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UTOPIA

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"The need for utopian thinking is more pressing now than at any time since the end of World War II."
THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY LIKES TO THINK OF ITSELF AS THE PARTY OF LABOR, ONE that represents minimum-wage workers, the so-called white working class, unionized labor, and employees from vulnerable communities attempting to overcome structural hurdles. But the party has done little to stop one of the most persistent anti-labor forces in American society and politics: the current Supreme Court. The Roberts Court—this era of jurisprudence presided over by Chief Justice John Roberts—has been the most anti-labor court since the New Deal, and every term it gets a little bit worse.

This term saw a particularly devastating attack on labor rights in the case Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid. Not only did Roberts and his conservative brethren and sister justices use the case to vitiate the ability of labor to organize workers; they did it by reviving an old argument made by segregationists. In the process, their ruling undermined a raft of regulations meant to prevent businesses from discriminating against workers or customers. It’s a five-alarm-fire bell for those concerned about the rights of people as opposed to corporations—or it would be, if only there was anybody to hear it.

*Cedar Point* was decided at the end of June. At issue was a California regulation that required corporate farmers like Cedar Point (a 300-acre strawberry farm in Northern California) to allow union organizers onto their premises to talk to the laborers. The organizers’ access was limited to three times a day (early morning, late evening, and during the lunch break) so as not to interrupt the farmwork, and to no more than 120 days a year.

In a 6-3 ruling, Roberts, joined by the other justices appointed by Republican presidents, struck down the California regulation. The court ruled that the regulation was an exercise of the government’s power of eminent domain and amounted to a “taking” of private property by the government. Specifically, it argued that the regulation was a form of per se taking, or a government “seizure” of land instead of a mere regulatory restriction on land use. Roberts said that Cedar Point was thus entitled to compensation for the government’s violation of its property rights under the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution.

Roberts’s ruling was unnecessarily extreme. Instead of the wrong-but-narrow ruling he could have written, which would have framed the California regulation in less sweeping terms, he went for the jugular. He wrote that the “right to exclude” was “one of the most treasured” property rights and that property could not be “invaded” without compensation to the owner. What that means in practice is that even if the government wanted to compensate Cedar Point and all other factory farms, the cost to the taxpayers would be prohibitive. The decision thus effectively nullifies the government’s ability to enable union organizers’ access to labor at its place of work.

The effect of this decision on labor rights in California will be bad. But what makes it even worse is that it is unlikely to stop with strawberry growers. The notion that property owners have a “right to exclude” that cannot be violated without compensation is pulled directly from old-school segregationists who argued that they could not be forced to serve customers of color at their lunch counters. By resurrecting that argument, rejected by the Supreme Court in 1964, Roberts has given shape, form, and breath to a beastly new legal logic.

Harvard Law professor Niko Bowie tweeted a few examples of where this could lead: “Anti-discrimination laws ‘take’ employers’ ‘right to exclude’ workers of color, pregnant workers, and LGBTQ+ workers…. Fair housing laws ‘take’ landlords’ ‘right to exclude’ renters of color, families, and renters with vouchers…. Endangered species laws ‘take’ landowners’ ‘right to exclude’ conservationists.”

This brings me back to the Democrats, who could intervene by, say, working to expand the Supreme Court but haven’t so far. If they won’t stand up for labor’s right to organize, will they bother to reject the argument that business owners can exclude people of color from their property, or LGBTQ+ workers from their office park? How many bipartisan commissions need to be erected before Democrats use their power to dilute the worst instincts of the conservatives on the court?

*Cedar Point* shows that the court’s conservatives are willing to step into a time machine to take away the rights of constituencies Democrats claim to care about. But I’m not even sure our elected officials noticed.
No Offense
David Bromwich

Secret Science
Did Anthony Fauci tell the whole truth about gain-of-function research?

R. ANTHONY FAUCI HAS SERVED AS DIRECTOR OF THE National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) since 1984. His salient qualities would seem to be a genial concern for our well-being and a fund of practical wisdom informed by expertise. Still, 37 years in a position of enormous power is probably too long not to nurture delusions of infallibility.

Fauci confirmed that impression when, in a June 9, 2021, interview with NBC’s Chuck Todd, he said, “A lot of what you’re seeing as attacks on me, quite frankly, are attacks on science.” The reason his critics resent him, Fauci added, is that, throughout the Covid siege, he has been a source of “inconvenient truths.” Just how inconvenient have his statements been, and how truthful?

Testifying before the Senate on May 11, Fauci was asked by Rand Paul: “Do you still support [National Institutes of Health] funding of the lab in Wuhan?” “Senator Paul,” replied Fauci, “with all due respect, you are entirely and completely incorrect.” Few in the audience would have known that Fauci’s NIAID did funnel money, through a grant to a North Carolina virologist, Dr. Ralph Baric, to support gain-of-function research on bat viruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Gain-of-function research—which can make a disease more lethal or infectious—had been shut down by a US moratorium that lasted from 2014 to 2017. The link to China was cut by a presidential order in April 2020. So, Fauci’s testimony was not literally false: NIAID wasn’t still supporting the bat virus research in the Wuhan lab; and the support had been at one remove.

The avowed purpose of gain-of-function research is to combat a future pandemic that nature hasn’t yet found the ingenuity to launch. But the investment also has a potential military use—to sicken and kill enemies in large numbers. And criticism of this experimental subculture has come largely from scientists themselves. Richard Ebright, a professor of chemical biology at Rutgers, said that the Fauci-Baric model—using gain-of-function techniques in an urban center, in a lab known for its failure to maintain the highest level of safety—was like “looking for a gas leak with a lighted match.”

Fauci’s early and insistent claim that Covid-19 came from nature was abetted by a friendly subterfuge. Dr. Peter Daszak, an associate of Baric, organized a letter of February 19, 2020, signed by 27 public health scientists, which affirmed the pandemic’s natural origin. (In a February 6 e-mail, Daszak had coordinated with Baric to keep his name off the public letter, so as not to arouse a well-founded suspicion of a conflict of interest.) This gave Fauci a breathing space of several months, during which his reputation rose steadily.

Early on, Fauci declared that masks were unnecessary. He later confessed that he had shaded the truth to avert a run on vital equipment. When he gradually revised upward the percentage of vaccinated Americans required for herd immunity, what was really changing was his estimate of how much truth we could take, and when.

Further into his exchange with Paul, Fauci offered some reassuring words: “Dr. Baric is not doing gain-of-function research, and if it is, it is according to the guidelines, and it is being conducted in North Carolina.” Well, is he or isn’t he? Because if he is doing that research, who would know better than Fauci? In this testimony, as in much of his conduct over the past two years, Dr. Fauci was speaking “nothing but the truth.” Yet he was mindful of what Jesuits used to call a reservation.

A reservation, in this sense, is an unspoken qualification. The speaker telegraphs a public meaning, confident it will be misunderstood. He holds in reserve a private meaning whose release might damage a higher cause (a cause known to the speaker and God, of which God approves). For God, in this context, we can take, and when.

Several Wuhan lab researchers had been suddenly hospitalized in November 2019 with an illness reported to be influenza. A comprehensive June 3 Vanity Fair article by Katherine Eban—following trenchant investigative pieces arguing against the came-from-nature hypothesis by Nicholson Baker and Nicholas Wade—revealed that officials at the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance were advised not to look into the “Pandora’s box” of the Wuhan lab. After the outbreak, the Chinese government incidentally removed from the online record 22,000 virus samples and sequences, to hamper any inquiry into the source of Covid-19. Fauci hardly registered a demur at these irregularities.

