trauma, and doomed to the lowest kind of work, if any. Imagine if they were seen as demographic treasures to be nurtured and cherished, and raised to live happy, useful lives.

The world population is still rising, but demographic decline probably can’t be reversed. In some ways, that’s sad—children bring joy and hope and purpose to life. Young people bring new ideas and energy. But from the point of view of the planet, it’s a good thing. And probably from the point of view of women and children, too.
Decline and Fall
How Dianne Morales’s once-promising campaign for New York City mayor became a cautionary tale.

For a moment, Dianne Morales seemed like the left’s best shot at stopping the more moderate frontrunners in New York City’s Democratic mayoral primary race, businessman Andrew Yang and ex-cop Eric Adams. Though she was always a long shot, consistently polling in the single digits, Morales began gaining traction among the city’s fragmented left after allegations of sexual harassment and abuse upended the campaign of city Comptroller Scott Stringer, who had hoped to consolidate progressive support. Morales, a former nonprofit executive, positioned herself as the most left-wing candidate in the crowded field and started bringing in impressive fundraising hauls, qualifying for millions of dollars in matching funds for the first time in March.

But less than four weeks before Election Day, the Morales campaign collapsed, and did so in an excruciatingly public way. On May 28, about 40 members of her staff gathered in Manhattan’s Bryant Park to protest working conditions at the office of the candidate they’d spent months campaigning for, carrying signs that read “Union Busting Is Disgusting” and “WTF Dianne?!?” The organization, staffers said, was rife with sexual harassment and mistreatment, and fostered a “toxic environment” for young Black and brown workers. So they walked off the job, called a strike, and rallied in a park before marching to campaign headquarters to outline their demands.

By that time, Morales’s campaign was facing a leadership vacuum. Earlier that week, two high-level staffers were fired after being accused of harassment and toxic workplace behavior. Another senior staffer submitted a letter of resignation saying the campaign “no longer aligned” with her values. Then Morales fired four staffers who were involved in a last-minute unionization effort. Employees saw that as an act of retaliation—and the final straw. By the end of the day, individual aides had begun calling on their candidate to end her mayoral bid.

Farudh Emiel Majid, the senior Queens borough organizer for the campaign, released a statement asking Morales to step down, saying she had created “a hostile work environment towards Black and Brown staffs.” More than four dozen staffers, through a Twitter account called Mayorales Union, shared statements declaring demands, letters detailing negotiations with the candidate, and even a custom purple and orange gradient background that followers could use to make their own pro-union, anti-Morales profile picture.

As the drama unfolded, Morales struggled to explain why she fired the four union leaders and why her team had abandoned her. “It’s a beautiful and messy thing,” she told Spectrum News NY1. In a phone interview with The Nation, Morales said that staff were unwilling to negotiate and that she had found a way to pay those who were involved in the work stoppage, even through the end of their contracts. “I don’t know how much more pro-worker you can be than that,” she said.

Her supporters didn’t see it that way, and many quickly jumped ship. Groups like the New York Progressive Action Network and the Jewish Vote rescinded their endorsements and urged voters to rank Maya Wiley, a civil rights attorney who had served as counsel to Mayor Bill de Blasio, in the No. 1 spot instead. The Working Families Party, a major progressive force in the state, shuffled its endorsements for the second time in the race, ending its support for Morales and ranking Wiley first, weeks after the Stringer allegations had led the party to co-endorse the two women. A number of notable progressives, including New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also switched to Wiley, despite being ideologically closer to Morales. At least one top Morales aide went to work for a rival campaign. Then, three days before early voting began, Morales fired more than 40 staffers, roughly half of her team.

The work stoppage was unprecedented for a major political campaign. Of course, none of the tensions or labor disputes that led to the strike were unique. Campaign work is often grueling, and workers in the political sphere are increasingly turning to collective bargaining. But the turmoil is usually contained out of belief in a greater good. In 2020, Bernie Sanders’s staff came within minutes of blowing up his presidential campaign in Iowa with a work stoppage just weeks before the caucuses, as Ryan Grim recently revealed on The Hill’s Rising. They were already in a union, formed early on in the campaign, so there was a system in place to address their concerns. After some back and forth, and counter-organizing from a less-junior faction, the campaign narrowly averted a crisis—and kept it contained.

A progressive campaign eating itself alive, with its staffers and candidate publicly turning on each other during the final stretch of the race, poses uncomfortable questions for the left. The organizing and activist culture of the young staffers conflicted with the professional world of a campaign. It didn’t help that a unionization fight starting weeks before Election Day was bound to be a frenzied process; it was even worse that Morales took an adversarial stance. Her left-wing bona fides had already started to look dubious. An old interview in which she had refused to identify as progressive resurfaced, leading her supporters, and some staffers, to take another look at her background. After
Morales skipped an “accountability meeting” to discuss harassment issues in the campaign, staff had had enough.

When I asked Morales whether staffers revolted because they ultimately did not believe in her candidacy or that her politics were genuine, she replied, “I am running on a record of decades of successful experience as a manager, as an executive, as someone who has been effective at bringing about change for communities.” From her perspective, staffers who saw her as a progressive hope were mistaken; she claimed to have rejected the label from the beginning. “I am who I am, and my record speaks for itself,” she said.

Morales denied that she was anything less than fully supportive of the unionization effort, saying she comes from a union family and “organizing is in my blood.” According to the union, she voluntarily recognized it. But her refusal to meet the union’s demands, which included the reinstatement of the four union leaders and severance packages worth two weeks’ pay for those who exited “voluntarily or involuntarily,” left the campaign at an impasse.

“As a landlord and charter school founder, she wielded the jargon of the intersectional left to garner grassroots support.”

“After our meeting and your voluntary recognition of our union on Tuesday, we sincerely believed that despite the numerous missteps on your part up till that point—missteps and delays that enabled weeks of continued abuse of Black and brown organizers, queer folks, women and literal children, and led to the resignation of your two most senior campaign staff—that despite all of it, we could somehow emerge from it stronger and more aligned in our purpose,” the staffers wrote in a letter. “Your escalation prevented that from happening.”

Several young women on the campaign came forward internally with allegations of sexual harassment on the job, including inappropriate touching, sexual remarks, and unwanted advances, according to staff. These allegations, along with complaints of racial insensitivity, were outlined in an internal letter to Morales in May.

Other aspects of the labor dispute were more complicated than either side’s portrayal. Morales told the union that their demands included “things that either violate state and local laws, and/or create a risk of fiscal liability for the campaign.” A former campaign treasurer who has worked on other New York City campaigns told City & State that this appears to be true. The city’s public campaign financing program imposes restrictions on how candidates can use the money, so the demand that Morales use funds for “community grocery giveaways” was probably off the table. The city’s campaign finance handbook doesn’t rule out paying staff in accordance with existing contracts or agreements made about postelection work. But the Morales campaign said that continuing to pay staff with public funds who are no longer doing work for the campaign would risk liability. “The campaign finance board approved a very limited time for sort of this limbo status, and the clock ran out, unfortunately,” Morales said.

As for the union vote itself, staffers I spoke with, under conditions of anonymity due to nondisclosure agreements, conceded that the decision was reached in haste. They supported the push for workplace protections but realized, in retrospect, that they should have maintained a certain level of organization. “There were some people who seemed to be more interested in getting Twitter activity and their branding as radical activists, and that kind of contributed to the sense of ‘We’re going to burn everything down,’ ” one staffer said.

Morales had the most ambitious platform in the race, as the 54-year-old political newcomer was the only candidate to embrace defunding the police department. She campaigned on a municipal green jobs plan, a citywide rent moratorium, a wealth tax, and a pledge to close the Rikers Island jail complex without opening any new ones. Her platform contrasted with candidates like Adams, a 22-year veteran of the NYPD who supports stop-and-frisk, and Yang, a corporate-minded politician with plans to drastically increase police presence in the city. As the first and only Afro-Latina to run for New York City mayor, Morales also checked the boxes as the exciting kind of insurgent from a diverse background that the city’s rising left has favored. There were, however, some glaring signs of what was to come.

It turned out that Morales had virtually no presence in activist circles before running for mayor and was not involved in many of the left’s biggest fights in New York politics, like the effort to break up the Republican-allied Independent Democratic Conference (IDC) in the state legislature or to elect democratic socialists to office. She had spent most of her career in the nonprofit sphere, including at an organization that carries out mass evictions.

It wasn’t really a secret. In the same interview in which she had refused to identify as a progressive, Morales pointed to her strong support of charter schools and admitted that she thinks she voted for Governor Andrew Cuomo over Cynthia Nixon in 2018 but couldn’t remember for sure. (Even Yang voted for Nixon in the Democratic primary.) Local outlets and journalists like Ross Barkan reported on some of the emerging questions about Morales’s leftist credentials, including her involvement in a bribery scheme and how, as a landlord and a charter school founder, she wielded the jargon of the intersectional left to garner grassroots support.

“As a landlord and charter school founder, she wielded the jargon of the intersectional left to garner grassroots support.”

“A big lesson here is, I was sort of swept up in the zealotry and the idea of a person like Dianne, so much that I had ignored all the other red flags,” one Morales staffer told me. “So I think if anybody does want to run as a true progressive or true leftist or true socialist, whatever you want it to be, they have to be vetted. People need to do their homework next time, and I think I’m one of those people. If you don’t want a catastrophe like this again, you’re just going to have to make sure it’s the right person, period.”
Riot police in Berlin move in formation on June 17, the day a fire inspector was scheduled to carry out an assessment of the Rigaer 94 building. Leftist squatters have occupied the apartments since 1990 and have sought to prevent an official safety inspection, which they claim is a step toward their eventual eviction. Rigaer 94 is one of the last remaining squats in Berlin.

**By the Numbers**
- 63% People in Japan who oppose hosting the Olympic Games in Tokyo this summer
- 83% People in Japan who worry that Olympic athletes and staff from abroad could spread Covid-19
- 11,091 Athletes expected to compete in the Olympics
- 72% People in Japan unhappy with the government’s response to the pandemic
- -32 Net approval rating of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga
- $15.4B Budget for this year’s Olympics and Paralympics, though the actual cost could reach nearly $25 billion
- 102.4°F Predicted high temperature in Tokyo during the Olympics

**January 6 Reckoning**
The veep who’d been slavishly loyal, Mike Pence, accomplished his duty despite the mob, hence he’s now called a traitor; the hatred’s intense. In cults deviation’s the final offense.

**Deadline Poet**

**Omer Messinger**

**SNAPSHOT**

**A Berlin Holdout**
Texas plans to spend $25 billion widening highways to relieve congestion. But a movement to tear them down instead is growing in influence—even in the Lone Star State.
ON JANUARY 19, 2018, SHORTLY BEFORE 10 AM, ROBIN LAFLEUR exited Texas Highway 290 at First Street, as she did every morning on her way to work at Austin Habitat for Humanity. It was a cold, cloudy morning, but Lafleur was in a good mood. She finally felt settled in her new home, which she’d bought less than a year before in Cedar Park, a suburb northwest of Austin. It was a Friday, and she had happy-hour plans with friends after work, so she was wearing one of her favorite outfits—maroon jeggings and a new mauve sweater with matching boots.

She doesn’t remember much about what happened next. As Lafleur merged onto the frontage road, a car stopped abruptly in front of her. She slammed into it. When she woke up, she was in a hospital gown at St. David’s South Austin Medical Center; the nurses had cut her clothes off her body to take a CT scan. The concussion she’d suffered kept her out of work for more than three months. “I was told that to heal, I needed to sit in a quiet room and let the time go by,” she says. “It was horrific, because the days went by so slowly.”

Before she moved, Lafleur had been renting an apartment less than 10 minutes from her office, but she wanted to own a home in the city she’d grown up in. She soon realized that her nonprofit salary wouldn’t get her very far. If you can’t afford to buy in Austin, Lafleur says, “you’re left up a creek without a paddle. Or you use that paddle and you travel to Cedar Park.”

As the price of housing in Austin has skyrocketed, low- and middle-income people like Lafleur have left the city in droves, seeking cheaper homes in the suburbs strung along Interstate 35—all of which have doubled or tripled in population since 2000. After she closed on her house, Lafleur joined the thousands of people who crowd I-35 every day, spending 90 minutes in traffic to travel just 25 miles. “At this point, driving on 35, which I still do every day—it’s a very, very stressful and anxiety-causing event,” she says.

The Texas Department of Transportation wants to fix Lafleur’s commute. In early 2020, after nearly three decades of planning, discussion, and community input, the Texas Transportation Commission—whose five members govern TxDOT—voted to allocate $7.5 billion to the I-35 Capital Express Project, which includes plans to expand an eight-mile segment through central Austin.

That stretch of highway is the most congested in the state and the most dangerous roadway in the city—one in four traffic fatalities in Austin occurs on I-35 or its frontage roads. The goal of the expansion, says Susan Fraser, the program manager for the project, is to make the highway safer and more efficient for the more than 200,000 vehicles that use it every day. TxDOT plans to do that by adding lanes that are restricted to vehicles carrying two or more people.

“I know there’s the mindset that if you build it, they will come,” says Diann Hodges, a spokesperson for TxDOT’s Austin district. “Well, they have come. Anybody who lives or drives in Austin knows the congestion that we’re dealing with. So we’ve got to make improvements to the road that is there, to make it accessible to everyone.”

Texas’s population is projected to nearly double by 2050. Most of that growth will happen in urban areas like Austin, which has been the fastest-growing major metropolitan region in the country over the past decade. Texas leaders have decided that to accommodate that growth, the state needs “to get new roads built swiftly and effectively,” as Governor Greg Abbott promised to do. Even though it is much more efficient, sustainable, and safe to move people through crowded cities by other modes—like buses and trains—TxDOT spends essentially all of its funding on enabling seamless car travel. Since 2015, the state has committed more than $25 billion to “congestion relief” projects, with plans to expand freeways in Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth, and El Paso.