His advocacy of gain-of-function research may have begun...
Anthony Fauci may be remembered as a warning more than an exemplar: a bureaucrat who became a hero in his own eyes.

with his support for alleviation of the AIDS epidemic, but it got a considerable boost from his service as George W. Bush’s bio-terror czar. He showed a keen interest in strengthening the human immune response to pathogens such as those that cause anthrax and plague. A few years into the Obama administration, one could still encounter Fauci—in a 2011 Washington Post op-ed, cosigned by Francis Collins, director of the NIH, and the virologist Gary Nabel—arguing that the benefits of “engineered viruses” made it a “risk worth taking.” Nor did he let up under Trump. At an NIAID conference in 2018, Fauci celebrated the lifting of the “pause” on such research. With government in “upstream” control of funding, guidance, and publications, what could go wrong?

Many in the scientific community now suggest that a lab-leak origin of Covid-19 is likelier than a natural one. The virus seems too perfect, it drills into human tissues so neatly, and no intervening adaptations have been found in nature. Anthony Fauci may be remembered, in the end, as a warning more than an exemplar: an adventurous bureaucrat in the field of scientific research who became a hero in his own eyes. The trouble begins when such a person asks for our implicit trust in return for his good intentions.

WITH INEVITABLE REGULARITY, RACIAL INJUSTICE AND VIOLENCE lead to moments of national conflict when even white Americans can no longer ignore the issue. And just as inevitably, instead of addressing this country’s pervasive racism and anti-Blackness, white Americans locate the problem somewhere within Black people themselves.

We’re in yet another of those moments, as last summer’s promised “racial reckoning” turns out to be a white lie. Black demands for full citizenship and equality are being treated as entitlement, calls for white racial accountability redefined as white persecution, and anti-racism falsely construed as anti-whiteness. To reestablish unchallenged white dominance, a movement of white resistance, or anti-anti-racism, is working tirelessly to blot out what it sees as a problematic presence—purging Black folks from democracy by stripping voting rights, erasing Black struggle from history by banning the teaching of slavery and its legacy, and prohibiting protest that threatens the white supremacist status quo.

We can be shocked, but certainly not surprised. This nation has a long history of counterbalancing any move toward Black liberation with the insistence that Black existence is better wholly removed or more tightly controlled. In an 1814 missive addressing the prospect of African American emancipation, Thomas Jefferson advocated for Black expatriation to another country, contending that without the yoke of slavery around their necks, African Americans were “pests in society.” Abraham Lincoln, even as he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, told a delegation of Black leaders invited to the White House that “your race suffer very greatly… by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence,” and placed the blame for “white men cutting one another’s throats” on Black folks requesting equality, claiming “but for your race among us there could not be war.” Lincoln suggested the solution was for Black people to “sacrifice something of your present comfort” by picking up stakes and relocating abroad, an idea the president would support until days before his assassination.

Many would assert that Jefferson and Lincoln were just white “men of their time,” but even as the times have changed, this pervasive white American attitude has not. The Republican Party has gone all-in on attacking critical race theory, labeling it a “dangerous ideology,” “anti-American,” and “a blatant attempt to change the foundational principles of our nation,” despite the fact that no GOP lawmaker seems to know what CRT is. Conservative legislatures are seeking to ban the teaching of structural racism in 22 states, though CRT itself is already not being taught outside of graduate and law schools. The party has taken a similar approach to the 1619 Project, introducing federal
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bills to defund the teaching of the curriculum to students in grades K-12. Under the guise of anti-riot measures—and to push the idea that protest for Black lives is inherently violent—over 70 bills that criminalize protest have been proposed around the country, including multiple “hit and kill” laws that would effectively make it legal to run over protesters with a car.

Some of this is cynical political calculation. Conservative propagandist Christopher Rufo admitted in March that his “goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.” But that strategy works only because it is easy to stoke white fears of status loss in the face of even the most minor Black progress, an outlook that views Black appeals for equality as a kind of racial overreach. The more Black liberation movements are viewed by conservatives as potentially successful, the more vigorous the reactionary effort to shut them down, to demean them as a threat to the country and, more importantly, white feelings. (Note how many of the right-wingers opposing CRT claim it makes children feel bad.) It’s not us, it’s you, in other words.

In 1961, as white parents raged against integration, James Baldwin addressed what motivated their anger: “They do not really know what it is they are afraid of, but they know they are afraid of something, and they are so frightened that they are nearly out of their minds.... We would never, never allow Negroes to starve, to grow bitter, and to die in ghettos all over the country if we were not driven by some nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes.”

And here we are again. I noted last September that white support for Black Lives Matter, which surged immediately after George Floyd’s murder, had already fallen precipitously less than two months later. A recent New York Times investigation finds that a year later, “Republicans and white people have actually become less supportive of Black Lives Matter than they were before the death of George Floyd—a trend that seems unlikely to reverse anytime soon.” In tandem with that drop-off in support, there’s been a rise in “tough on crime” sentiment, a reaction to the defund-the-police messaging that gained traction last summer. Never mind that crime is down overall and that the 2020 increases in homicides occurred not only in cities that trimmed police funds—always by tiny amounts that fall far from actual defunding—but also in those that made no cuts to police budgets or poured yet more money into law enforcement.

Jennifer Chudy, an assistant professor of political science at Wellesley College who contributed to the Times study, expressed skepticism last year that white support for BLM would hold. Recently, noting that white support for Black civil rights correlates with racial sympathy, Chudy said that “less than 20 percent [of white people] feel sympathy towards...every flavor of Black suffering, from microaggression to physical altercations akin to what George Floyd faced.”

And thus, for an awful lot of white Americans, the complications of racism would be solved if Black people would stop complaining about it. If only we’d all just go along to get along, things would feel a lot better. Nearly 120 years ago, in The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois addressed the query that is almost never overtly posed to Black folks but is always embedded in the national understanding of race: “How does it feel to be a problem?” It remains the wrong question.
Which Is the More Prescient Dystopia?

**Gattaca**

David M. Perry

The hair fiber may have scored a 9.3 GQ, but it doesn’t come from Hawke’s character, whose real name is Vincent. Vincent is an in-valid, a child conceived in the back seat of a Buick and allowed to develop as nature sees fit. He’s got a 99 percent chance of developing a heart condition, and his life expectancy is 30 years. He’s also brilliant and wants to be an astronaut, but he has no chance of passing the genetic screen for a space gig at the Gattaca Aerospace Corporation. So he engages in a criminal conspiracy with the real Jerome (Jude Law). Jerome was genetically engineered to near perfection, becoming a champion swimmer and a silver medalist in the Olympics before suffering a spinal injury in a car crash. (Later we find out that Jerome, unable to tolerate being second best, had stepped in front of the car. It’s the rare disability-suicide.

**Parable of the Sower**

Niela Orr

The events in Octavia E. Butler’s 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* presage this moment of mass shootings, global warming, en masse migration from California, a pandemic that throws into relief rampant structural inequalities, widespread drug abuse, and a presidential candidate who campaigned on returning the country to a sense of so-called normalcy. (In the book’s sequel, 1998’s *Parable of the Talents*, one politician promises to “Make America Great Again.”) When the novel was published, it was set 31 years in the future. The gap between the version of life Butler imagined and the one we’re living in is closing.

*Parable of the Sower* tells the story of activist Lauren Oya Olamina, who is 15 when the book begins and lives in an increasingly destabilized Southern California with her minister father, her stepmother, and her four brothers. Like other micro-communities in their Los Angeles County town, the Olaminas and a handful of other families live behind a wall to escape looting, murder, sexual assault, drug abuse, arson, and corporate slavery. Responding to her environment, Lauren has already started to develop Earthseed, the spiritual philosophy she creates based on the notion that “God is change.” She lives with a condition called hyperempathy, which causes her to become ill when she vicariously experiences the suffering of others. It is perhaps this hyperempathy that makes Lauren so attuned to the impending doom around the corner (literally, for her and her compound). She seems to be the most worried person in her community and suggests that people refine their emergency preparedness for a series of catastrophic events. She reads history books to fortify herself; in a conversation with a friend, Lauren underscores the significance of the Black Death in the 14th century, saying, “It took a plague to make some of the people realize that things could change.” Eventually her suspicions come true, and Lauren leads a band of travelers to Northern California in search of freedom, paying jobs, and affordable water.