This is how transportation departments across the country have functioned for decades: building ever bigger freeways to fix congestion, despite the reams of evidence that it doesn’t work. Between 1993 and 2017, the 100 largest urbanized areas in the United States spent more than $500 billion on adding new freeways and expanding existing ones. Yet in those same areas, congestion increased by 14 percent, significantly outpacing population growth. “I think traffic engineers tend to think traffic is like a liquid: If the pipes aren’t big enough, then it gets plugged up and overflows,” says Robert Goodspeed, a professor of urban planning at the University of Michigan. For the engineers, “the solution is building bigger pipes. But all of the evidence says that that’s not true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic overflow is true, that instead [traffic] is much more like a gas, meaning the volume of traffic
congestion will expand to take up the capacity allowed.”

But if traffic can expand, it can also contract. Advocates in Texas are at the epicenter of a national movement asking: What if, instead of building our aging roads back wider and higher—doubling down on the displacement that began in the 1950s and the climate consequences unfolding now—we removed those highways altogether? What if we restored the scarred, paved-over land they inhabit and gave it back to the communities it was taken from?

**“Traffic is more like a gas than a liquid—the volume of congestion will expand to take up the capacity allowed.”**

—Robert Goodspeed

### On a Warm, Breezy Day in April, State Representative Armando Walle appeared before the Texas House Transportation Committee to introduce HJR 109, a measure that would put to a public vote whether to allow state highway funds to be spent on things other than roadways, including sidewalks, bike lanes, and public transportation. Dozens of Texans testified in support of the bill. About an hour into the hearing, Jack Finger, a member of the advocacy group Texans for Toll-Free Highways, testified against the measure. “Do not take my gas tax dollars for the bus, nor for bike paths, nor for sidewalks,” he said. “The local municipalities can pay for their own. To me it smacks at a socialistic attempt to get me out of my vehicle.” HJR 109 was left pending in committee.

The idea that public transit is for socialists and that highways enable free-market capitalism pervades Texas politics. According to Farm&City, a nonprofit that advocates for sustainable development across the state, Texas is one of only a few states in the country without dedicated funding for public transportation in major metropolitan areas. Over the past two decades, surveys have found that people who live in these urban areas—as 85 percent of Texans do—consistently prefer the state invest in public transit rather than bigger highways. Even the outgoing head of TxDOT, James Bass, said earlier this year that he’d like to see more funding for public transit: “With the projected population and growth in the state of Texas, I think as we move forward in time, we’ll need to consider investment in additional modes.”

But the Legislature has refused. State law requires around 97 percent of TxDOT’s roughly $15 billion annual budget to be spent on roadways. For decades, Texas Republicans have contended that highways are the engine that powers the state’s economy. “Everything we’re doing for transportation infrastructure feeds into keeping Texas number one in the nation for economic development,” Abbott said in January.

That’s also the argument advanced by the Associated General Contractors of Texas, which represents 85 percent of the state’s highway contractors. Between January 2013 and December 2020, AGC contributed more than $2.5 million to Texas officeholders, most of that to powerful Republicans, and another $2.2 million to Texas Infrastructure Now, a pro-roadbuilding political action committee, according to Texans for Public Justice. In that span of time, the group donated $375,200 to Texans for Greg Abbott; $334,950 to Texans for Dan Patrick, the current lieutenant governor; and $303,100 to state Senator Robert Nichols, the chair of the Senate Transportation Committee. State Representative Terry Canales, the Democratic chair of the House Transportation Committee, received just $4,000.

“As TxDOT considers how to rebuild I-35 through central Austin, we wonder: Why don’t they consider other modes?” says Bo McCarver, a community activist in East Austin who worked for the department from 1980 to 1999. “Well, AGC is not going to let you. The Legislature’s not going to let you.” AGC did not respond to multiple requests to comment for this story.

“TxDOT and AGC have formed a symbiotic relationship over the years,” writes Gary Scharrer, a journalist turned AGC spokesperson, in his 2020 book, *Connecting Texas: True Tales of the People Who Built Our Highways and Bridges*. Doug Pitcock, the founder and CEO of William Brothers Construction, the company responsible for expanding Houston’s Katy Freeway to 26 lanes, told Scharrer that mass transit “is not a solution for solving the congestion problem on the highways.... In my opinion, you will never do away with cars.” Pitcock has donated nearly $5 million to officeholders since 2013, according to the Texas Ethics Commission, with most of that going to Republican candidates and PACs.

The assertion that a Texan will always require a car is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In 1967, DeWitt Greer, the head of the Texas Highway Department (as TxDOT was known until 1975) said upon his retirement that mass transit was not the answer for Texas: “It would take a generation to break Texans of the comfortable and convenient habit of riding in the automobile. If we are to please the taxpayers, then we must develop more adequate thoroughfares in the urban areas.”

Two generations later, the costs of that habit have come due. Even as cars have become more fuel-efficient and electric vehicles have trickled into the market, greenhouse gas emissions from passenger vehicles have continued to climb. In Austin, the average driver emitted 12 percent more greenhouse gases in 2019 than in 1990, according to a *New York Times* analysis. In the Dallas–Fort Worth area, the average driver emitted 27 percent more. “Suburban driving, including commuting, has been a major contributor to the expanding carbon footprint of urban areas,” the project’s lead researcher concluded.

In 2018, the last time TxDOT did an analysis of the greenhouse gases generated on its roads, it found that Texas, which has 0.38 percent of the world’s population, accounted for...
Would you believe this was once a cow pasture? Under a program of civic improvement, it was changed into East Avenue, a pleasure to the eye and a major north-south thoroughfare.

— Austin Chamber of Commerce promotional film, 1943

“Would you believe this was once a cow pasture? Under a program of civic improvement, it was changed into East Avenue, a pleasure to the eye and a major north-south thoroughfare.”

— Austin Chamber of Commerce promotional film, 1943

0.48 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions. TxDOT insists that fixing congestion will help reduce emissions, arguing that cars run more efficiently at higher speeds, though research shows that emissions are more closely tied to distance traveled. Meanwhile, taking public transit can reduce average greenhouse gas emissions per mile by half—and cut your chances of dying or being seriously injured in a car crash by 90 percent.

In Round Rock, 20 miles from Lafleur’s home, a limestone brick wall edges a rolling green golf course just west of Texas Highway 130. Behind the wall, two-story homes sprout along streets with names like Asher Blue Drive and Lady Swiss Lane. Polyethylene wrapping flaps in the wind as workers install roof shingles and hammer in siding. Some homes have cars parked in the driveways and plants spilling out of terra-cotta pots; others are still plywood skeletons.

In 2015, this area in Round Rock—traffic analysis zone (TAZ) 1797—had a population of 6,879, according to the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization. But by 2045, CAMPO predicts, the population will have more than quadrupled.

This projection doesn’t match the on-the-ground reality, says Cole Kitten, a planner in the City of Austin’s Transportation Department, because population growth is not linear. Some TAZs have experienced rapid growth over the past decade, as subdivisions were built on vacant land and people moved into new homes—but once those areas are built out, that growth should effectively get shut off. In March 2020, Kitten wrote an e-mail to Ann Kitchen, a member of Austin’s city council and the vice chair of CAMPO’s transportation policy board, to express his concerns.

“This is not how demographic forecasting is done, anywhere,” he insisted.

Most urban areas are required under federal law to create regional planning organizations that study and predict future travel demand based on population growth. These plans become the basis for how TxDOT prioritizes projects and allocates funding across Texas. “We do build to projections. So we look forward to say, ‘OK, what do we anticipate the traffic will be in so many years?’” says Hodges, the TxDOT spokesperson. “We are trying to accommodate what is going to be there.”

But the act of predicting can itself shape the future. “A lot of people want to avoid the conversation of what is desirable, and they just say, ‘Well, the number says this, and so we’ve got to accommodate it,’” says the University of Michigan’s Goodspeed. He calls this “colonizing the future”: If you plan for a future of car-centric sprawl, that’s what you’ll get. If you don’t build bus lanes or light rail stations, people won’t take public transit. If you don’t build enough housing to enable people like Lafleur to buy homes near their jobs, those people will climb into their cars and drive until they can afford one.

In 2019, a consulting firm hired by TxDOT for a different project looked at CAMPO’s projections and registered concerns similar to Kitten’s, concluding that the growth rates were “outside the range used in most studies.” If that population growth doesn’t materialize, the firm wrote, “the roadway configuration could be overdesigned at a higher monetary cost, with more disruption to the local community, and potentially include a greater environmental impact.”

Those concerns went unaddressed. CAMPO formally adopted its 2045 plan in May of last year, projecting significant population growth in Williamson County, which includes Round Rock and Cedar Park. Kitten worries that the same flawed growth models will be used to plan the I-35 corridor. If TxDOT engineers use CAMPO’s forecasts, as they’ve said they will, they might conclude that a much wider highway in Austin is required to accommodate the booming population growth projected in Williamson County—even if the only way to make that growth materialize is by building a bigger highway.
A

Dam Greenfield powers up a blue decibel meter the size of a cell phone. A longtime activist and the founder of a grassroots campaign called Rethink 35, Greenfield stands on a hill overlooking the interstate, where East Ninth Street ends at a guardrail, beyond which a grassy slope descends sharply down to the freeway. It’s a brisk January morning, and Austin’s downtown glistens in a spread of glass and steel, a dozen cranes perched above. Traffic roars below, and the screen flickers as the foam-covered microphone registers a reading: 82. Anything over 85 decibels can cause permanent hearing damage, Greenfield says—one of many ways the freeway harms people who live nearby.

Interstate 35 was once East Avenue, a four-lane boulevard split by a wide, grassy median and dotted with impeccably manicured bushes and trees. Families picnicked in the shade between the north- and southbound lanes. In 1943, the Austin Chamber of Commerce released a film welcoming newcomers to what it called “the Friendly City.” Among the scenes of Austin’s treasures—Congress Avenue, the University of Texas, the 340-acre Zilker Park—the film included a shot of East Avenue. “Would you believe this was once a cow pasture?” the narrator intones with a Texas twang. “Under a program of civic improvement, it was changed into East Avenue, a pleasure to the eye and a major north-south thoroughfare.”

In 1928, the city’s first comprehensive plan created a six-square-mile “Negro District” on the east side of town, effectively prohibiting Black people from living west of East Avenue. Starting in the 1950s, the construction of I-35 consumed the boulevard, demolishing hundreds of homes and businesses and erecting a physical barrier between neighborhoods of color and the heart of the city. There is essentially no urban freeway in the United States that didn’t unleash similar violence on Black and Hispanic people so that white people could get home faster. Even before the Federal-Aid Highway Act passed in 1956, highway builders and car manufacturers promised not only to revitalize downtowns by connecting suburban commuters to city centers but also to “displace outmoded business sections and undesirable slum areas,” according to a General Motors promotional film made in 1939. Eric Avila, an urban planning professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, says that between 1956 and 1966, highway construction consumed 37,000 units of housing in cities across the country annually, displacing many thousands of people.

Greenfield wants TxDOT to tear down I-35 through central Austin and replace it with a modernized version of East Avenue: a boulevard with space for cars but also bike paths and bus lanes and wide sidewalks, lined with apartments and offices and restaurants, with trees shading courtyard cafes. His proposal is a more radical version of a campaign called Reconnect Austin, which

“The city could reclaim nearly 74 acres of land, where it could build thousands of units of affordable housing near jobs.”

—Heyden Black Walker
Corridor of change: Instead of cutting the city in half, the new boulevard could knit Austin’s neighborhoods together.

When you’re in a car, I-345 is a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it freeway. It’s a quick swoosh through downtown Dallas, connecting I-45 with US Highway 75. You don’t even see a sign for I-345 until you’re on it. By that time, you’re halfway through its 1.4-mile stretch, suspended 25 feet in the air by concrete. A billboard welcomes you to the historic neighborhood of Deep Ellum as you speed past. Traveling at 70 miles per hour, you experience I-345 for under a minute.

Down on the ground, however, the experience of the freeway is generational. Deep Ellum was originally settled by former slaves after the Civil War and became the cultural heart of Black Dallas. Businesses like La Conga Cafe and the Gypsy Tea Room formed the backbone of a thriving Black community. Dozens of theaters and clubs along Elm Street would launch the careers of jazz and blues musicians in the 1920s and ’30s. As European immigrants settled in the neighborhood and opened grocery stores and pawnshops, Deep Ellum became one of the city’s few integrated communities. But starting in the 1950s, urban renewal came for Deep Ellum. By 1973, the elevated highway had cut the neighborhood in half and consumed 54 city blocks, including the historic Harlem Theater.
in the heart of the community. By the late 1970s, most businesses had shuttered, and the neighborhood slowly emptied out.

In 2002, when Patrick Kennedy moved to Dallas fresh with a degree in landscape architecture from Pennsylvania State University, he rented a place in Deep Ellum and walked to work. He wanted to live near his new job downtown, so every day he’d walk along cracked sidewalks, past public storage facilities, boarded-up buildings, and parking lots, the black asphalt radiating heat in the summer. He’d pass under I-345, the canopy casting a long shadow blocks beyond its physical reach. And he’d wonder: Couldn’t this be something better?

Almost a decade later, the City of Dallas published a master plan for downtown that concluded the inner freeway loop was “a significant barrier to surrounding neighborhoods,” but that fixing it would be a “long-term and expensive proposition.” TxDOT had announced plans to rebuild every highway that encircled downtown except I-345. Kennedy and a friend studied the traffic flows on the eastern edge of the city and saw that, while the highway was often congested during peak hours, the city streets that surrounded it remained empty. The highway had scrambled the grid, disrupting the north-south flow of streets, which were built to carry much more traffic than they did.

“So we said, ‘OK, hypothetically, what if we just remove the thing?’” Kennedy recalls. They mapped the highway’s right-of-way and the underdeveloped land that surrounded it and found that it affected hundreds of acres, representing billions of dollars in developable land and millions in property tax revenue—in a city that desperately needed money to fund basic services like schools and sewage. “I had to pitch it to the power structure of Dallas,” Kennedy says. “What do they care about? They care about money.” The financial pitch was a Trojan horse for other, harder-to-quantify benefits, he adds: equity, environment, quality of life.