In a present-day America that’s reeling from the toll of the pandemic, the War on Drugs, the prison-industrial complex, reproductive oppression, and weakened labor unions and that is constantly threatened by white supremacy, the cowardice of career politicians, and the avarice of the wealthy, the lessons of *Parable of the Sower* have practical application. The principles of Martine and Bina Aspen Rothblatt’s Terasem Movement (founded in 2002), which focuses
plot point that places the blame on society rather than on disability.) Jerome makes a deal to provide Vincent with hair, blood, urine, and skin samples in exchange for a portion of Vincent’s salary. The fraud works. Vincent becomes a navigator, but before he can launch into space, the mission director at Gattaca is murdered. A manhunt ensues, the cops find an eyelash from Vincent himself, and the movie rolls forward.

It’s a pretty good plot. Vincent has a genetically engineered younger brother, Anton, against whom the naturally conceived in-valid measures himself, a tension that plays out in adulthood. Vincent helps Irene realize that even if she’s not perfect according to the charts (she’s “valid,” but no 9.3), she can do more than she realizes. But it’s not the plot that made the story endure; rather, it’s the film’s vision of the world.

The premises of Gattaca feel real not just because its characters espouse long-held eugenic principles in the development of prenatal testing and genetic engineering technologies but because the movie pairs those ideologies with surveillance. It’s one thing to have an ableist viewpoint about the value of people, another to have the technology for genetic engineering, and yet a third to build a society around the routine penetration of the body to extract blood, urine, and saliva and measure it against a universal database.

The film isn’t perfect. Aside from the presence of a Black geneticist and a few extras, its world is extremely white, and I don’t think that’s an accident. As we watch Vincent embark on his early career as a janitor, he provides narration about the times, saying, “I belong to a new underclass, no longer determined by social status or the color of your skin. No, we now have discrimination down to a science.” That’s nonsense. Ableism and eugenics intersect with racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. Inventing new forms of discrimination does not erase the old ones.

Still, a single film, like a single essay, doesn’t have to do everything. Make no mistake, our Gattaca future is coming; the technology can’t be held back. What we must do now is work to undermine the eugenicist ideologies that will lead those technologies to cause increasingly greater harm. And that’s where this movie comes in. When I talk to people about designing babies, I often get assurances that discrimination against kids like mine—my son has Down syndrome and is autistic—is bad, but where’s the problem in trying to create advantages, to alleviate burdens? Gattaca, however, makes the case that you cannot design your way to happiness and that trying to do so will build a world ever less free—even for those who achieve high marks in GQ, IQ, or whatever other rubric we use to mismeasure potential.

David M. Perry is a journalist and historian. He is a coauthor of The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe.
By the Numbers

90%  Estimated percentage of Lytton destroyed by wildfire on June 30

99.8%  Percentage of the world that was cooler than Portland, Ore., on June 27, when the city hit 112°F, a record that lasted one day

121°F  Temperature reached in the town of Lytton, British Columbia, on June 29, the highest ever recorded in Canada

108°F  Temperature in Seattle on June 28, an all-time high

56%  Percentage of homes in Seattle without air conditioning, the highest of any US city

59M  Number of people affected by drought in the western US

45%  Percentage by which greenhouse gas emissions must be cut from 2010 levels by 2030 to hold temperature rise to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels

SNAPSHOT/Stephanie Keith

Pride of Place

Henry Arango, aka Adrian, in Tompkins Square Park before the 27th annual Drag March in New York City on June 25. The 93-year-old dancer fled Cuba in 1956 and got a job at the storied Club 82, where he performed as the biblical temptress Salome for such stars as Elizabeth Taylor and Errol Flynn. He cheered on the Stonewall uprising in 1969 and marched in the first Pride parade a year later.

Kim Jong Un Drops Some Weight

So Kim Jong Un is looking rather svelte.

He’s lost at least four notches on his belt.

Has illness or a diet made him trim?

Have shortages of food reached even Kim?

Not yet. But if that threat becomes more credible, He’ll find in time that missiles are inedible.
UTOPIA

Allows Us to Dream Together

News from nowhere: Holbein’s portrait of Sir Thomas More, currently on view at the Frick Collection, was commissioned in 1527.
A map of the world without Utopia tells us little about where we want to go—and even less about where we are now.

JEET HEER

Utopia and dystopia are twins, born at the same moment from the shared ancestry of social critique. Although remembered as the first modern attempt to systematically imagine an ideal society, Thomas More’s Utopia (1516) began with a stark portrait of a Europe torn apart by war and crushing poverty, with the shocking prediction that if the enclosure of farmland continued, soon sheep would be eating people. This horrifying prospect made it urgent to look for an alternative, which More sketches out as an egalitarian, communal society of shared property.

More’s utopian hopes were balanced by his dystopian fears, with a new sense of human agency in the making of history leading to possibilities both hopeful and dire. In the half-millennium since More wrote, countless others have trodden both paths, painting scenarios of either earthly paradises or human-created hells.

The equipoise More achieved has been lost in our own era, in which our fantasy life is overburdened with dystopian nightmares and the utopian impulse is only faintly heard. In his 1994 book The Seeds of Time, the literary theorist Fredric Jameson mournfully reflected that “it seems to be easier for us to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness of our imagination.”

Jameson saw this cramped, blighted imaginative inability to conceive of positive systemic change as one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. The past few decades have proven him prophetic, as the dystopian imagination becomes ever more dominant in our culture. Frightening (and all too plausible) stories of climate catastrophe, pandemics, and rising authoritarianism thread their way through newscasts and popular fiction. Whether it’s Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy, Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games, or countless zombie movies, we have no shortage of ways of imagining the end of the world: nuclear war, rising oceans, biotech gone mad, totalitarian dictatorship. What’s lacking is any positive road map for building a better world.

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia tells us little about where we want to go— and even less about where we are now.”

—Immanuel Wallerstein

Against both Marx and Wallerstein, there’s a venerable tradition of radical thinkers who have tried to redeem the idea of utopia in Marxist terms by insisting that the hope of a better society keeps social agitation alive. Jameson is perhaps the greatest living exemplar of this tradition. In a 2004 essay in New Left Review, Jameson insisted, “It is difficult enough to imagine any radical political program today without the conception of systemic otherness, of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive, however feebly.”

A utopian imagination isn’t sufficient in and of itself to build a better world, but it’s an essential prerequisite. Oscar Wilde expressed it best in his essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891) when he declared, “A map of the world that does
"It is difficult enough to imagine any radical political program today without the conception...of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive."
—Fredric Jameson

There is little doubt that this has indeed been a recurrent pattern. More’s own Utopia, in 1516, preceded the outbreak of the Reformation that convulsed Europe, and consumed More himself, by less than a year. The next cluster of significant utopias—Campanella’s City of the Sun (1623), Bacon’s New Atlantis (1627) and Robert Burton’s idiosyncratic digression in Anatomy of Melancholy (1621–38)—appeared in the period before the outbreak of the English Civil War and the Neapolitan Uprising of the 17th century. The greatest utopian reverie of the 18th century, Diderot’s Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville (1772), was written a generation before the French Revolution. In the 19th century, too, the remarkable set of utopian fictions in the last years of the century—Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888), Morris’s reply in News from Nowhere (1890), Hertzka’s Freiland (also 1890), to which we might add, as a pendant from the Far East, Kang Youwei’s Great Consonance (1888–1902)—precede the turbulences of 1905–11 in Russia and China, the outbreak of the First World War, and the October Revolution.