Kennedy got the ear of an unconventional member of the Texas Transportation Commission, Victor Vandergriff, who commissioned a 2016 study called CityMap that, for the first time in the agency’s history, included the full removal of the elevated highway as an option. TxDOT engineers talked to hundreds of people across the city, and the public feedback was decisive: People didn’t care all that much about congestion. They cared a lot about community and connectivity and parks and housing. Removing I-345, the study found, would increase delays on nearby thoroughfares by just one minute.

CityMap was unlike any document TxDOT had ever produced, and it represented an inflection point in how some of the department’s engineers considered their work. “We’re not here to move cars,” says Mo Bur, TxDOT’s Dallas district engineer. “We’re here to have a project that will address all kinds of transportation—and then, once we leave, what does it do to the community that the highway went through?”

According to a 2021 report, 377 acres of land in the core of the ninth-most-populous city in the country had either been subsumed by I-345 or had undergone noticeable decline due to its presence. This represented more than $9 billion worth of developable land and $255 million in annual property tax revenue. Removing the highway could create the capacity for 59,000 new jobs and 26,000 housing units, the report found. For years, job growth has clustered in the suburbs north of Dallas, while most of the affordable housing has stayed south of I-30. “The typical response has been, ‘Well, how do we help low-income people drive and access jobs that are going increasingly farther to the north?’” says Kennedy, who also serves on the board of Dallas Area Rapid Transit. “My response has been, ‘Why don’t we bring housing and jobs closer together and reorient downtown as the center of job growth?’”

The business community got on board immediately. “Buy land,” Mark Twain famously wrote. “They aren’t making it anymore.” But removing I-345 would do just that: make land, and very valuable land at that. Who would profit from this new land, ripped from a thriving Black community a generation before?

In St. Paul, Minn., the construction of I-94 through a predominantly Black neighborhood called Rondo claimed more than 700 homes. In 2020, the nonprofit Reconnect Rondo calculated that the loss of this home equity represented at least $157 million in generational wealth taken from Black families—equivalent to the tuition costs for 4,800 four-year college degrees. Policies to repair the harms wrought by a highway like I-345, which disproportionately affected Black families and businesses, cannot be race-neutral, says Jerry Hawkins, the executive director of Dallas Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation. Removing the highway is great, he says, “but for who?”

Hawkins is skeptical that the land created by removing the highway will actually help the people—or their descendants—who were so violently displaced by its construction. “There are a lot of larger conversations in urban development about what reparations would look like,” says Ben Crowther, a program manager for CNU’s Highways to Boulevards program. “As we think about removing things like highways, what are ways that we could provide benefits to community members for whom the highway was a barrier—who are no longer there?”

Amy Stelly, an architect and the founder
of the Claiborne Avenue Alliance in New Orleans, is one of many advocates pushing to put the land liberated by freeway removal into a community land trust—which separates the ownership of a structure, like a single-family home or an apartment complex, from the land beneath it—to create permanently affordable housing. “What a land trust must do now is put that affordable housing back so that the people who make New Orleans New Orleans can move back into the neighborhood,” says Stelly, who is Black and grew up within blocks of the highway she’s fighting to tear down.

Because of a 1995 state law governing the sale of highway rights-of-way, the City of Dallas—or a nonprofit community land trust—would have to buy any “surplus” land created by the removal of I-345 from TxDOT at fair market value, which is likely out of reach for anyone but for-profit developers. “The majority is going to be folks who have money and the opportunity to develop it,” Hawkins says. “That’s definitely not Black and brown folks.” But this is where federal funding—the $10 billion earmarked by Schumer in his Economic Justice Act and the $20 billion in Biden’s American Jobs Plan—could potentially be transformative, returning that land to community control. “Thankfully, highway removal is glamorous now,” Stelly says.

LIKE SO MANY OTHERS, ROBIN LAFLEUR was grounded at home for most of 2020. In some ways, it was a relief. “It was refreshing to not be on the road in all of the hustle and bustle of I-35,” she says—a gift to get three hours of her day back. In November, she started commuting again, 50 miles a day, three to four days a week. She looked into taking public transit, hoping she’d be able to work on the way, but that would have added two hours to her round-trip journey.

In 2013, the Texas A&M Transportation Institute modeled seven scenarios for solving congestion on I-35 as Austin boomed. “Congestion will be severe even if a substantial amount of roadway capacity (typically as lanes) is added,” the study concluded, recommending that planners focus on managing demand on the highway: shifting 40 percent of commuters to work-from-home, creating virtual classes for university students, replacing in-person retail shopping with online shopping.

In March 2020, those recommendations became reality. After stay-at-home orders for Covid-19 went into effect, vehicle trips on I-35 dropped by roughly 40 percent, and congestion all but disappeared. “One of the things about the virus that I think is so important is that, up until now, that’s been a theoretical model, which might have been wrong,” says Heyden Black Walker of Reconnect Austin. But by May 2020, anyone could go for a drive and see for themselves: You don’t have to get rid of all the cars to solve most traffic congestion. “I think we should use the pandemic as a time to really learn and reevaluate what we’re doing.”

In late 2020, TxDOT released renderings for I-35 that showed a 20-lane highway, including frontage roads—an increase of eight lanes. “To spend 7 or 8 billion dollars on a project like that, to me, just doesn’t make sense,” Lafleur says, “when a better solution would be to figure out a way to improve commuter options—getting us from one spot to another in a safer vehicle, in a bus or on a train, where you don’t have to worry about people who aren’t paying attention while they’re driving.” Lafleur loves her job helping people find homes in Austin. She just hates getting there.
Bombing, bombing, bombing”—that’s how Ahmad Yassin Leila recently described the whirlwind of destruction that met him and his young family as they sought shelter in Idlib, Syria, early last year. Leila, his wife, and their four children had come to Idlib after the Syrian government’s heavy artillery siege of their Damascus neighborhood of East Ghouta had forced them from their home years before. Since then, they had been on the run from the pervasive violence—shock waves, caved-in ceilings, flying shrapnel—that seemed to follow wherever they fled.

The Syrian government had been bombarding Idlib for months with tanks and armored vehicles, while Russian and Syrian war planes dropped incendiary explosives, cluster munitions, and massive “barrel bombs” on a population that included over a million people who had fled from other parts of Syria and taken refuge in the province. The bombs targeted schools and hospitals in neighborhoods thought to be rebel strongholds, neighborhoods now reduced to rubble, blood, ash, and the streams of people attempting to get out.

In early 2020, Leila and his family piled onto a motorcycle and joined the hundreds of thousands fleeing for their lives and dying on the cold mud road packed with trucks, cars, handcarts, motorcycles, bicycles, and animals—a limping exodus heading north toward Turkey in search of safety. But the hundreds of thousands of refugees were brought up short at the border wall. Turkey wouldn’t let them in.

Leila’s family was left without shelter in the miserable cold of a northwestern Syrian winter, blocked by Turkey’s border to the north and “bombing, bombing, bombing” to the south. The temperature frequently dropped below freezing at night, so people took to burning whatever they could find for warmth. One night that freezing February, in their floorless tent, Leila noticed that something was wrong with his 18-month-old daughter, Iman.

“Around 3 o’clock in the morning, I tried to move my little girl, but she was really blue, and we did not know what to do.” —Ahmad Yassin Leila

The baby became unresponsive and cold again. Alarmed, Leila took her in his arms and, along with his wife, started looking for an ambulance or car that could transport her to a hospital. Finding no vehicle to help, they set out on foot. On the way, as Leila carried her close to his chest, Iman froze to death.

When I first read of Iman Leila’s tragically foreshortened life and terrible death in The New York Times last year, it captured something for me about the protracted conflict’s human cost. Trying to understand what happens to someone who is fleeing persecution and is denied refuge has driven much of my reporting over the last few years. With the forcibly displaced, the desperate, and the undocumented, horror often piles upon horror. Ahmad Yassin Leila lost his daughter, and his name appeared in the headlines. Through an interpreter, he told me about that time last year when he was trying to find a safe haven for his family.

“We kept searching and looking for a home,” he said, “but could not find one.”

Iman Leila’s death and the hole it has left in her family was not caused by bullets or bombs or shrapnel—not directly, at least. Instead, her death and many others like it are due to the humanitarian crises that have followed in the conflict’s wake, crises that are now crashing against the borders of other countries in the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. With the war in Syria entering its 10th year this spring, the full humanitarian impact remains impossible to catalog. The failure to address this young century’s greatest refugee crisis led to Iman Leila’s unnecessary death—and the unfathomably violent Syrian conflict contains a multitude of stories like hers. What has a full decade of conflict done to the Syrians who have been forced from their homes, lost family members, and undergone hardships unimaginable to those who have lived without war?

Even as President Bashar al-Assad’s blood-soaked victory in the conflict...
Syria’s Victims

Ten years of grinding conflict have inflicted an immense humanitarian cost.

By John Washington

Nowhere to turn: The conflict has left millions of refugees scattered in crowded camps like this one in Idlib, Syria.
seems ever more assured, Syrians—both those in the country and those consigned to refugee camps or to a precarious undocumented status throughout the region and the world—are trapped in a cycle of violent upheaval and refuge denied. Moreover, the bending of international norms that the Syrian conflict has occasioned—the return of chemical weapons to the battlefield, the disregard for civilian casualties exhibited by regional and world powers, and the abrogation of refugee and asylum laws—will shape conflicts across the planet for years to come. It is time for the humanitarian costs—both in terms of lives lost and obligations ignored—to be tallied.

Around 6.6 million people have been displaced within Syria. A similar number have been forced to flee the country.

While the human toll of the war in Syria is difficult to comprehend, some numbers do help put the situation into context. Since Assad’s troops fired the first shots at peaceful protesters in the southern city of Daraa in the spring of 2011, around 6.6 million people have been displaced within Syria. A similar number have been forced to flee the country. The number of dead may be as high as 600,000. Nobody really knows how many people are languishing in the Syrian government’s secret prisons, but some observers estimate that hundreds of thousands may have been detained or disappeared in these human slaughterhouses. Forty percent of the country’s infrastructure has been destroyed. And people have been doubly, triply, multitudinously displaced, entire cities razed, neighborhoods engulfed in flames and flattened to rubble.

Back in 2015, the world was momentarily aghast when pictures of the body of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old boy who drowned in the Mediterranean and then washed up on a Turkish shore, went viral. The images of Kurdi, who was from Kobani, Syria, and died with his mother and brother while trying to make the perilous journey from Turkey to a Greek island, forced the world to confront the reality of the humanitarian crisis. Politicians in the West were briefly held to account for refugee policies that had failed to respond adequately to the crisis: According to reports, Kurdi’s family had been seeking, ultimately, to reach Canada, and the child’s death became a major issue in that country’s national elections.

But last year, when another young Syrian boy drowned—this time in the Aegean—half a decade after Kurdi’s death, the world hardly noticed, as journalist Robert Mackey pointed out at the time. Was Iman Leila another example of the Syrian War surpassing the limits of the world’s attention, or of a tragedy that exceeds our capacity for empathy? The reality, for desperately fleeing Syrians, is that things have only gotten worse since Kurdi’s death, and the vast majority of people displaced by the conflict have not been taken in by Western countries, in part because of nativist fearmongering in Western Europe and the United States. The US took in just over 18,000 Syrian refugees during the Obama administration. The Trump administration slashed those numbers significantly, resettling just 62 Syrians in 2018, before suspending all refugee applications last spring in response to the Covid pandemic—likely a violation of international law. (Even when the US was accepting significantly more refugees—nearly 85,000 from dozens of different countries in 2016—that was only 0.4 percent of the worldwide total.)

After a concerted campaign in 2015 to welcome Syrian refugees, largely in response to Kurdi’s drowning, Canada took in just under 45,000 from 2015 to 2020. Of the Western European countries, Germany has taken in the most refugees, at over 600,000; the Netherlands has accepted over 100,000; and a number of Eastern European countries have striven to take in none. The UK has accepted fewer than 20,000 Syrian refugees, though supposed “tides” of asylum seekers have contributed to a wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric there, both in the run-up to the Brexit vote and afterward. Denmark is poised to become the first European country to begin deporting refugees back to Syria after deciding to reevaluate the cases of people who had fled Damascus—a city that Denmark now deems to be safe, despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary. Asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere, including a number of African nations, have sparked the rise of far-right groups in other European countries and continue to provoke a potent backlash in the United States.

All of which means that nearly all of the Syrians displaced by the war have been forced to remain in the region. There are over 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, making up around a quarter of the country’s population. In Jordan, with a population of about 10 million, there are 1.3 million Syrian refugees, and in Turkey, there are more than 3.5 million. The destabilizing effects on these countries of this influx of traumatized and impoverished refugees cannot be overstated, even while the real victims remain the Syrians.

In Lebanon, Syrian refugees face a host of restrictions, including arbitrary raids, curfews, and checkpoints that apply only to them. More than 80 percent don’t have legal residency, and 90 percent live in extreme poverty and are vulnerable to arrest, harassment, and detention. In Jordan, in one of the largest refugee camps in the world, called Za’atari, more than 76,000 people suffer from acute health problems. And last year, 10,000 refugees were stranded, with little access to essential resources, in a makeshift encampment at the Jordan-Syria border. Syrians in Turkey face precarity, unemployment, detention, and xenophobic attacks. And even as Europe closes its borders and uses the refugees as pawns in its negotiations with Turkey, Turkish border guards have brutally beaten, illegally deported,
In Syria, 12.4 million people—about 70 percent of the population—are food-insecure, and 1.3 million are severely so.

Unequal burden: Refugees arrive in Germany in 2015. Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon have taken in millions, Western countries far fewer.

or killed Syrians breaching the border wall. Yet this hasn’t stopped thousands of Syrians—facing bombs, torture, or starvation at home—from trying to escape.

Ahmad Kdor, a Syrian originally from Ma’arat al-Numan, in the northwestern part of the country, has been forced to uproot himself multiple times. This spring, he described his experiences after being arrested at a checkpoint outside Damascus and taken to a secret prison, one of the many regime-run black sites that are places of almost unimaginable suffering. “I tasted the most severe forms of torture,” he told me.