A further example is the utopian speculations of Frankfurt School Marxists like T.W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Herbert Marcuse during the 1940s and ’50s, works that were early premonitions of the upheavals of the ’60s. Periods of revolution themselves, Anderson added, are accompanied by an efflorescence of utopian writing. The ’60s and ’70s were no exception to this rule, witnessing the last great burst of the utopian tradition in the feminist and queer speculative writings of Shulamith Firestone, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, and Marge Piercy. We are still living through some of what these writers imagined.

Even after the utopian firestorm of the ’60s and ’70s died out, there were a few significant embers in the science fiction of Stanley Kim Robinson, who imagined an ecologically sustainable California in one of the greatest of modern utopias, Pacific Edge (1990). Not by accident, Robinson had done his doctoral thesis, on the fiction of Philip K. Dick, under Jameson.

What do we lose by giving up the utopian imagination? The political scientist Lyman Tower Sargent describes utopian thinking as “social dreaming.” Utopias teach us to dream collectively, to sharpen our imagination, to demand more, to ask if the injustices of the world really need to exist—or if we can figure out how to junk them.

One of Jameson’s crucial arguments is that utopias don’t offer simple blueprints to be executed but function rather as diagnostic tools for figuring out what is wrong with society. Mutually exclusive utopian proposals can still serve the same end of exposing the insufficiency of existing society. Jameson’s preferred utopia of universal employment might seem at odds with Marcuse’s scheme for universal leisure. But both proposals are meant to highlight the monstrosity of a system that ties survival to employment and maintains a reserve army of the jobless.

The function of utopia, Jameson argued in his 2004 essay, “lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined.”

One of the most hopeful signs of the present moment is that for the first time since the 1970s, the utopian imagination is reviving. Once-lonely voices like Robinson and Jameson are now being joined by a younger chorus calling for a universal basic income, a Green New Deal, open borders, a super TVA to modernize America’s infrastructure, and abolition of police and prisons, among other utopian schemes. Not all will pan out—nor do they need to. The utopian impulse exists to spark discomfort with the status quo and agitation.

Where it ends no one can know, because all social progress is made from the bottom up, with people hammering out alternatives amidst the conflicts of political life. But the energy to create those alternatives wouldn’t exist without utopian dreams.
To the untrained eye, video games can look like violence pornography for frustrated youths. Most games revolve around killing and gunplay (“combat” in the parlance of the industry). You can slay monsters, massacre aliens, or find a game that gives you a very big gun and very many cops to mow down if they stand in your way. The more cerebral “strategy” games revolve around concepts of war and battle. And even “kid-friendly” hits like Minecraft still have modes that give the player lots of enemies to kill. To some, video games can look like a dystopian mirror that reflects all of the ills of our violent, decaying culture.

To me, video games are an escapist utopian fantasy. That’s because they give me something I can’t get nearly enough of in real life: control. I get to choose which conflicts I engage in and how I resolve them. My choices are limited only by the rules of the game, not the inane vagaries of late-republic American life. Take a game like the oft-maligned Grand Theft Auto. Yes, the cops might hunt me in the game, which is not all that different from real life. But in the game, I have control over whether they get me. I can escape their attention simply by hiding or maybe by getting a quick new paint job on my car. And that is a comforting fantasy. In the real world, I cannot so easily change my color to avoid the ire of law enforcement.

Still, as utopian control fantasies go, I’m not really into the shooters. After a long day of fighting Republicans in real life, I don’t always feel like fighting hobgoblins in a game, even though the digital versions are at least bound by rules and artificial logic. So the game I keep coming back to, for well over a decade now, is the one that gives me ultimate control over every little detail of my virtual life: The Sims.

The Sims came out in 2000 and is, at core, a digital dollhouse. You make people—Sims—and dress them up and then move them into houses and dress up the houses and then watch the Sims do very important things like go to work and cook dinner. The player can place hurdles for the Sims to overcome (often a deep pool with no ladder) or grant them favors (like a working toilet). They get married, have children, grow old, and die, all with a little prodding from the player. The “game” essentially involves acting as a deity (a slightly creepy voyeuristic deity) who watches them live out their lives.

When I first played the game (The Sims was succeeded by The Sims 2 in 2004, which was a megalith and the first version I played), I was really into the architectural design aspects of the game. I was all about environmental determinism and basically tried to force my Sims to behave the way I wanted them to by imposing structural limitations on their living spaces. I was also, in real life, living in a series of cramped Manhattan apartments and working at a job I hated, and I didn’t think my Sim-self deserved to be any happier than I was. I reacted with glee when a Sim based on my best friend tried to
tend to his little Sim garden in the rain and was struck by lightning and died. (Sorry, bro.) That's how my world was: cramped, wet, and punishing to those who dared to try. I appreciated the game's accuracy.

By the time the current version of the game, *The Sims 4*, came out in 2014, my circumstances were much different. I had one kid, another on the way, a job I was actually good at, and a house outside the city. Oh, life was still nasty, brutish, and not nearly short enough. But I wanted to think that the world could be a better place than it demonstrably was. And so I started construction on my *Sims* utopia.

The organizing principle of my world is that everyone must be as happy as possible. My new architectural designs are big, airy, and green. I'm no longer an angry god, but a helpful genie. The game gives your Sims certain desires based on their personalities, and I try to be a wish-fulfillment machine. No more getting struck by lightning for trying to garden. In fact, I've turned the rain off completely. (I kept the snow because the Sim kids like it.)

I also tightly curate my community. I picked a neighborhood and moved all the prepackaged Sims out. I moved my Sim family and Sim friends in. I have to be around Sims that I want to be happy, after all. No Republicans are allowed in my game. I've even deleted the files of prepackaged Sims that give me any kind of Republican vibe. (There's a family called the Landgrabs, and I put them right in the dustbin.)

The friends I do put in the game are people I really like in real life, people I'm happy to be reminded of as my Sim-self jogs through town. During Covid-19, *The Sims* is as close as I've gotten to “getting the band back together.” I even made us a bar. I'd blow my entire entertainment budget for a year if the game got a *Rock Band* expansion so we could all play music together.

Which isn't to say there's no drama. Utopia would be boring if there were no opportunity for conflict. I know that because I have one version of the game where aging is turned off, nobody gets old, and nobody ever dies. What I realized was that version of my town was boring. Immortality meant that nothing ever mattered. There was no thrill from getting a promotion or learning a new skill, because everybody had time to do everything anyway. Turns out, living forever is the death of fun.

In my current game, people grow old and die. I'm actually on the fourth generation of my “family.” My world is much browner and, well, gayer than what I started with. That's just what happens when you let Sims flirt with whomever they want and marry people who share their interests. But I do occasionally have to add a family I don't personally know just to decrease the chances of in-breeding: So, the Obamas are in my game. Sasha grew up and married my grandson. I'm buried in their backyard.

Frankly, I couldn't write a better utopian postscript for myself: a founding member of a brown, gay, rainless world that banished Republicans who is buried under the kiddie swing of his progeny.

It's a little bit counterintuitive and sneakily authoritarian, but having enough control over the system so that people can be allowed to do whatever makes them happy is my biggest utopian kink. Sometimes, I just need the terrible world to leave me alone with my dolls.
Utopia to Save It

IMAGINING BETTER WORLDS CAN HELP US IMPROVE OUR OWN, BUT LITERARY AND CINEMATIC UTOPIAS OFTEN EXCLUDE THOSE WHO DON’T FIT INTO WHAT ARE USUALLY Racially and culturally homogeneous societies. And whether it’s 1516 or 2016, utopian thinkers are especially prone to leaving out one group whose experiences and insights should enrich our dreams of the future: the disability community.