Kdor now lives in Idlib province, sometimes earning as little as a dollar a day as a laborer. When he can, he helps distribute food aid from a foreign NGO. He and his family rent a small home but are on the verge of moving into a nearby tent city, as Kdor can’t afford both to feed his family and to pay rent. He described the desperation surrounding them: “Some people hanged themselves, while others burned themselves because of the psychological stress and their inability to take care of their families and children. They could not do anything about it except to take their own lives.” He added that “around 90 percent of people living in tents [in Idlib] are dependent on humanitarian assistance. This humanitarian assistance is not enough, but it is better than death.”

Though Assad has wrested back effective control over about two-thirds of the country, the current economic collapse in Syria is adding even more misery to the crisis. Ongoing international sanctions, an all-time low for the Syrian lira, and a banking collapse in neighboring Lebanon have squeezed Syria’s finances. In the past year, as the economy has continued to tank, food prices in the country have gone up 247 percent. According to the World Food Program, 12.4 million people in Syria, or about 70 percent of the population, are food-insecure, and 1.3 million are severely so, which means they sometimes go a day or more without food.

Joshua Landis, a professor of Middle East studies at the University of Oklahoma and a fellow at the Quincy Institute, told me, “For the Syrian people, who have suffered so much over the last 10 years, the suffering has only become more severe over the last year. For most, the direct violence and fighting are over, but economic conditions have collapsed at a faster pace over the last year than at any time during the worst war years.”

Kdor described his daily routine now: “I wake up in the morning and watch the news, see where the planes bombed and who died. Every day we fear that the regime will advance to our areas, and there are no remaining areas to which we can flee. We fear that the regime will come and kill us and our children.”

Besides the ongoing human toll, the conflict has also set dangerous precedents through the evisceration of international human rights law. The Syrian government, as well as the United States, Russia, Turkey, and others, have simply not been held to account for their numerous and egregious violations of such laws. Sara Kayyali, a Syria researcher at Human Rights Watch, cited the Chemical Weapons Convention, which had been one of the most robust and stringently followed international war covenants. But the Syrian government—which acceded to the convention—has staged multiple chemical attacks and never been held accountable.

“We have a morbid joke,” Kayyali told me, “that in the Syrian context, we used some words too early [back in 2012 and ’13] and then the situation kept getting worse and worse”—for example, what’s beyond “crimes against humanity”? At some point, language reaches its limits.

(continued on page 31)
Nina Turner's Next Act

By Joan Walsh
Can the former Sanders surrogate win over her district without losing her supporters on the left?

Before there was the Squad, or even the glimmer of a movement by insurgent progressives to challenge incumbent congressional Democrats, a progressive Black woman legislator in Cleveland contemplated what to many Democrats was unthinkable at the time: challenging a respected Black congresswoman from the left in a primary, in this case Representative Marcia Fudge of Ohio, in 2012.

In the end, Nina Turner didn’t run against Fudge, but even announcing she was considering it made her an outsider to establishment Democratic Party politics. In a way, she’d always been one. She had come up as a college professor, city council member, and state senator, always a Democrat. But one of her earliest moves was backing a 2009 ballot initiative to reorganize the Cuyahoga County government that many local Democrats strenuously opposed. It passed overwhelmingly.

Turner again made establishment enemies when she went from publicly supporting the Ready for Hillary super PAC—the unofficial stalking horse for the presidential candidacy of the former senator and secretary of state—to becoming a top surrogate for Senator Bernie Sanders in his 2016 primary campaign.

Now Nina Turner may be poised to actually join the Squad. In her run to fill the seat vacated when Fudge became the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the former Ohio legislator has the endorsement of Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Cori Bush, four women of color who either defeated an incumbent or ascended after an incumbent stepped down. She’s also backed by Progressive Caucus chairs Pramila Jayapal and Katie Porter, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison—and, of course, Bernie Sanders.

One of 13 Democratic candidates in the race, Turner is leading in campaign funding—her campaign announced in mid-June that she had raised over $3 million—thanks largely to her ability to tap into Sanders’s movement. Her volunteer events often brim with die-hard supporters of the Vermont senator. At almost every gathering, Turner tells her audience that her focus is on “the least of these”—the poor, the working poor and barely middle class.” She’s running on Medicare for All, free college, a $15 minimum wage, criminal justice reform, and voting rights.

The key to this race, though, will be winning over her district’s many Biden supporters—the president won roughly 80 percent of the general-election vote here last year, as did Clinton four years earlier—without losing her admirers on the Sanders left. She’s already drawn fire from a leftist fringe for her perceived betrayals, most notably for defending members of the Squad who declined to “force the vote” on Medicare for All earlier this year. “For the love of God, do not throw away the Squad members!” she told a lefty podcaster. Meanwhile, her leading rival, Cuyahoga County councilwoman and Democratic Party chair Shontel Brown, is running on her ties to the president. A recent ad includes a photo of Brown with Biden and features a cable host telling Turner, “You’ve been highly critical of President-elect Joe Biden.” The ad closes with: “I’m Shontel Brown, and I’ll work with Joe Biden.” (By press time, Clinton had endorsed Brown.)

“Highly critical” of Biden might be an understatement. A July 2020 Atlantic feature on how Trump could win in November featured this colorful quote from Turner about how, despite Sanders’s endorsement, she still wasn’t keen on voting for Biden. “It’s like saying to somebody, ‘You have a bowl of shit in front of you, and all you’ve got to do is eat half of it instead of the whole thing.’ It’s still shit.”

Turner has praised Biden as president, especially his Covid response. But will those earlier attacks hurt her? “I think it hurt her in the beginning, but I think people have gotten past that,” says Turner backer Samara Knight. “People are hungry for change. Nina brings hope.” Knight, an executive vice president of SEIU 1199, is a Biden supporter and also backed Clinton in 2016. Her union endorsed Turner after interviewing both her and Brown. “She’ll fight for us,” Knight says.

Brown has recently floated tributes to Israel at the top of her campaign website, as she’s welcomed support from the PAC Democratic Majority for Israel, which spent $1.4 million on ads attacking Sanders in 2020. The group is attacking Turner now for past statements conditioning US support for Israel on justice for the Palestinians.

“I’m a Democrat,” Turner tells me flatly. She runs through her party bona fides: as a city council member and state senator representing the city of Cleveland; as a Barack Obama delegate, twice, to the Democratic National Convention; as the Democratic nominee for Ohio secretary of state in 2014; as the engagement chair of the Ohio party. No one can take that away from her.

“People are hungry for change. Nina brings hope.”

—Samara Knight, SEIU 1199
just because she supported Sanders, she says. “Sometimes, challenge isn’t pretty.”

Democratic voters will decide in an August 3 primary. An internal poll released on June 1 showed Turner at 50 percent and Brown at 15 percent, trailing “undecided.” But observers say the race could tighten, given Brown’s access to outside money.

Nina Hudson Turner was born in Cleveland to married teenage parents who separated after five years. Turner and her younger siblings then lived with their mother, who worked as a preacher and a nurse’s aide in a senior home while sometimes relying on welfare to keep the family afloat. “Nina’s mom was the love of my life,” her father, Taalib Hudson, told me, but the too-early marriage doomed their relationship. His strongest memory of his oldest daughter is at age 2: “She had, it seemed like, thousands of questions every day. And I answered every one of them, or I tried to.”

Father and daughter maintain a close bond to this day. Hudson remembers that at one point when the children were still young, he was having trouble with one of Nina’s sisters, and young Nina felt torn about taking a side. He told her she didn’t have to. “I said, ‘Get to know me for yourself, who I am.’ And she did. That’s what a leader does—they make up their own mind, they don’t take somebody’s word.”

Turner’s mother, Faye Hudson, died suddenly of an aneurysm at 42. She’d struggled with her health, particularly high blood pressure, for a long time and also faced mental health challenges. “There were times where my mother couldn’t take it,” Turner tells me. “My mother attempted suicide. She even talked about killing her kids. My siblings aren’t aware of that—they were too young. I bore a lot of those burdens growing up. She couldn’t pay rent one time, so instead of telling us that, she told us there were dead bodies under the porch.”

Turner recalls being terrified. “So we had to move and leave behind all of our toys. We were very transient.”

She goes on: “The reason I have so much empathy and compassion and sometimes so much rage about what happens to people like my mother is because of my proximity to her pain. The pain is still very raw for me. So yeah, I might not be politically correct all the time.”

Turner was just 25 when her mother died, with a child of her own, and she suddenly was responsible for her youngest siblings. Still, she continued in school, as she’d promised her mother she would do, getting her associate’s degree at Cuyahoga Community College. That’s where she met the woman she calls “my mentor and surrogate mom”. Dorothy Salem, a now-retired professor of African American history.

“She’s a white lady with blond hair—and I was in my Black history class,” Turner recalls. “Of course, I was like, ‘White people can’t teach Black history!’ I’m looking at my schedule and saying, ‘I gotta be in the wrong class!’” Salem confirms the story: “Students would come to class the first day, look at me, and check their schedules. That was Nina. She came in and sat in the back of the class, and I could tell I had to prove who I was.”

When I tell Salem that Turner considers her a surrogate mom, she gets quiet. “When I found out her mom died... she didn’t come to me at that time, because we didn’t have that bond yet. But she told me about it later, and it bothered me, because everybody needs a mom.” Salem held Turner close, inspired her to continue her studies, to get a master’s degree at Cleveland State University, and to become a history professor herself.

Turner began teaching at Cuyahoga Community College in 1999, and she also worked in a variety of jobs as a political aide, from the state senate to the mayor’s office. She won a city council seat in 2003 and moved to the Ohio Senate in 2008. That’s when Issue 6, the reorganization of the Cuyahoga County government, came to define her early career. In that conflict, you can see traces of her later battles with the Democratic Party establishment.

The measure did away with the all-powerful three-person county board and created an elected county executive and an 11-member county council. Democrats were against it, because it meant some Republicans could win seats. “Old-time Democrats, old-time Black leaders, opposed it,” Turner recalls. “When it came to county corruption, in terms of Democrats, I stood up to say, ‘We have an opportunity to change the structure and let more people be in elected leadership.’ They threatened to ruin my career.” A local Black newspaper caricatured her on its front page as Aunt Jemima. But when the measure passed, the Cleveland Plain Dealer noted that Turner “has emerged as the region’s ‘it’ politician of the moment.”

Soon came the issues that would cement her image as a progressive rabble-rouser: the 2010 GOP takeover of state legislatures across the country, as well as Congress, and the rise of anti-worker, anti-women, and anti-voter legislation nationwide. In Ohio, SB 5 stripped public workers of their collective bargaining rights, and Turner became an MSNBC regular railing against it, predicting the law would not stand; in November 2011, Ohio’s voters overturned it. She won more attention for the scene-stealing demonstration that followed the measure, in which Turner was arrested after she lay down on the ground in front of the Ohio Statehouse, which the police had blocked off with a police horse. When she was taken into custody, Turner said: “It’s my right to be here, and I’m not going anywhere.” She had been calling for the resignation of Ohio’s then-governor, John Kasich, whose policies she felt were discriminatory against, and were harming Ohio’s working-class families. She was arrested for civil disobedience and was later found guilty of disorderly conduct and Failure to Comply with an order of a Police Officer. She took her case all the way to the Ohio Supreme Court. Despite a mixed ruling, the case was a morale booster for Turner’s party, with Turner serving as a “radical leader.”

In 2014, Turner won the primary to become the Democratic nominee for Ohio secretary of state. She lost the election by a margin of 51% to 49%, in what was a shellacking for Democrats across the nation. But Turner wasn’t finished in Ohio yet. After the police shootings of
John Crawford, who was examining a gun being sold in a Walmart, and Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old killed for playing with a pop gun in a park, she approached Republican Governor John Kasich about the need for serious police reform. Today she campaigns on her work with Kasich as chair of a bipartisan commission on community-police relations, which established standards for officer accountability, hiring, and use of force. (As the wife and mother of law enforcement officers, Turner is hard to peg as anti-police.)

But that work is not well known outside of Ohio. Turner is most famous for being Bernie Sanders’s best surrogate. It is her crowning glory, and perhaps her biggest liability, in this congressional race.

Turner contests the narrative that she “switched” from Clinton to Sanders in 2015. It’s... complicated.

“We’d just come off a hard race in 2014 in Ohio, and a young activist reached out to me and said, ‘Senator Turner, people are feeling really heavy. I’m heading up Ohio Ready for Hillary—would you come headline an event for us?’ For me, it wasn’t as much about Clinton as that Democrats were in pain. I wanted to lift spirits.” Turner went on to do fundraisers for the pro-Hillary group across the country and was covered in the media as a supporter. She insists she never “endorsed” Clinton, but given her high profile with Ready for Hillary, she campaigns on her work with Kasich as chair of a bipartisan commission on community-police relations, which established standards for officer accountability, hiring, and use of force. (As the wife and mother of law enforcement officers, Turner is hard to peg as anti-police.)

“OK? Why can’t we be honest? Hello, somebody!” is Turner’s quirky campaign slogan, born of a very rough time, the period after Sanders suffered a heart attack in 2019. Speaking at his first campaign rally after his recovery, to a crowd of at least 25,000 people in Queens, Turner found herself overwhelmed by the audience’s emotion. “I was feeling the vibe from this crowd, and I’m looking out into all these faces and saying, ‘These are a lot of somebodies.’” She shouted, “Hello, somebody!”

“Sometimes the ultra-progressive left will be in love with me, sometimes they won’t. It causes me pause, but I don’t lose sleep on it.” —Nina Turner

F ormer aides with Clinton’s 2016 campaign recall an event where the candidate failed to acknowledge Turner but insist she tried to make amends. As for the charge that Clinton never asked her directly for her support, several note that given Turner’s high-profile appearances on behalf of Ready for Hillary, the campaign thought it already had it. When the news broke that Turner had endorsed Sanders, with the emphasis on her “switching” from Clinton, she came in for heat from old friends and allies.

“After all we’ve done for you,” a white supporter in the reproductive health community said to her at a local event. Run-ins like that continued throughout 2016, but the ultimate insult, for Turner, was when the Clinton campaign opposed letting her put Sanders’s name in nomination at the Philadelphia convention. That honor went to then–Representative Tulsi Gabbard.