For centuries, utopias have presented disability as a personal shortcoming to be remedied, not as an identity to be supported and celebrated. A disability in a utopia is socially undesirable—a cause of suffering that does not belong in a place where wholeness of body and spirit is prized. The disability community, however, has a very different view of itself. And understanding what a more inclusive utopia entails shouldn’t just inform attitudes about what constitutes an ideal society; it should shape the way communities approach disability in the real world.

The exclusion of disability from utopias reflects long-standing social attitudes. Throughout much of Western history, disabled people were sequestered, either in institutions or at home. Disability wasn’t a topic of discussion in polite society, except in the context of charitable activities. When characters with a disability or an illness do appear in utopian worlds, as in Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), they serve as plot devices that help develop the nondisabled characters around them. More’s denizens find pleasure and fulfillment in caring for the sick, of whom we learn nothing. Rarely, as in a text like Sarah Scott’s *A Description of Millenium Hall and the Country Adjacent* (1762), the authors deal directly with disability and its policy implications. Scott proposes that disabled people should be treated with dignity and respect, not exploited and housed in workhouses, a sentiment that is unfortunately still radical.

The mere nonexistence of disabled people wasn’t enough for writers like H.G. Wells and Edward Bellamy; for them, that absence was a desirable consequence of eugenics, a movement they enthusiastically supported. Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) positioned crime as an illness, at one point stating that “all cases of atavism are treated in the hospitals,” reflecting the belief that genetics determined criminality. Wells revisited eugenic and utopian themes over and over in his work, writing in 1901 that society should “check the procreation of base and servile types, of fear-driven and cowardly souls, of all that is mean and ugly and bestial.” He also noted that people with impairments and mental illnesses should be killed or not permitted to “propagate.” Many feminists of the era were also proponents: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) envisioned a harmonious society without men, where eugenics could hone the women of Herland to perfection.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, utopian fiction advertised the idea that it was possible to mold better people through the judicious application of breeding, sterilization, and euthanasia. Popularized by texts like Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), which imagined humans evolving into a twisted and vile race called the Morlocks, eugenics took hold in England and the United States. But the ideas didn’t stay there. American works on eugenics influenced the Nazis, who deployed utopian thinking with tragic consequences.

The world of *Gattaca* isn’t necessarily far off. Some advocates fear genetic testing and editing may make Down syndrome, dwarfism, autism (which hasn’t been decisively linked to any specific genes), and numerous other impairments and identities things of the past. In a sense, the goal of some nondisabled-led disability organizations is ostensibly utopian: building a better world by eradicating disability. For example, Autism Speaks, an organization that purports to represent the
To conceptualize what disability in utopia might look like, it’s critical to understand disability as an identity rather than an adverse life experience.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. concluded that the state has a compelling interest in forcibly sterilizing disabled people, infamously writing in * Buck v. Bell that “three generations of idiots are enough.” Devaluing disabled lives did not stop there. During the coronavirus pandemic, care rationing of ventilators and some kinds of treatment targeted disabled people—some of whom, like Sarah McSweeney in Oregon, died because of it. Additionally, euthanasia continues to be pushed on the disability community by some proponents of “right to die” legislation who imply that disability alone is grounds for physician-assisted suicide.

Focusing on accommodations, however, leaves out more visionary possibilities. Pretending that differences do not exist does not eliminate them; it just shuts people out. Such spaces can be intimidating for nondisabled people, who are not accustomed to being in environments that do not cater to their needs and expectations, let alone those that celebrate disability instead of hiding from it. This is a striking reversal of the usual narrative, and thus, in its own way, is a utopia for disabled people who want to be the heroes of their own narratives, not plot devices in others’.

A cripspace is an environment that pushes back on cultural attitudes about disability; it is a room where disability is at the center of the conversation, one where all participants strive to make sure everyone is included. That may involve making way for a wheelchair or ensuring that someone can see the sign language interpreter, but it also includes honoring differing lived experiences of disability and holding space for one another. Cripsaces do not just respect disability identity. Race, gender, sexuality, class, parenting status, adoptee experience, and more are considered in a cripspace, and their interactions with disability are acknowledged.

The cripspace engages with difference in a way that can and should inform utopias, which typically function by eliminating difference. The consequences of things like “colorblind” ideology are both painful and obvious in the present moment but are ignored in visions of the future. The cripspace knows what society struggles to understand: Pretending that differences do not exist does not eliminate them; it just shuts people out.

In a culture where disability is unwelcome, its presence in utopia may be unsettling to some, but society can benefit from conjuring worlds that model diversity and inclusion, where differences are celebrated rather than flattened.
In our flattened historical imagination, pictures of atrocity and those of progress can coincide in unsettling ways.

Jay Caspian Kang

At first glance, there does seem to be something a bit out of touch, even menacing, about the scene. A small gathering of white people kneel before a Black man and woman seated on a park bench. Some of the white people appear to be washing the man’s and woman’s feet. A white woman in a red shirt strolls around with a megaphone intoning, “Repent on behalf of, uh, Caucasian people.” She then pulls over three people in what appear to be first-responder and police uniforms, who take a knee in what looks like an act of deep penitence.

From the pavement, a man with a British accent leads the group through a prayer. “We stand here confessing... repenting for our aggression, repenting for our pride... for thinking we are better, that we are above.”

The captions tell you that the Black people are “protesters” and the white people are white people, and that this is happening in Cary, N.C., which doesn’t mean much to the vast majority of the audience watching this minute-long clip on their phones. The protests are national, which means this scene could happen anywhere, and what it shows reflects not on specific cities or people but rather on “the movement” as a whole. By the time it becomes clear these are church people and this ritual is a religious tradition and not some inevitable metastasizing of identity politics, wokeness, or critical race theory, the clip has already projected a vision of the future.
The visual history of dissent in America has always been carefully edited.

The obvious points of comparison here are the icons of the burned-out radical ‘70s, whether the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Weather Underground, or, most dramatically, Jonestown. In these viral fantasies, the foot washers of Cary become the congregation of Jim Jones’s Peoples Temple. The water is always Kool-Aid, even when the metaphor doesn’t quite fit.

The set-up is assumed: A charismatic leader entices nearly a thousand impressionable young people to follow him into the jungle. The centerWaiting for the obligatory helicopter shot. All the other gaps are filled in with the assumption that all the things Jones preached, whether apocalyptic gospel, communism, or equality among the races, will go bad when taken to extremes. This may well be the correct way to think about Jones, a mass murderer who led a mostly Black congregation to its death, including members of his own “rainbow family.”

“Jonestown fulfilled the most dire warnings of its opponents,” write John R. Hall, Philip D. Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh in their book *Apocalypse Observed.* “After the murders and mass suicide, Peoples Temple became the quintessence of the ‘cult,’ stereotypically portrayed as an organization that drains both property and free will from its members and ‘brainwashes’ them into a ‘group mind.’” There are certainly cults that do these things, but Hall and his co-authors’ scholarship makes an important distinction between Jones, the con-man preacher, megalomaniac, and murderer, and his congregation. The latter “sought to participate in an integrated community that transcended persistent racism in the United States. In a society where
the practice of religion is largely segregated from everyday socioeconomic organization and practice, the group infused its members’ working lives and social relationships with new “religious” meaning.”

Religious lessons about loving one’s neighbors and caring for the less fortunate, in other words, had been tangibly expressed by the Peoples Temple. Something similar could be said about the church’s ideas of socialist liberation: Well before Jones ever stood in front of a congregation, the left had sought what, in modern terms, would be called a “multiracial, working-class movement” built on solidarity and shared struggle. What that actually might look like has been clouded by history, in no small part by efforts to cast any type of communal living or emancipatory action as yet another Jonestown. I am not trying to make excuses for Jim Jones here or even to entirely separate the flock from its doomsday apostle—Jones did not act alone in Jonestown, and the killing of children, in particular, had to be carried out by loyal followers. Nor do I wish to argue that Jonestown’s role as a cautionary tale comes entirely from some unfair twisting of its intentions—918 dead are 918 dead.

But I first encountered the photos from the International Hotel a couple of years ago, while doing research for my upcoming book. While I recoiled at the sight of Jones with his dark sunglasses and bouffy hair, these were exactly the types of pictures that work well in the turbine of online historical associations: See? There have been examples of multiracial, working-class solidarity. The association with Jones, of course, made them unusable, but I wondered why there were so few obvious replacements.

The images of good dissent are frequently segregated: Good oppressed people make a good peaceful protest, and good white people make some good difficult decisions. After a hard night of deliberation, Lincoln frees the slaves. The utopian visions that fall under the most scrutiny are always the ones where people from different backgrounds rise up together in the name of a radical reimagining of the world. The paradox is that while the scrubbed-history utopians call for “unity” or “togetherness,” they also quietly disqualify every example of solidarity, whether Harper’s Ferry, the Rainbow Coalition, or the foot washers of Cary.

I wondered, half-seriously, if they might be a deep state operation to freak out the squares and elicit comparisons to the Peoples Temple, which, needless to say, soon followed. Over the next few days, I looked through everything Black Hammer had posted online. While there wasn’t much to like or even understand, I could sense the desperation of young people who had no meaningful pathway into politics. If things go bad for them—and it seems likely they will—Black Hammer will slide into the litany that includes Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, and Heaven’s Gate. Little will be said about the conditions that created them, and even less will be written about those who felt the same sense of urgency, imagined something that did not turn the gears of history, and found some separate peace.

We are already in an era of manifestos, separatist cults, and acts of mass violence. But the vast majority of these come from the far right. The historical-comparison machine has coded the participants as “fascists” or “white supremacists,” which they may well be. But for those who lament that the center, once again, has lost its hold, the history of dissent teaches only one lesson: Stay in your lane or watch the bodies pile up. Given the accumulating crises of the past five years, it might seem reasonable, or at least excusable, to reduce everything to a warning.

Today, history itself has become a front in the culture war. Several state legislatures have passed vaguely written laws that effectively ban the teaching of this country’s racist past. Videos of concerned parents screaming at school boards about critical race theory go viral every day. These efforts should be called what they are: an attempt to turn the narrative of last summer from an organic uprising of millions of Americans from all racial and class backgrounds into a conspiracy run by intellectuals, Marxists, and the progressive elite. It’s incumbent on anyone who cares about emancipatory politics to resist these laws and the chaos they will unleash, but if we are ever to get out of these endless culture wars, we must also rethink the space these linear histories take up and ensure that we’re not just replacing one fully determinative, alluringly symmetrical narrative with another. We must stop thinking that the problems of the present can only be understood by finding corollaries in the past. Not everything is Jonestown, including Jonestown.
THE CITY
All That’s Utopian Melts Into Asphalt
Utopia Parkway is both a dream and a place, a promise and a farce, stretching through time and space.

MOLLY CRABAPPLE

Utopia Parkway. It’s a name that sounds like an oxymoron, so impossible, so perfect it shouldn’t exist. Yet it does, a 5.1-mile gash—four lanes of asphalt, sometimes two—running through New York City’s largest borough, Queens.

The roadway begins, if a line can be said to begin, in Beechhurst in the north. From there it runs past the Long Island Expressway, down through Clearview, Flushing, and Hillcrest to Jamaica Estates in the south, where it fragments just before reaching the behemoth of Grand Central Parkway. This intersection is one of the most dangerous in the city, a place where bodies, bikes, and sometimes lives meet the harsh reality of the pavement. For much of this route, the road is banal, an endless procession of squat brick houses broken up by the occasional gas station or bagel shop. But as it approaches its southern end, it narrows and shifts, becoming something else entirely: a quaint, tree-lined street that deposits its travelers in a place that may or may not exist. The maps call it Utopia, but the residents call it Fresh Meadows, which is its own kind of irony.

Most New Yorkers probably haven’t been to Utopia Parkway, haven’t traveled its stingy curves, but they may have heard of it in passing, from local traffic reports or perhaps from a line of poetry or song. With a name like Utopia Parkway, the bards were bound to discover it, mining it for meaning. Lawrence Joseph turned it into a poem, as did Julio Marzán. Charles Mee turned it into a play. In the 1990s, the indie rock band Fountains of Wayne spun it into both an album and a song. When the lead singer croons, “I’m on my way / Down Utopia Parkway,” he means that he is on his way to somewhere bigger, somewhere exciting—somewhere else, anywhere else. It sounds almost like an anthem—or a dare. Or maybe it’s a promise, bound to be broken.

Utopia Parkway—both the idea and the place—is a deeply New York phenomenon: high and low, longing and stasis, bravado and banality.

Unsurprisingly, sectarian battles raged within the co-ops, among kids as well as adults. One friend of Zuckerman’s, the nuclear physicist Victor Gilinsky, arrived in the Bronx Amalgamated community with his Bundist parents in 1941, the end of a harrowing escape from Nazi-occupied Poland and Soviet Russia.
One of their first visitors was Mrs. Stein, a communist neighbor who was collecting money for Biobidzhan, a Jewish autonomous oblast that Stalin had set up near the Russian-Chinese border. Gilinsky’s family had stopped in Biobidzhan as they made their way to Vladivostok on the Trans-Siberian Railway. A brief conversation in the station was all it took for his father to learn that the alleged Yiddish paradise was a police state. He told Mrs. Stein as much. “Fascist dog!” she hissed and stormed out. Victor, then 7, still remembers that Mrs. Stein’s son jumped him as he was leaving the building while she stood behind them screaming, “Hit him again!”

Utopia is serious business.

In New York today, there is little room for the collective spirit that made the three men try to stake out their 50 square miles of Queens meadow. Like every proletariat, American Jews fought tooth and nail for their children not to follow in their footsteps. When they entered the middle class, those children no longer needed to pool their finances or their living spaces. The old Yiddish socialist New York still exists in fragments beneath the shiny, slightly shattered city. The Forward Building, Abraham Cahan’s Beaux-Arts headquarters, still stands, the Marx and Engels busts glowing from the front, but the interior was gutted and turned into luxury condos.

At the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, I study Yiddish the way British schoolboys once studied Latin: to understand revered, but still alien, forebears. No matter how prosaic the subject, I cannot help but feel the electricity conveyed by the old German-Slavic words encased in holy letters; I feel like a medium, staring into a mirror to find ghosts.

In that spirit, I took the long subway ride over to Utopia.

Before the F train even reached Queensbridge, a man got on lugging a violin case. He was South Asian and wearing a sweat-stained red polo. He took out the violin and, with great verve, played the unmistakable bars of “Hava Nagilah,” the vaguely Zionist song that became a stand-in for all Jewish songs in the popular imagination. I gave him $2, notwithstanding the politics of the song’s origins.

I got off the train at 169th Street, with its row of stores offering elaborate henna designs and cash transfers to Bangladesh, then walked 38 minutes through the leafy streets until I reached Utopia Parkway. It was exactly the sort of unlovely beige with which this country likes to blot out its natural wonders, a sprawl of poky big box stores—TJ Maxx, Coldstone Creamery—that constitute the suburban wasteland of latter-day America. I ate an egg and cheese at a small Chinese deli and stared through the window at the Forward Building, Abraham Cahan’s Beaux-Arts mirror to find ghosts.