Turner and I were on opposite sides of the Clinton-Sanders battle in 2016. I still regret one move: When Green Party candidate Jill Stein asked Turner to be her running mate that summer, I tweeted that Turner wouldn’t do it, because she wouldn’t risk “throwing away her career.”

I was factually correct—she turned down the offer—but morally wrong. Who was I to tell Turner what she should do with her political career? When we met at an event for Stacey Abrams’s gubernatorial campaign in June of 2017, I apologized to Turner. She forgave me. But during the weekend I spent interviewing her for this article, we were still wary at times. She refused to say whether she’d voted for Clinton, on the grounds that it’s a “secret ballot,” and our tensest moment came when I pressed her on it. “Oh my God,” she said, “you know who I wanted to win in the primary. People can draw their own conclusion. I voted against Donald Trump both times, and I voted for democracy.”

Yet in the end, we maintained our truce. She wanted me to understand why she’s still angry.

“I’m saying all of this, Joan, because people—her supporters—instead of trying to vilify me, should have said, ‘I wish she had stayed with us, but it’s OK.’ I really feel like some people on that side—and this is my Black girl resentment talking—felt as though, ‘OK, we elected the first Black president, y’all can’t help us elect the first woman? First white woman?’ These are things that are not said.”

“Actually, I might have had that feeling,” I confessed.

“OK? Why can’t we be honest? Hello, somebody!”

“HELLO, SOMEBODY!” is Turner’s quirky campaign slogan, born of a very rough time, the period after Sanders suffered a heart attack in 2019. Speaking at his first campaign rally after his recovery, to a crowd of at least 25,000 people in Queens, Turner found herself overwhelmed by the audience’s emotion. “I was feeling the vibe from this crowd, and I’m looking out into all these faces and saying, ‘These are a lot of somebodies.’” She shouted, “Hello, somebody!”

As I trailed Turner around Cleveland and Akron the second weekend in May, I heard her say it to all kinds of crowds. Our first stop was at a roundtable for Black women union leaders organized by SEIU’s Samara Knight. It was a small circle, no more than 10 women, but each was an organizing powerhouse in her own right. Lynn Radcliffe, retired after 35 years as a secretary with Cleveland Metropolitan Schools, declared she’d been behind Turner “forever.” Her top issue is “criminal justice correction,” she says. “I have two Black sons, and I’m the great-grandmother of Black males. For us, the crying never stops.”

Turner talks about Radcliffe the next morning as...
“I wish people would be more concerned about the suffering in the country than about the colorful words.”

—Nina Turner

she kicks off a canvassing operation at her Akron headquarters, lamenting the pain of “Black women who know fear when their sons walk out the door. It’s one thing for progressives to run in New York and win, or in California,” she tells the crowd. “The type of history we are about to make will show that a progressive can win in Cleveland and Akron, and in suburban and exurban counties.”

She and Akron City Councilmember Tara Samples go out to canvass, and after a quick lunch we head back to the campaign office, where about 50 women, almost all of them Black, gather for another conversation—“a sister conversation,” as Turner puts it. An Akron city councilwoman who hasn’t endorsed anyone yet asks Turner why she wants to join a Congress that’s “so divisive and dysfunctional.” Turner pauses, then tells the story of an Amazon worker named Jessica she met in Bessemer, Ala., during the unsuccessful union drive. Jessica told her that she wasn’t going to leave the company even if the organizing drive failed. “She said, ‘This is a snake pit, but I don’t wanna leave any of my coworkers alone in the snake pit.’”

A woman, clearly a supporter, raises her hand and says, “If I talked like you, I’d get fired.”

“I have been punished many times for being who I am,” Turner tells her. “But I am a grown-A woman. Things are getting better! You do you!”

That experience—being “punished many times for being who I am”—explains Turner’s indefatigable drive, and also the tinges of, as she terms it, “pain” or even “rage” that sometimes surface as she talks about her political life. A streak of well-earned pride, born out of hard work, personal struggle, and early losses, can make her bristle at suggestions that she should think or talk or act a certain way as she pursues her next goal. I see it more than once, including when I ask: Does she ever wish she could take back that she should think or talk or act a certain way as she pursues her next goal. I see it more than once, including when I ask: Does she ever wish she could take back

Indeed. Turner was the keynote speaker at an August 2020 event trying to establish a left-wing People’s Party, alongside Dore and Sanders ally Cornel West. Although she made it clear that she was staying in the Democratic Party, she defends reaching out to the “DemExit” folks, who believe the party rigged the 2016 primary against Sanders and object to its corporate ties. “You’re doggone right I did participate, proudly, and agreed with much of what they had to say. Somebody’s gotta speak their language, and I speak it very well. What I would like is for my party to show by its words and its deeds that there might not need to be another party.”

Can Turner maintain this balancing act? She speaks warmly of bringing together the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Progressive Caucus, but so far, outside of CPC members like Bush, Jamaal Bowman, and Mondaire Jones, she’s gotten no support from the CBC; Ohio’s Joyce Beatty supports her opponent Shontel Brown. And if Turner is elected, how will the ideologically diverse Democratic caucus incorporate this strong, independent, radical, indisputably working-class Black woman—and how will she work with it? Turner and her allies hope we’ll find out next year.
In 2017, during a US-led coalition campaign to liberate Raqqa, which had been suffering under ISIS’s heel for three years, US Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend said that the goal was “zero human casualties,” adding: “I challenge anyone to find a more precise air campaign in the history of warfare.” The reality, however, was that thousands of civilians were injured or killed by the US-led strikes. The American munitions came raining down amid a Russian bombing campaign that had been going on for at least two years. The Russian strikes, too, though allegedly targeting ISIS, hit and killed Syrian civilians. In other words, the accounting is being exacted on the people of Syria, not on the regime.

I asked Nadia Hardman, a refugee and migrant rights researcher at Human Rights Watch, what she views, after 10 years of war, as the hardest challenge Syrian refugees currently face. “The knowledge that so many can’t go back,” she replied. “They’re living in eternal limbo. They’re living in a country that doesn’t want them. To be where they know they’re not wanted, and they can’t go back. There’s not much hope.”

Hardman told me about Syrians leaving Jordan to return to Daraa, the city near the Jordanian border where the uprising started. Their homecoming, however, has not been what they’d expected. Young men of fighting age have to go through a “reconciliation” process in which they vow not to take up arms against the government. They run the risk of being forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army or picked up by the military security agency.

In the areas under government control—where peace has ostensibly been restored—the country’s population. However many Covid-related infections and deaths there are, the quarantines and curfews have certainly weighed down an already sinking economy. Last summer, the situation reached such a desperate point that, in Damascus and other government-held areas, people took to the streets again in protest—this time knowing full well the lengths to which their government would go to quell dissent.

“We are not thinking about leaving,” Leila told me, “because we are tired of moving around, and we are waiting for God to make things better for us, and we do not want anything else. We want to teach the children and have them go to school. We want this situation to end, and we do not want anything else.”

“Stranded: Syrian refugees at the al-Fares camp in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. More than a million Syrians are now in Lebanon, making up around a quarter of the country’s population.”

“‘They’re living in eternal limbo. They’re living in a country that doesn’t want them…and they can’t go back. There’s not much hope.’”

—Nadia Hardman
The publication of the 1619 Project by The New York Times in 2019 pushed many Americans to reconsider what they assumed they knew about African American and, more generally, US history. The project, whose title refers to the importation of the first enslaved Africans to the Virginia colony in 1619, sought to show how, in the introductory words of its special issue, “no aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed.”

There were good reasons to start the project in 1619—many African Americans trace the beginnings of Black America to this moment—and to focus on Virginia, but it could have started earlier, too. The story...
of Africans in North America can, in fact, be traced as far back as 1526 and the creation of the San Miguel de Gualdape colony in what would become South Carolina—a colony that was likely destroyed by a mutiny of the colonists and a slave revolt. More than 140 years later, the colony of Carolina would be founded by English settlers from Barbados who hoped to create a settlement purely for the purpose of plantation slavery.

Annette Gordon-Reed’s new book, On Juneteenth, considers another set of bifurcating paths in African American history—this time in her home state of Texas, where both her own history and that of Juneteenth began. Texas, she argues, provides a key to the history of Africans in Texas and, coupled with the rapidly popularized holiday of Juneteenth, offers a different perspective from the one to which most Americans are accustomed. For her, the history of Black Texas, in fact, allows one to tell the larger history of Black America. “The history of Juneteenth,” she writes, “which includes the many years before the events in Galveston and afterward, shows that Texas, more than any [other] state in the Union, has always embodied nearly every major aspect of the story of the United States of America.”

This is a bold statement. Others might alternately cite the Low Country of South Carolina or the Mississippi Delta or the South Side of Chicago. Yet Gordon-Reed’s contention, by the end of her book, proves hard to dismiss. By using the history of Black Texas, she is also able to tell the story of Black America, and by doing so, she places Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous Americans at the forefront of US history. If nothing else, she shifts its focus away from the East Coast origin stories of Jamestown and Plymouth and toward the West. Everything is bigger in Texas, and in the hands of Gordon-Reed, the history of Texas becomes large enough to encompass the fullness of the American story.

Gordon-Reed has spent her career studying the majestic and often confounding contradictions of American life and how we memorialize them. Her two best-known works—1997’s Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy and 2008’s The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family—told the story of Sally Hemings, the enslaved woman who was forcibly involved in a sexual relationship with Thomas Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings offered a thorough account of the relationship between the two, a subject that had long been ignored by many Jefferson scholars. The book also proved to be something far more: an analysis of those historians who refused to reckon with the centrality of slavery in the founding of the United States—and in particular its importance in the lives of the country’s “founding fathers.”

Much of this previous scholarship was criticized by Gordon-Reed “as a rejection of black people’s input and black people’s participation in American society.” Along with an emerging new generation of historians, she sought to correct this. As David Walton argued in his review of the book in The New York Times, Gordon-Reed provided a “devastating and persuasive critique of those who have rejected” the possibility of Jefferson having sex with Hemings and “is sure to be the next-to-last word for every historian who writes about this story hereafter.”

The Hemingses of Monticello was arguably even more groundbreaking, shifting the traditional lens on Monticello from Jefferson and Hemings to the family tree they produced. The book, for which she became the first African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize for History, was also part of a larger goal at the center of her career: to push Americans to rethink their nation’s past—in particular, its origin myths. Her scholarship, Gordon-Reed explained in an interview, sought to establish “black people’s participation as American citizens from the very beginning.” For her, this was more than a matter of the historical record; it was also an assertion of citizenship. Because white supremacy had so deeply influenced the telling of US history, she noted, “you have to be able to help write the history of the country in order to establish your right to be here, to say that you’re legitimately here.”

This quest to re-center American history around the experience of those who are not white is also at the core of On Juneteenth. By focusing on Texas, Gordon-Reed can tell not only the story of Black America but also “of Indians, settler colonialists, Hispanic culture in North America, slavery, race, and immigration. It is the American story, told from this most American place.” She does have a point: Nearly every great movement in American history did, at some time, touch Texas. Everything from the rise and fall of slavery in antebellum America to the Populist movement to the civil rights movement and the white backlash against it has left an imprint on the history of Texas, and, in turn, Texas impacted each of them in ways the entire United States had to deal with.

The origin of Juneteenth exemplifies the central role Texas played in the history of Black America. When Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger entered Galveston on June 19, 1865, and informed the enslaved that they were free, the Civil War had ended across much of the South, and the region—and most of the nation—was convulsing with the beginnings of Reconstruction. If the Confederacy had won the Civil War, Texas would likely have become the chief example of what that government would have stood for—not only as a bastion of slavery but as a harbinger of its expansion throughout the Western Hemisphere via white settler colonialism and violent confrontation. But with Granger’s emancipatory declaration, and in the aftermath of the South’s defeat, Texas became an arena in which those pursuing a more inclusive idea of American freedom battled those seeking to restore the subversive relationship of African Americans as close to the old form of slavery as possible. Before the Civil War, Texas took steps in its Constitution to prevent the movement of free African Americans into the state. “Seeing that Black people could exist outside of legal slavery,” Gordon-Reed writes, “put the lie to the idea that Blacks were born to be slaves.”

For Gordon-Reed, the history of East Texas, which was the nexus of slavery in the state and

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where much of the fight over the terms of emancipation raged, helps tell this story of American contradictions in microcosm. Reconstruction was a bloody affair across the South, but in Texas it was especially grim—in part because, Gordon-Reed notes, the white population still remembered that the state had been a republic. The struggles over civil and political rights that roiled the nation during Reconstruction were magnified in Texas by the contradictions of self-government—of a white majority seeking to impose its will on a large Black minority.

The pursuit of emancipation was frustrated almost from the start. Gen. Philip Sheridan, the military commander of the Fifth Military District (Texas and Louisiana), created by the Reconstruction Act of 1867, worked hard to protect the rights of newly freed African Americans, but as a result he drew the ire of former Confederates and eventually was fired by President Andrew Johnson. (Sheridan purportedly said, “If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent Texas and live in Hell.”) His replacement, Winfield Scott Hancock, was far more lenient toward white Southerners who resisted giving Black Americans any rights whatsoever. As W.E.B. Du Bois noted in Black Reconstruction in America, citing a report from the Committee on Lawlessness and Violence in Texas, “Charged by law to keep the peace and afford protection to life and property, and having the army of the United States to assist him in so doing, [Hancock] has failed.”

For generations afterward, African Americans would fight to save Texas from the hell it had been turned into by white supremacy. Black Texans like Norris Wright Cuney would play a pivotal role in helping other Black citizens get involved in their native state’s politics. Cuney himself would become the Texas national committeeman of the Republican Party in 1886 and as president of the Union League led the national fight against the attempts of the party’s conservative wing to purge what was left of the Southern Black leadership. Like Sheridan, however, Cuney found that his leadership of the Texas GOP was one of the last hurrahs of the emancipationist spirit of the 1860s. Even if Texas was the state in which Juneteenth and the celebrations that followed were born, so, too, was it a state of stalwart resistance to Reconstruction and Black freedom.

For Gordon-Reed, who was born in 1958, this grim past was never dead. Growing up in East Texas, she saw living reminders of it all around her—both the struggles for freedom and the institutions created by African Americans to survive in a cruel Jim Crow system. Just as in the years after the Civil War, the power and dogged determination of white supremacy persisted.

As Gordon-Reed recounts of her own childhood, she initially attended an African American school, as so many of her friends and family had, before becoming one of the first Black students in her area to desegregate an all-white school. Entering first grade in the mid-1960s, she was enrolled in the Anderson Elementary School, leaving behind her all-Black school, Booker T. Washington. While some Black parents frowned on the Gordons’ sending their child to a previously all-white school, Gordon-Reed remembered the moment as one that was as much about practicality as politics. Her father, Alfred Gordon Sr., simply believed it made more sense for a school to have students correctly segregated by age. Anderson Elementary provided that; Booker T., as it was affectionately known, did not. But it also meant that Gordon-Reed would be the only Black student there.

Gordon-Reed excelled in school, both at Booker T. and at Anderson. At the time, she felt that she “never experienced any different treatment…. In fact, I felt nothing but…support.” Still, she knew and understood that she was different from the other students—and that she had to excel on behalf of the Black community. “This period was intense,” she writes. “My mother remembers me breaking out in hives at one point, a thing I don’t recall.”

Gordon-Reed’s experience of desegregation is a valuable one. Often, the story of school desegregation follows a student or students—the Little Rock Nine of Arkansas, for example—up to the school door and then leaves them to be immortalized in history. There is little consideration about the short- and long-term consequences of the experience on the children. “There was an oddity of being on display,” Gordon-Reed recalls, but few considered the effects of desegregation on the Black students who entered the formerly all-white schools—especially those, like Gordon-Reed, who were on their own. “Not to take anything away from the teachers and administrators at Anderson, but I did make things easy for them,” she adds. Her intellect certainly helped, but so did the fact that, because she was the only Black person enrolled at the school, she was not seen as an “invader” of Black students. “The degree of racial tolerance among Whites has always been about numbers,” she notes.

Gordon-Reed’s experiences after high school were like those of other African Americans who came of age during the civil rights and Black Power eras: increased opportunities for education at the finest of American universities. For Gordon-Reed, that meant attending Dartmouth College in the late 1970s and, eventually, Harvard Law School. But the experience of desegregating a school—and understanding what that desegregation meant for other African Americans—lingered, both for her and, more broadly, she argues, as a feature of the history of Texas and Black America.

Like her earlier work on the Heminges, On Juneteenth is determined to force us to rethink our origin stories. As Gordon-Reed notes, for example, the push for desegregating schools did mark the beginning of a new turn in Black freedom, but it was also greeted ambivalently by more African Americans than classic narratives of the civil rights movement would have us believe: “Some members of the Black community felt that my parents were making a statement—alas, a negative one—about the quality of teaching and education at Washington.” Leaving Booker T. for a formerly all-white institution was seen in her African American community as equal parts heroic and bordering on betrayal. For most, Black schools were symbols of community empowerment and self-determination—symbols that, in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision, would eventually be degraded and destroyed by an education system that had previously ignored them.

Eschewing nostalgia, Gordon-Reed demands that her readers reexamine their
assumptions about American history and their commitments in the present. Focusing on the history of African Americans in Texas helps her make this compelling argument for an update to the story of America: She welds a new narrative onto the one we already have. “Origin stories matter, for individuals, groups of people, and for nations,” she explains, but we also need to separate out the “origin stories” we tell ourselves from actual history, making it clear that the two are not often the same.

Gordon-Reed challenged the infallibility and the mythology of the founding fathers through her work on Jefferson and the Hemingses, and in On Juneteenth, she spends a considerable amount of time demarcating the differences between the origin story that places the beginning of the United States in Plymouth—“a founding story about valiant people leaving their homes to escape religious persecution”—and the one that places it in Jamestown colony: “It is difficult to wrest an uplifting story from the doings of English settlers who created the colony for no purpose other than making money or, at least, to make a living for themselves.” Starting before 1619 and beyond Jamestown colony, she argues, also gives the African American experience a longer and more international origin story, touching as it would on the presence of Estebanico, an enslaved African explorer who was part of the Spanish expedition of what is now Texas in the 1530s.

Spanish St. Augustine, Gordon-Reed writes, had long existed partly as a settlement for Africans who’d escaped slavery in the English colonies, and ignoring the presence of Africans in other European settlements in North America—whether established by the Spanish, the French, or the Dutch—led to what she calls “an extremely narrow construction of Blackness.” By considering the other Black Americans—those formed outside the reach of the English-speaking colonies—Gordon-Reed also helps us better understand the relationships among African, Hispanic, and Indigenous Americans and reminds us of the non-Anglophone influences on the formation of what became the United States. By incorporating so much recent scholarship on the Atlantic world and the early encounters among various ethnic and racial groups in North America, she argues, we can understand “that the origin story of Africans in North America is much richer and more complicated than the story of twenty Africans arriving in Jamestown in 1619.”

As readers come to the end of On Juneteenth, they begin to realize that as much as the emancipation in Galveston and the original holiday of Juneteenth frame the book, contrasting these different origin stories is one of its central premises. Even the origin story of Texas comes under scrutiny. Building on the scholarship of others, Gordon-Reed notes that the early days of Texas’s struggle for independence from Mexico were also tied to the institution of slavery. Rather than pursue freedom, the white Americans who fought for Texan independence sought to create a slaveholding republic.

Growing up in Jim Crow–era Texas, a young Annette Gordon was not taught this. When it came to the Alamo, the birthplace of modern Texas, she writes, “I didn’t know that an enslaved person was there.” For Americans who wish to avoid the unpleasantness of racism in our country’s past, Gordon-Reed points to the documents themselves. “Race is right there in the documents—official and personal,” she writes. Texas’s own constitution, promulgated after independence in 1836, explicitly excluded free people of African descent from citizenship. Black people in Texas were to be there for one reason: enslavement.

Gordon-Reed also writes of how Texas’s oft-recounted origin story elides the plight of Indigenous peoples. The early Republic of Texas under Sam Houston could potentially countenance living side by side with Indigenous groups like the Alahamas and Couchattas, but later Texas leaders insisted on the familiar American pattern of driving Indigenous groups from their lands. This experience of oppression also linked the fates of enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples: Both had a common enemy in white supremacy, one that was around after slavery’s abolition. As a young girl coming of age during not only the civil rights and Black Power eras but also the rise of the American Indian Movement of the 1970s, Gordon-Reed wondered why Indigenous and African groups had not joined forces against the Europeans in North America. One complicating factor was certainly that some Indigenous peoples also held Africans in slavery. “There was no ‘natural’ alliance between the groups, Gordon-Reed writes, reminding us once again of the problem of crafting myths about the past, as opposed to cold, hard actual history. “Writers, and consumers, of history must take great care not to import the knowledge we have into the minds of people and of circumstances in the past,” she warns.

On Juneteenth begins and ends with the holiday of the same name, and here too Gordon-Reed reminds us that like origin stories, our regional and national holidays say a great deal about the stories we wish to tell about ourselves. While at the beginning of the book Gordon-Reed expresses surprise—and a little consternation—that a holiday celebrated primarily in Texas during her life has become nationally known, at the end she reminisces about how Juneteenth was an important part of her life, and one that incorporated cultural traditions from other groups.

Juneteenth celebrations, Gordon-Reed tells us, included the traditional “red ‘soda-water’”—a delicious strawberry-flavored drink that some argue traces its origins to the hibiscus tea of West Africa—seen at so many African American holiday gatherings, but they also included the preparation of tamales, a dish originating with Mesoamerican civilizations, and pointed to the ways in which Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic Americas intersected in Texas. Such a set of culinary rituals, Gordon-Reed writes, made the day “so very Texan.” But as she goes on to argue, it also made the day—and its history—so very American.

Making Juneteenth into a national holiday not only nationalizes Texas’s history but, Gordon-Reed argues, also serves as a moment of national reflection on the effort needed to destroy slavery and, in its aftermath, the struggle to affirm a new birth of freedom. With Republican politicians pushing to abolish critical race theory and the continued assaults on use of the 1869 Project in the classroom—not to mention the raging debates about Confederate statues and other “Lost Cause” memorials—it is clear that powerful leaders in society also understand the importance of historical memory. Besides origin stories, Gordon-Reed reminds us, history provides us with a way to think about the present and future—and, just as with the past, the remaking of our contemporary world will likely be messier, if potentially more emancipatory, but also more tragic than any of us is willing to fathom.
We know a lesser life does not seem lesser to the person who leads one,” wrote the novelist and critic Diane Johnson in 1972. “His life is very real to him; he is not a minor figure in it.” This wise and witty insight appears in *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives*, Johnson’s monograph on Mary Ellen Peacock Meredith. The adulterous wife of the celebrated Victorian writer George Meredith, the spirited Mary Ellen is one of many “lesser” figures, all too frequently female, who have been more or less excised from the historical record. Johnson’s masterful biography paints an evocative portrait of a woman with grand intellectual ambitions—and thereby dignifies a figure first vilified and then forgotten by most chroniclers of the period.

Johnson’s commitment to remembering the forgotten and humanizing the dehumanized is palpable not just in *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith* but throughout her work. In her 2014 memoir-cum-family genealogy, *Flyover Lives*, Johnson recalls how she “became especially interested in some testimonies by long-departed great-grandmothers, simple stories but all the rarer because the lives of prairie women have usually been lost. Perhaps prairie women at the end of the 18th century didn’t have the leisure to pick up their pens, or maybe they didn’t think their lives were of interest.” But for Johnson, the flyover and lesser lives, so often dismissed as uninteresting, deserve the most scrupulous literary attention. Many of the superb essays she has written for *The New York Review of Books* mount defenses of women who have gone unappreciated, and her fiction, too, is populated by heroines all too apt to be trivialized.

In each of her 12 deft and diverting (if sometimes frothy) novels, there is a woman who seems, at first glance, to be abjectly ordinary. In *Persian Nights*, a finalist for the 1987 Pulitzer Prize and perhaps her best work of fiction, there’s Chloe Fowler, a superficially cheerful but fundamentally
dissatisfied California housewife who finds herself in Iran on the eve of the revolution. In *Le Divorce*, a finalist for the 1997 National Book Award, there’s Isabel Walker, a seemingly ditzy but ultimately canny film school dropout visiting her sister in Paris. And in Johnson’s latest, *Lorna Mott Comes Home*, there’s the eponymous Lorna Mott, an American woman “of a certain age” who toys with the idea of leaving her French husband of 20 years and returning to her native San Francisco.

*Lorna Mott Comes Home* has all the elements of a quintessential Johnson novel: the independent female protagonist, slighted but not cowed by men who routinely underestimate her considerable powers; the philandering husband, usually a Frenchman; the hapless Americans committing shameful gaucheries abroad; the devious plotting, thickened with hints of crime and mystery; the large and complexly entangled cast of characters; and the delightfully arch prose.

In Johnson’s previous novels, these threads wind together to form ornate tapestries. This time around, the parts never cohere into an elegant whole. Instead, *Lorna Mott Comes Home* feels cluttered with events, like a TV series with so many subplots that we scarcely have time to take stock of one arc before we are catapulted into the next. Of course, a disjointed novel could suit our agonized disjuncted moment, when it is so difficult to believe in anything that surrounds the person.”

Her first escape came in 1953, when she fled not to Paris but to America’s own great metropolis: New York, where she was one of 20 young women in a competitive summer internship program at *Mademoiselle* magazine. Another member of her cohort was a prodigy by the name of Sylvia Plath, who subsequently fictionalized her experiences at the magazine in *The Bell Jar*. As they had been for Plath, the relentless rhythms of the city were anathema to Johnson, then a student at what was nominally a women’s college and functionally a finishing school: It offered, and she took, the very course about “Marriage and the Family” that Betty Friedan went on to pillory. Compelled to train for a career as an “airline stewardess, secretary, teacher, [or] nurse,” Johnson had only ever dabbled in literary pursuits—and had never lived anywhere even a little bit loud or chaotic. Though she found New York daunting and its denizens abrasive, it was there that she first encountered people who “lived by writing, and were serious, even fierce, about it.”

She embraced this fierceness herself when she moved to California with her first husband, before she had finished college. While her four young children were napping, she befriended the novelist Alison Lurie, worked toward a PhD in English at UCLA, and completed her first two novels, both of them set in Southern California. By the time she had divorced and remarried in the late 1960s, this time to a successful pulmonologist, she had published *Fair Game*, a romantic farce, and *Loving Hands at Home*, a comedy about promiscuous Mormons. Further novels about Californian intrigues followed in the 1970s, but it was in 1987, with the release of *Persian Nights*, that Johnson evolved into a writer concerned primarily with Americans flailing overseas. After her husband’s 1994 retirement, the couple began splitting their time between San Francisco and Paris, and shortly thereafter, Johnson began work on the comedies of manners for which she is best known.

Whether they are set at home or abroad, Johnson’s fictions have always been united by a common ethic and sensibility. She has always attempted to honor “lesser lives”; she has always aspired to wryness without nihilism; and she has always been staunchly feminist. I use the last term advisedly: Johnson is not an activist and has never been formally affiliated with any political campaigns, nor is she up-to-date on the latest developments in feminist scholarship. Nonetheless, almost all of Johnson’s writing mounts implicit arguments against the impulse to treat women not as people but as fragile ingenues in need of special protections, representatives of a permanent victim class, or, worst of all, ornamental afterthoughts. She pays the first Mrs. Meredith what she takes to be the ultimate compliment when she writes, “Mary Ellen thought of herself as a person, as Victorian women often did not.” Some may object to her emphasis on individualism, as she acknowledged in her response to a letter to the editor in *The New York Review of Books* accusing her of devaluing care work. Her interlocutor uses “the word ‘individualistic’ [as] a term of reproach,” Johnson wrote, but to her, “it is not. I would prefer a society in which all individuals are encouraged to do what interests them or that they have some ability for, and where women are individuals.”