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As the dream of Freeman, Resler, and Fried, I wondered: to be just as dull as everyone else?

I walked north from Union Turnpike, where the little brick houses sat on little lawns with picket fences. For-sale signs boasted names from everywhere—Stella Shalamova, Jiangwei (Wayne) Zhou. Posters from the Bukharian Chai Center offered an ice cream social and a reading of the Ten Commandments. Further up sat two-family brick homes, bounded by wrought-iron fences covered with gloppy paint. They could have been the fence I grew up behind in Far Rockaway.

(continued on page 27)
The Measure of Our Lives

Anyone who grows up multilingual knows that words are more than just labels that we apply to things. We are funnier in one language than another, because the wordplay comes faster. We are sweeter in one language than another, because we know how to wish someone a morning filled with flowers and not just a curt “Good morning.” Words shape the contours of our sociality and open up our imagination to what is possible. They allow us to write and speak ourselves into our communities and into the world.


Language makes it possible for us not only to describe the world but to inhabit it. “We do language. That may be the measure of our lives,” Toni Morrison said in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

What will be the language of our digital future? What will be the measure of our digital lives? I’ve been thinking about this lately, particularly as we digital-rights advocates stumble to translate key developments in a rapidly changing space to our audiences—the nonspecialists who need to understand the implications quickly and completely so they can defend themselves. Most of the technology we use is built around English as the default language, even if the coding that provides the basis for final platforms and applications is in specific computer languages. In many countries, even the rules that we develop to rein in the worst online behavior are often conceived in English. So Kenya has a data protection

Without online language diversity, only a handful of people will dictate the fate of the world.

Nanjala Nyabola

ILLUSTRATION BY SONIA PULIDO
The platforms that we rely on to remain connected in this digital age are not ready for our multilingual truths.

Because it is the language of the platforms we organize on and against.

The platforms that we rely on to remain connected in this digital age are not ready for our multilingual truths: We live in numerous languages, and constraining our ability to communicate in them effectively limits our ability to participate fully in our digital future.

Consider content moderation on social-networking platforms. In Africa, where some 2,000 languages are spoken, we would need content moderation in at least the eight Indigenous languages that have more than 10 million speakers, though that would cover only a handful of the continent's 54 countries. We would also need effective translation for the five non-Indigenous languages that are the official languages of the African Union and for unofficial languages like sheng and pidgin in which we conduct our daily lives. The current lack of such translation partly explains why hate speech and misinformation in languages other than English are more easily unnoticeable than a harmless gibe in Kinyarwanda, the official language of Rwanda; it can be an incitement to genocide, because of the way it was used in the specific social context. "Cockroach" can be more menacing in English than a harmless gibe.

Words take on specific meanings in a paranoias and predilections of places that we may never visit. Words take on specific meanings in a specific social context. "Cockroach" can be more menacing in English than a harmless gibe.

This history raises the question of whether English should be the language of the digital future. African digital-rights activists increasingly say no. We are not just working with existing tech platforms to translate their content into languages other than English; we are also creating software to make translation into African languages better. But even this is not enough.

A digital future in which we can only participate in translation is inherently unequal and exclusionary, shaped by the paranoias and predilections of places that we may never visit. Words take on specific meanings in a specific social context. "Cockroach" can be more menacing in English than a harmless gibe.

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This history raises the question of whether English should be the language of the digital future. African digital-rights activists increasingly say no. We are not just working with existing tech platforms to translate their content into languages other than English; we are also creating software to make translation into African languages better. But even this is not enough.

A digital future in which we can only participate in translation is inherently unequal and exclusionary, shaped by the paranoias and predilections of places that we may never visit. Words take on specific meanings in a specific social context. "Cockroach" can be more menacing in English than a harmless gibe.

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The platforms that we rely on to remain connected in this digital age are not ready for our multilingual truths. The platforms that we rely on to remain connected in this digital age are not ready for our multilingual truths: We live in numerous languages, and constraining our ability to communicate in them effectively limits our ability to participate fully in our digital future.

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Even this is not enough.
only as markets, not as places where people live and love. We must make it possible for people to use technology in their chosen languages.

I kept noticing that speakers in grassroots digital-advocacy initiatives would awkwardly default to English when explaining essential concepts like surveillance or privacy. Neither Kiswahili nor any of the 100-plus languages that are spoken in Kenya and Tanzania have translations for these words, at least not in terms of their full human-rights implications. We were giving people the words, but we were not giving them the language.

Kiswahili was a natural choice for the project. It is the most widely used language in Africa, spoken by over 150 million people in at least eight countries as both an official language and the language of commerce. It is the only Indigenous African language that is an official language of the African Union. It is a rich language with numerous dialects, because its Indigenous speakers inhabited powerful city-states that were connected enough to share a root language but disconnected enough for that language to take on local flavors. As an official language in Kenya and Tanzania, Standard Kiswahili also has the advantage of benefiting from the numerous linguistic Institutes dedicated to promoting it. And because it is part of the largest language group in Africa—the Bantu languages that spread across the continent south of the Sahara—Kiswahili provides an excellent base on which other languages can build.

We have been working with experts from Kenya and Tanzania to translate key digital-rights terms into Standard Kiswahili and with cultural producers to popularize them. We have translated not just the words but the ideas behind them: for instance, choosing a word that doesn’t just define surveillance as the act of being watched but also has roots and modification that emphasize that surveillance isn’t a good thing. In fact, there was no word for surveillance that conveys what it means in a digital-rights context until we started this project. We offered *udukizi*, which isn’t just about watching but watching with the intent to influence behavior.

Motivated by the ways in which Africans switch languages on social media, I wanted to help make it possible for us to do the same when talking about digital rights. We are working to increase the space for Kiswahili language communities to use technology on their own terms. We are working for a digital future in which people can demand privacy rights, the protection of their data, and an end to surveillance without having to do so in translation.

Yes, there are numerous digital efforts to preserve rare and dying languages, but most of us are multilingual in a less dramatic way. Our languages are not at risk of disappearing per se; they are at risk of being left behind because of the unspoken principle that technological advances must serve the unending quest for efficiency and standardization. We should be able to express that version of ourselves who is funnier, wittier, or more direct, even if it is more expensive or less efficient to enable that, because the point of culture is not efficiency—it is color and complexity and depth.

We need to bring our whole selves into the digital future, and language is central to that. In Africa, which has the youngest population on the planet—more than half of its inhabitants are under the age of 30—a majority of us don’t remember life without the Internet. We want our languages to be spoken in the digital-first future, and we want to be able to shape technology to suit us. And so creating space for us to exist online with as much linguistic complexity as we want is an act of resistance. We must keep affirming our right to define the measure of our lives.

(continued from page 24)

I kept walking until I hit Utopia Playground, a generous span of grass and asphalt that offered every childhood amenity: a basketball court and a soccer field, monkey bars and sprinklers, and plenty of concrete, where toddlers played and chattered in a babble of languages.

Almost half of Queens is foreign-born, and more languages are spoken in the borough’s 109 square miles than in any other place on earth. Though it was once the home of Archie Bunker and Donald Trump, the Queens of today has a cosmopolitanism that is working-class and solid—made by working people from everywhere who live together in this near-impossible city, in defiance of all the pundits who deny that people so profoundly different can carve a collective life together. If there is any utopia in Utopia, it is this. It is built by the Sikh, Black, and Mexican boys shooting hoops, by the Hasidic kids and Guatemalan kids battling over a soccer ball, by the tiny girl writing Chinese characters along the pavement while her brother holsters insults from his bike, by the mom in the sheitel who watches everyone’s children run through the fountain in this much-needed summer after the plague.