In both her novels and her criticism, Johnson allows women to be individuals. Still, her fiction is almost always richly social: Characters are embedded in intricate communal networks, and drama is generated by cultural clashes. As she once told an interviewer, “It’s kind of the opposite of a lot of people’s writing...where the complexity of the protagonist, the disturbances, very often the psychological evolution of the character, is the subject. I think I’m more interested in the society that surrounds the person.”
Because Johnson is mainly preoccupied with what she has called “the reification...of Americanness” abroad, the ordeal of being a bungling American in Europe, she is often described as an heir to Henry James. Tonally and even temperamentally, she is not much like the Master: Her prose is crisp and droll where his is elaborate, her mode comic where his is grave. But she is drawn to Jamesian scenarios. Her fiction is haunted by the specter of the marriage plot, which it interrogates and subverts. As she wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in 2005, “It may be that the marriage plot itself has seen its day, and in these times of redefined families, plots will change.”

Many of her novels center on moments of romantic redeification. The first of Johnson’s three celebrated books about Americans in France, *Le Divorce*, details the acrimonious divorce of the title, between an American poet and an adulterous French painter. The poet’s younger sister, in town for a supportive visit, is whisked off into a liaison with a married statesman. Johnson’s 2000 *Le Mariage*, the second book of the trilogy, ends with a marriage, but both bride and groom are beset by doubts. They go through with their wedding unenthusiastically, as if marriage were necessary but unpleasant, not unlike a medical procedure. The night before the event, the husband-to-be jokes to a friend, “I’ve begun to think we’re making a big mistake,...hoping by his tone to indicate he really didn’t mean this, though he did.” Meanwhile, an American actress with a moody husband begins an affair with her married neighbor. *L’Affaire* (2003), the final book in the trio, makes good on its title: A newly minted Silicon Valley billionaire, Amy Hawkins, comes to France in search of “culture,” which she pursues by sleeping with a married Austrian and a married Frenchman.

Affairs are to Johnson what marriage was to Austen: Almost all of her novels build up to their consummation. But while acts of infidelity provide essential narrative scaffolding, they are also framed as casual occurrences. In Johnson’s fiction, everyone is engaged in “rather unconcerned adultery,” as the narrator of *Le Divorce* observes. An affair can “almost be a settled thing, one of those social facts people accept with a wink, referring to the well-known Wednesdays (or whenever) of two people, married to others, whose irregular love had been sanctified by a kind of community consensus.”

Grinder concerns loom in the background: the conflict in Serbia in *Le Divorce*, the fall of the shah in *Persian Nights*, gun violence in America throughout. But Johnson’s primary concern is domestic, which is not to say that it is apolitical. Her married heroines are not leading lives that are arid and stifling. Infidelity is their chosen form of rebellion against disappointment and dissatisfaction—not that they are ever blubbery or tragic. Instead, these female characters are consummately practical and unsentimental, if a little dismayed to find themselves incapable of the extravagant romanticism so often expected of them. In *Persian Nights*, Chloe Fowler felt “inwardly ordinary and uncomplicated... She regretted this curse of reasonableness, and longed to be, but knew she could never be, flamboyant.” *L’Affaire’s* Amy Hawkins is in a similar predicament. She recognizes that she is “impervious,” but she wishes for “her heart to be broken, or in some other way to indulge the potentiality for emotion and passion that she knew must lie somewhere beneath her practical commonsense surface”—or, at least, she “hoped” it did.

Bracingly sensible as Johnson’s heroines are, their whirlwind romances yield complex and even operatic plots, reminiscent of the theatrical storylines in the novels of Thomas Hardy. The milieu, too, has a Victorian flavor: The characters are white, comfortable if not fabulously wealthy, knowledgeable about designer clothing and faience, and often reflexively racist, if officially right-thinking. (In *Le Divorce*, the narrator’s sister tells her not to mind the African neighbors: “You don’t have to be afraid of them here, you know, they’re nice Africans.”) Like Victorian novels, Johnson’s books also brim with aphoristic treasures. Of a novelist in *Le Mariage*, she writes, “Her...line of work had taught her to value experiences, but, like all mothers, she didn’t want her children to have to have them.” When one character in *L’Affaire* asks where a dead person is now, his interlocutor replies, “I assume that is a practical and not a metaphysical question.” Comedies of mutual misunderstanding abound: In one scene, a French hostess with American guests makes “a great show of things she had heard Americans like, like ice cubes,” which a waitress dispenses into glasses with tongs.

All of this makes for enjoyable, socially observant, and funny reading. Compared with many works of wan, thin, and self-involved contemporary fiction, which strain for an unearned profundity, Johnson’s light, winking novels sparkle. Amy Hawkins is “accused of frivolity” when she announces that she plans to take cooking and French lessons in France, but she isn’t “troubled by the shallowness of these pursuits; looked at one way, everything was shallow, and from another perspective everything had innate interest and the power to enlarge.” The same might be said of Johnson’s oeuvre: At its best, it dares to take seriously so much that is often deemed feminine or frivolous, and it is therefore amusingly enlarging; at its worst, it is formulac, too much like a glib romantic comedy. Unfortunately, Johnson’s latest novel is not enlarging but claustrophobic.

*Orna Mott Comes Home* has many characters in addition to the obligatory Lorna, a freelance art historian who has decided to leave her longtime French husband and move back to the United States. The husband in question, a retired curator named Armand-Loup, is affable and charismatic, but he is also “a notorious tombeur—that is, skirt chaser.” As Lorna has grown older, he has taken to wooing “ever-younger young women,” a practice that his wife understandably finds insulting. In the
wake of his latest affair, Lorna decides to return to San Francisco in hopes of reviving her languishing career.

Armand is Lorna’s second husband, and San Francisco is where she lived with the first, Ran, who is now married to L’Affaire’s Amy Hawkins. It is also where her three children live with their floundering families. There is Peggy, divorced and struggling to pay off her loan; Ham, a wastrel whose wife is expecting a baby; and Curt, a seemingly successful tech entrepreneur who has recently absconded to Thailand, leaving his wife, Donna, to sort out what proves to be shady dealings. Hovering in the background is a motley assortment of supporting players: an amorous reverend in search of a wife, Peggy’s beautiful daughter Julie, an urbane British politician, and a 20-year-old Brown dropout named Ian who is seemingly devoid of personality—but who will play an unexpectedly large role in the book.

Johnson never specifies exactly when the novel takes place, but as the plot progresses, it becomes clear that Lorna has returned to a haggard San Francisco still reeling from the effects of the 2008 financial meltdown. To one character’s horror, newscasters are reporting, in tones of “sympathy that barely conceal their scorn,” on newly homeless people “living in their cars.” Lorna is dismayed by the state of the country in general and astonished by the astronomical rents in her old neighborhood, so much higher than when she left. (She is curiously insulated from American affairs; it is quite a feat to have so thoroughly avoided articles about how the tech industry has transformed the Bay Area housing market.) Financial anxiety, especially over eviction, is in the air: Peggy accepts what is in all likelihood a predatory loan, while Donna finds herself unable to pay off a $3 million mortgage on the mansion that Curt purchased before his abrupt and unexplained disappearance.

Lorna herself struggles to find an apartment that’s within her dwindling means. The neighborhoods where she naively hoped to live have become unaffordable, and she fears she will deplete her savings as she searches for employment after her long hiatus from full-time lecturing and writing. When she visits a bookstore, excited to sign copies of her new essay collection, she is disappointed to learn that none of the shop’s employees have heard of her; they haven’t even bothered to display her book on the shelves. She feels her irrelevance more and more acutely, and by the time she moves into a ramshackle apartment, she finds herself recalling her marriage fondly. But it isn’t Armand-Loup that she misses: It’s the sprawling country house they shared, with its huge kitchen and shiny amenities. In Lorna Mott Comes Home, the erotic energies directed at married Frenchmen in the rest of Johnson’s corpus are redirected toward the pursuit of desirable real estate.

Johnson’s frequent and somewhat hectoring discussions of her characters’ economic troubles give her latest novel a realistic cast and an admirable political dimension—but they also tend to make it unpleasant to slog through. They are trotted out almost as recitations, without much in the way of analysis, contextualization, or embellishment. Indeed, Lorna Mott Comes Home is full of strange repet...
tions, perhaps the result of poor copy-editing. Yet even if they are an intention-
al feature of the book, they yield frustrating redundancies.

Characters we have already met are introduced as if we had not seen them before. At one point, Ran becomes ir-
ritated, as if for the first time, by something that already irritated him several pages earlier. Confusion is compounded by inconsistency: One character decides not to sell her house, then, pages later, thinks of “her wish to sell the house.” Ian has “no interest in fifteen-year-old girls” when we first encounter him at a charity benefit with Ran’s 15-year-old daughter, Gilda, but shortly thereafter, we learn that he has deflowered and impregnated her. Ran, reasonably enough, is furious with his daughter’s seducer, but later we learn that he “initially accepted Ian’s role in Gilda’s plight as accidental, incorpore-
al, almost as if an airborne seedpod had drifted by her and was merely inhaled”— not a plausible attitude in the father of a violated 15-year-old in any case.

Lorna’s quieter struggles to adjust to her increasingly ad-
vanced age and her new environs are per-
haps the most engrossing and believable parts of the novel. Though she sets out to “prove, to herself if to no one else, that you can make a new life at any age,” she is not quite successful. Financial tribula-
tions aside, she remains unable to adjust to life in a society that fetishizes female youthfulness in much the way that her husband does. As she contemplates the prospect of resuscitating her lapsed ca-
reer, she wonders whether “her own age and grandmotherhood” would “detract or add to her authority as an art critic. For a man, it would add, or be irrelevant. For a woman, she didn’t know.” In the friend’s apartment where she is staying as she seeks her own lodgings, things have “the brave but losing familiar among Lorna’s contemporaries, of belonging to a downsizing person of a grandmotherly age and former affluence.”

At first, Lorna is so happy to be back in San Francisco that she can overlook many small inconveniences. She is enthralled by “the idea of wonderful America, its big mountains and expansive generos-
ity”; she had missed enchiladas; and she was sick of being “the awkward American woman, never quite right, said to once have had some career in America, but never, ever getting the cheeses straight.” But if she was never quite at home in France, she finds she is no longer quite at home in California, either. Now the Bay and the bridges, which she thought of as “positive attributes” when she was in France, strike her “as features of the punishing commutes exasperated people were forced into daily.” She hurts her ankle and, lacking health insurance, is appalled at the cost of her treatment. In France, there are “trains and medi-
cal care,” while in America, people are “being evicted and living in containers.”

To her chagrin, Lorna discovers that she is in a permanent state of exile, a full inhabitant of neither her native country nor her adoptive one. Worse, her na-
tive country has become more monstrous than she remembered. Johnson harps on its monstrousness by sounding the same notes—mostly about the vicissitudes of the housing market—over and over. If the results do not make for especially scintillating reading, they are at least somewhat justified: Lorna’s difficulties are oppressive in part because they are so unremitting.

Despite the many moving sections about Lorna’s de-
cline, the focus of Lorna Mott Comes Home is not, by the end, its eponym’s spiritual vagrancy and attendant turmoil, nor the United States’ larger injustices. Rather, Ian and Gilda’s fling and the ensuing pregnancy, which Gilda is determined to see through to the end, take center stage. Why Ran and Amy, Silicon Valley progressives with money to spare, would not do more to persuade their 15-year-old daughter, who is already beset by medical problems, to refrain from carrying her child to term is hard enough to grasp—but why they think it is expedi-
dent for her to marry Ian is even more incom-
prehensible. All Johnson has to say in the way of clarification is that they, too, cannot “explain the vestigial docility that was making them make [Gilda] conform to the world’s belief in marriage”—not that the world, even in the practically medieval days of 2008, is especially inclined to believe in marriage between minors and their statutory rapists.

Johnson can do, and has done, better, both in her most accomplished novels and es-
pecially in her sharp criticism, which is reliably allergic to cant and unreason. The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith, in particular, is a masterpiece that deserves to be hailed as a classic. In it, she fiction-
alizes history, endowing desiccated facts with a fresh vividness that brings them back to life. In contrast, Lorna Mott Comes Home treats fiction as history and thereby leaves its characters virtually for dead. It is to Johnson’s credit that she takes on timely themes—a post–Great Recession novel about Americans and Americanness that made no mention of the country’s failure to serve its struggling demographic—would not ring true—but the informa-
tion, details, and lists of events she offers up are schematic and bereft of experien-
tial texture. Though she reiterates the bleak realities, she neither animates nor analyzes them. For this reason, the lesser lives Johnson hopes to magnify end up feeling shrunkenn.
One year after America’s public schools were forced to go remote overnight in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we know that students have lost time with teachers, friends, and extended family; have lost the daily interactions with crossing guards, cafeteria cashiers, and other workers who once seemed like a small part of their lives but are now starkly missed; and have even lost loved ones, financial security, and health—as well as, we are told, “significant ground” in learning. Above all else, what the pandemic revealed about our educational system is that public schools provide far more than they should, serving as “the great equalizer” in an increasingly stratified society—serving in fact as welfare states, as health care facilities, as child care centers, as sources for counseling and for free breakfasts and lunches.

As we begin to reopen our society with the worst of the pandemic likely in our past, we are thus left with a question: Should we continue to task schools with serving as our primary social safety net for young people, with the hours of instruction received by students now standing in for the redistribution of wealth, or should we take seriously the holistic needs of students as human beings and citizens of a democracy? The summer of 2020 was an opportunity—mostly missed—to reimagine what schools could and should be like: moving some classes outdoors to give kids back their urgently needed recreational time and renovating buildings to provide beautiful, functional spaces, for instance. The need for smaller class sizes to enable social distancing could have led to demands to hire more teachers and reduce class sizes permanently, a measure that could not only put students one to two months ahead in content knowledge but also revitalize their engagement and deepen their relationships with their teachers. But instead of reckoning with the real social and emotional crisis facing school children, many administrators and think tanks opined about “learning loss,” or the number of instructional minutes students missed in math and reading—especially the poor and working-class children who are most “behind.” Thus, as society reopens, children will face, along with the economic and emotional consequences of the pandemic, “high hurdles” in making up these math and reading deficits, according to the thought leaders who measure them by standardized test scores.

No one has yet spelled out how falling behind an estimated one to five months in instruction could rob children of their future, because most people understand there is no need to elaborate on an article of faith. The most radical proposal for reimagining the structure and content of education to come from a government official was New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s cynical bid to preempt teachers (who, he implied, could be removed from the classroom thanks to technological advances) and ignore the wishes of students and parents entirely by turning over the future of the schools to billionaires like Bill Gates and Eric Schmidt, formerly of Microsoft and Google.

Exactly whom education should serve, as well as how and for what purposes, are the central questions raised in Christina Viviana Groeger’s new history, The Education Trap. A study of the transformation of informal education and the rise of formal education in the city of Boston, Groeger’s book doesn’t answer all of these questions but instead seeks to remind us that more hours spent in the classroom does not necessarily equal a brighter, more egalitarian future for all. She also reminds us that schools cannot be considered, as Barack Obama once put it in a State of the Union address, “the...
best anti-poverty program around.” That is the role of social programs that actually redistribute wealth, not of children burdened with the expectation to study their way into the ranks of the elite.

Groeger’s choice of Boston is fitting, given its role as a pioneer and site of struggle in the expansion of educational access throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. The home of Harvard University and educational reformer Horace Mann, Boston is also where the first legal challenge to segregation in the United States was raised and shut down in favor of “separate but equal” schools and where, years later, the effort to integrate the city’s school system through busing was met with violent protests. It is, in other words, a case study in the apparent contradiction between a citizenry with among the highest average years of schooling internationally by the age of 25 and one that still experiences some of the highest levels of inequality and lowest levels of social mobility in the Global North.

Starting her story in the late 19th century, Groeger explores the American education system as we know it today, from its Progressive roots and rise during the Gilded Age to the Great Depression, by which point formal education had replaced kinship networks, charity, and unregulated institutions and served as the primary route to employment. Though this transformation opened up new economic opportunities, it did not necessarily produce economic advancement, Groeger observes. Even worse, by making the schools one of the few means to resolve a vast number of social problems, the American education system has turned the youngest and most vulnerable among us into lab rats for every ideological trend and political scheme meant to secure American competitiveness, efficiency, and global dominance.

To find a time when education was not seen as the primary way to secure a job or level the playing field, Groeger reaches back more than a century to when the shift from craftwork to factory work began to remake the US economy. With this monumental economic change came all sorts of social changes as well. American society and culture began to move away from tightly organized and exclusionary ethnic and family-based networks toward similarly exclusive but far more contingent ones created by both a national economy and increasingly powerful federal and local governments. These social changes also marked new innovations in education. With the onset of industrialization, learning on the job was soon replaced by trade schools, charity-run vocational training programs, and for-profit and nonprofit commercial schools. Public secondary schools also began to proliferate throughout the country.

For many working-class Americans, the formalization of education offered the possibility of economic opportunity—and certainly the vision of a more just society, in the case of free public schools—while placing the burden for economic advancement on the individual rather than on society. But for wealthy Americans, this posed a threat to their unquestioned grip on the institutions of learning. As Groeger notes, in 1880, Boston Latin—the oldest public school in the country and one of the most elite—found it necessary to move from the city’s North End, which had become a neighborhood of working-class immigrants, to the South End, a residential district lined with rows of brick Victorian townhouses. Likewise, as more and more working-class families sent their children to the city’s public schools, the Boston elite—perhaps worried that free public education would undermine the social order on which their wealth depended, or perhaps merely reluctant to rub shoulders with the masses—shipped their children off quietly to private boarding schools in the insulated wilds outside the city.

New, often unregulated institutions that sought to educate and enrich an emerging working and middle class became instruments of social mobility for these newly ascendant classes. But they also reproduced and solidified other hierarchies, Groeger writes, by undercutting worker power and moving craft training away from the shop floor. Most important, she argues, they promoted the notion of “merit” as a way both to open up schools and to explain away the extraordinary disparities between economic winners and losers that these new formal institutions of education produced. (“Be quick to recognize merit and the labor agitator will find it difficult to get your workmen to exchange their independence for a union card,” noted one manufacturer in 1906.)

Like Obama nearly a century later, Progressive-era reformers insisted that educational uplift was the best anti-poverty program that a capitalist system needed. Through vocational education, the working poor could gain the skills to bootstrap their way up to well-paying jobs. Low wages were not a sign of a broken distributive system but instead signified the “value” of those who performed unskilled labor. Raising wages thus called for raising the status of work through training and professionalism in philanthropist-run vocational schools. Presaging today’s charter school proponents, these reformers insisted that the self-improvement of society’s most vulnerable was the antidote to social ills, not a more fair and equal distribution of society’s wealth and power—and also like today’s charter school proponents, they sought to erect barriers to their new institutions of social uplift for those deemed unworthy of help.

For more successful and enduring in its legacy than vocational schools was commercial education, which trained retail, office, and industrial workers. In 1906, the mayor of Boston argued that the city’s commercial dominance would be won first and foremost by the youth in schoolrooms, invoking the battle metaphors that often signify the involvement of business in education (and which would later be echoed by the Reagan-era “Nation at Risk” report). At the time, less than half of office and sales workers over the age of 20 had a high school education; by 1940, 85 percent would. Though the “business training revolution was a quiet one,” Groeger attributes the early 20th century surge in public high school day enrollment to a widespread demand by workers and employers for publicly subsidized training in corporate practices like

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accounting, which seems warranted given that a majority of female high school students and a large percentage of male ones were enrolled in the commercial (versus the college prep or industrial) education track. Women and second-generation immigrants in particular used formal education to obtain jobs in the business world. For many working-class families, entering the fields of clerical and sales employment represented a step up into the middle class, yet “still-classic scholarly portrayals of white-collar work such as C. Wright Mills’s White Collar neglect the role of women and downplay the sense of achievement of many who were able to access this work,” Groeger writes.

More often than not, however, hiring managers continued to select and promote workers based on traits associated with ethnicity, race, and class rather than their hours of schooling or their technical skill. Groeger finds that only 12 percent of women office workers surveyed at the time found their jobs through a school placement bureau, while 40 percent did so through a friend or relative. And “[despite] historically high levels of educational attainment among Boston’s Black youth”—who were more likely to attend school than white working-class children—“virtually no companies hired African Americans, other than a few Black-owned businesses.” Questioned about the qualifications for her job, one secretary said (it can only be read dryly) “chronic cheerfulness.”

“Cheerfulness” and “good character” are, of course, in the eye of the beholder, and working-class Eastern and Southern European women were seen by employers as unrefined, undainty, and lacking in either category. And when limiting access to jobs through outright discrimination failed, white male Protestant elites did so through pay scales and promotion ladders that had little to do with educational attainment but served to stratify workplaces into low-paid clerical workers and their higher-paid, more respected managers. The conditional nature of employment had the added benefit for employers of discouraging union organizing efforts. The fact that these strategies persist and are recognizable to us today should lead us to question whether these kinds of worker trainings are an effective tool for achieving social and economic equality.

While also framed in the language of uplift and meritocratic achievement, the new systems of higher education that emerged in the 20th century proved to be even more of a challenge to the American ideal of economic advancement. Here, too, despite the lofty liberatory rhetoric espoused both then and now, colleges and universities in Boston worked primarily on behalf of the wealthy, giving them an edge in navigating the worlds of business, teaching, and law and undermining the working-class and marginalized communities within the city.

College placement offices in Boston shaped the employment options of graduates, agreeing on the meaning of “merit” in almost conspiratorial harmony with corporations, so that ultimately, as Groeger points out, the same degree could have a much different value depending on the student. In one letter from the Harvard Alumni Placement Service to Kidder, Peabody and Co., a placement officer writes, “Although his scholastic achievements have not been outstanding, his extra-curricular activities provide testimony to his personal characteristics and are evidence of his standing among his classmates,” showing that popularity was prized above academic excellence. Naturally, businesses also wanted to be assured that they were hiring a so-called company man, not a rabble-rouser or someone who would otherwise not fit in. As another letter from the Harvard placement office put it: “It has, of course, occurred to me that you may not react favorably to Woodhouse’s record on account of his race. I realize that it is difficult to imagine a native of India being particularly successful in working with New Englanders. I want to reassure you...Woodhouse is extremely attractive and has made good with all kinds of people around here.” As for the man who majored in English literature but continued to speak “the language of the small town machine-shop,” such a person could not be helped: “In no outward respect is he a college man.”

Like Obama nearly a century later, progressive reformers saw schools as the best anti-poverty program a capitalist system can offer.
That Harvard was still admitting 90 percent of its applicants as late as the 1940s shows just how much the cost of a private education barred entry for those deemed undesirable to the upper class and the upper ranks of the professional classes, but what is less well-known is how private universities opposed working-class demands for free public education. The founder of one night law school (accurately) accused Harvard Law of jealously guarding its degree-granting power out of fear that its “spineless aristocrats” would run into competition from his own school’s graduates. As in business and law, education elites reinforced their position at the top in the face of expanding access to their field by introducing expensive credentialing requirements intended to deter, exclude, or relegate to the lower ranks even the most knowledgeable and experienced women, African Americans, and Irish Catholics (who were more likely to be working-class) on the apparent basis of merit. One Boston school administrator was so concerned by the growing number of Irish Catholic teachers that he began openly recruiting wealthier Protestant “outsiders” in a bid to find the “best teachers,” arguing that “staff that is recruited all from one source inevitably becomes narrow, conceited and unprogressive.”

In this program of exclusionary recruitment, in which “merit” actually served as a proxy for class, we can see the antecedents of contemporary organizations like Teach For America, which claims to raise the status of the teaching profession by enlisting young, inexperienced graduates from elite universities to teach for two-year terms in low-income public schools. Despite their good intentions and educational attainments, these “corps members” do not perform any better than other novice teachers, and they ultimately weaken worker power by absorbing the mentoring time and resources of lifetime teachers, while making it difficult to build solidarity amid the constant turnover and chaos. And just as working-class Irish American women were mainly to be found teaching the primary grades at the turn of the century, hierarchies in pay continue today, with better wages for those teaching the higher grades as well as for those with advanced credentials. Early childhood teachers receive the lowest pay, and their ranks are composed almost entirely of women, 40 percent of them women of color, compared with about 17 percent of K-12 teachers.

In Boston, as Groeger details, working-class teachers fought unsuccessfully for state-funded teacher training programs, arguing in a 1901 debate with administrators (who they said wanted to model the schools after corporate boards) that the history of education in Massachusetts was that of a class war “waged by the propertied class against the plebeian and working-class women of Boston.” The organization of schools remained centralized in the hands of predominantly white male Protestant “experts,” who exerted their control through highly subjective rating systems that evaluated teachers’ personal characteristics—another prominent feature of education “reform” today. In a 1917 graduation speech, one teacher satirized the Department of Educational Investigation and Measurement:

What do they investigate? Everything—even our most secret thoughts, words, and actions…. What do they measure? Everything that can possibly be measured…. My friends in the profession no longer eat at noon, for they must save time. One munches a bar of chocolate as she works; another needs only a glass of water and a date to keep alive the spark of life…. Just think what we are coming to! Beware that you do not become a pompous five-foot measuring stick. I am a healthy-looking specimen now, but I feel that I am not long in this sphere. Efficiency takes hold of me.

Reformers who see more hours spent in the classroom as the best way to address inequality miss inequality’s root causes.

The rise of job training and formal education in America is, as Groeger observes, “a contradictory process of both opportunity and exclusion rather than a simple story of educational expansion bringing greater equality.” And it helps us explain how public schools today can both broaden and limit our possibilities for the future. The “trap” in Groeger’s title refers to the unique and persistent tendency in the United States to focus on education rather than worker power as a panacea for social ills and economic inequality.

Education is important, and in a democracy, it should be a universal right. It has undoubtedly bettered the lives of some Americans, especially those deemed worthy of merit according to the various strategies devised by education elites for categorizing and sorting students into hierarchies. But it has not always been, and cannot be expected to continue as, the only vehicle for social welfare and human empowerment for the many. It is not a substitute for fair wages, better working conditions, or worker bargaining power, nor is it a path to attaining them. For while the demographic composition of wealthy Americans has broadened over time, today’s more gender-equal and diverse elites continue to employ the same strategies as the 20th-century WASPs to deter economic advancement by the working class, using educational merit as a tool for concealing the real privileges and power that they inherited rather than earned.

Reformers who see more hours spent in the classroom as the best way to address inequality—including the heightened disparities brought about by Covid-19—will inevitably propose (as the consulting firm McKinsey did in a recent report) that we must combat “learning loss” with programs like high-intensity tutoring. These programs sound punishing, and without a more robust welfare state and a set of social democratic institutions, they will not necessarily help our children secure “a bright future.” The brittle vision of whom and what education serves remains almost exclusively defined by managers and employers (and their well-paid consultants) instead of the educators who do the work and the students who are supposed to benefit. It would be a crime to let such a moment of drastic social transformation pass us by without any part of our public schools—their grossly unequal funding, their prioritization of the schedules and needs of adults over those of kids, their dual nature and ambiguous social role in sorting the deserving from the undeserving and the rich from the poor—actually being transformed as well.
San Pedro Sula, Honduras

It’s been over six months since back-to-back hurricanes Eta and Iota ravaged Honduras, but even now, people displaced by the floodwaters are still living in sodden tents under the CA-4 highway. In addition to serving as shabby refuge for those whose homes were washed away, camps like these have become de facto gathering spots for the many migrants who have tried to make the treacherous journey to the US but have been prevented somewhere along the way. The Biden administration is now pushing Latin American countries to deploy troops to stem the flow of migrants into the US; so far Honduras, Mexico, and Guatemala have signed on. This increasing militarization of the borders—without relieving any of the many crises that are making migrants flee—means that the choices facing these families will only get harder.

—Jared Olson

Close quarters: This camp beneath an overpass (pictured at left) is home to about a dozen families in the Chamelecón suburb of San Pedro Sula.

Militarized borders: Honduran special forces, like this soldier at a checkpoint in Omoa (bottom left), will soon be an increasingly regular sight along the border with Guatemala.

Out of options: A mother and son, inside their tent beneath an overpass (bottom right), have not received support to rebuild their home.
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