It’s imperfect, sure, and fraught and hard and filled with conflict, with hustlers and with bastards. The architecture sucks. It’s not how the books tell us a utopia should be. But utopia does not exist, by definition; Utopia, on the other hand, is as real as the baking asphalt beneath my feet.

I walk north and count the mix of names on the stores. Chen’s Cleaners. Bombay—an old movie theater where you can now eat samosas while watching Bollywood’s latest. The Utopia Jewish Center, where half the letters are missing in “Am Yisrael Chai.” I walk until my legs won’t walk, and then I keep on walking.

In his book *Naming New York*, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro writes about all the names for streets, bays, and alleyways whose origins have long since been forgotten. Where did Fresh Kills come from? How about Far Rockaway? Who were Ann and Catherine? The meanings died but the words remain, like the impressions of ancient sea creatures left on limestone.

I see Utopia Parkway like this. All the grandiose plans have faded into the prosaic present, the small houses inhabited by people from everywhere on earth, struggling each day to build for themselves and for their families a private sliver of a better world. Behind the chrome railings racked with roses, their kids grow up into New Yorkers. Like me, they will for their kids grow up into New Yorkers. Like me, they will for
Reading Shulamith Firestone in the Pandemic

Teaching an online course about a utopian manifesto from the 1960s is a brutally effective way to illuminate the dystopianism of the pandemic-stricken present, let me tell you. To be sure, great surges of love and rage have hit the streets again and again over the past few years, disrupting the unlivable, carceral, care-poor reality that is, for so many of its denizens, the United States. As these waves of abolitionism crested, for example in the summer of 2020, one could almost catch a glimpse of what it might have felt like in 1968, when everything seemed on the table; suddenly, the restraint of 21st-century radicalism was illuminated.

It is especially instructive, I feel, to look at the utopias of that bygone, almost-revolutionary era right now, during the late-stage pandemic. The re-entrenchment of gender cynicism, of nuclear familyism, has lately crept up on so many of us, without us fully noticing.

An overwhelming majority of today’s babies are being shaped in drastic, unheard-of privacy; reproductive laborers are at a breaking point; meanwhile, trans people—and victims of domestic violence generally—are suffering in silence, staying in the closet, unable to flee. Who better, then, to pierce the surreptitious, mind-numbing normalization of all this, under both Trump and Biden, than Shulamith Firestone (a mere 23 years old in ’68), with her scalding refusal of every “natural” premise of American society and her vision of a future in which children and adults together (having eliminated capitalism, work, and the sex distinction itself) democratically inhabit large, nongenetic households?

“Shulie” (as she was known to her friends in her youth), a Chicago art-school graduate and subsequent New Yorker, deemed the overthrowing of class, work, and markets to be a self-evidently necessary task, barely worth defending. What really interested her, instead, was the abolition of culture and nature, no less—starting with patriarchal “love” and its “culture of romance” on the one hand, and pregnancy on the other. Besides editing and producing the short-lived, self-published militant (and millenarian) women’s liberation journal Notes, Shulie cofounded several revolutionary groups—New York Radical Women, Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists—which sometimes carried out direct actions targeting, for instance, a Miss America pageant and a Manhattan bridal fair. She then published her book-length manifesto, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution, through (controversially) a mainstream press. In it, she advocates for “the abolition of the labor force itself under a cybernetic socialism” and “the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women.” Ectogenesis—the machine uterus—is famously a part of this speculative picture. But above all, she contends, women must liberate children and themselves from the capitalist patriarchy—seizing control over technology, eradicat-
ing the tyranny of work, automating labor (yes, even reproductive labor, as far as possible), and shedding the incest taboo such that play, love, and sexuality might “[flow] unimpeded.”

While sharing several of Firestone’s feminist commitments, the philosopher Hortense Spillers was devastating in her takedown of The Dialectic of Sex’s failure to imagine nonwhite women’s liberation, as well as the contempt for Black nationalism displayed in Firestone’s regrettable Chapter 5. The chapter in question is titled “Racism: The Sex- ism of the Family of Man,” and undeniably, it deserves everything Black feminists have said about it. Despite having denounced Freudianism as “misguided” in Chapter 3, Firestone here disregards slavery, colonialism, and any historical-materialist basis for white supremacy, instead explaining it as a psychological and fundamentally “sexual phenomenon” that mimics the Oedipus complex. Black men are the sons in the American national family, she posits lazily, hence they are driven to kill the white man (Dad) and rape his white wife. In her deconstruction of the “myth of the Black rapist” in Women, Race and Class, Angela Davis politely summarizes this theoretical clusterfuck thus: “Firestone succumbs to the old racist sophistry of blaming the victim.” Spillers is less polite: “Is this writer doing comedy here, or have we misread her text?”

Alas, the presentation of racial stereotypes as psychological portraits of individual members of the so-called “Family of Man” is not intentionally a part of Firestone’s extensive (and sometimes excellent) comedy. Blind to both queer urban and nonmonogamous Indigenous lifeways, Firestone misses the fundamentally racial character of the production of cis-heterosexual gender in post-Reconstruction America, and the flaw is fatal to her whole project. She was not wrong, of course, that canonical Marxists and ’60s New Left “politicos” failed to attend properly to the spheres of sex/gender, baby-making, the colonially imposed nuclear family, and romance. But the horizon that so motivated her—the “explosion” of American culture in its entirety—is ultimately unimaginable without the abolition of whiteness, which she ignores. The twinned institutions of childhood and motherhood, upon which culture rests, according to her, were after all forged within white supremacy, as Spillers so aptly showed in 1987 in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” In other words, when Firestone talks about eliminating the “sex distinction, she is eliding, under the sign of everywoman, what is really a multiplicity of racialized sexes and gender oppressions. Women do not all have the same gender. “The” utopia-bound dialectic of sex, if we should try to diagram it (as Shulie, believe it or not, did), is probably four-dimensional.

It is not up to me to excuse or “forgive” Chapter 5. On page 1 of the text, however, if you do make it that far (knowing what you now know about the whole), there is a very compelling idea: namely, that the fundamental categories we use to think about historical change “are not big enough.” If we are generously inclined, The Dialectic of Sex can serve as a reminder that the wretched of the earth can and must harness science, remake nature, and unleash universal equality and joy. Technologies exist, Firestone plausibly affirms, that could—if the proletariat wanted—equitably distribute, reduce, and perhaps eventually dissolve the burden of drudgery entirely. She affirms up front her wish for a word more all-embracing than “revolution” for the playful, orgiastic scenario she has in mind. Preempting her aghast technophobic critics—who nevertheless (for 50 years!) have never deigned to see past her positivity vis-à-vis artificial wombs—Firestone declares straight up that an intensification of capitalism, namely “The 1984 Nightmare,” is highly likely if control over reproductive technologies continues to be wielded by the ruling classes and isn’t stormed from below.

The flawed Dialectic, in all its immortal exuberance, priceless drollery, and anguished seriousness, remixes Engels, Marx, Freud, Hegel, Beauvoir, and the kibbutz, combining high metaphysics—coached conversationally, almost as stand-up comedy—with the visceral phenomenological observations that “childbirth isn’t good for you” and “childhood is hell.” Immediately after its release in 1970, heartbreakingly, Firestone deserted the world of politics for good. Her big second book, intended to “lay the foundations of a powerful new women’s art—with the potential to transform our very definition of culture”—never arrived. Instead, in 1998, a follow-up text appeared at last: Airless Spaces, a tiny, fragmentary, despair-filled collection of stories about the psychiatric incarceration of Shulie and other inmates. Toward the end of that volume, under the heading “I Remember Valerie,” the author dedicates a couple of pages to a non-comrade—the “matriarchalist” Valerie Solanas, who “waxed paranoid” at her once long ago and had, she’d said, loathed The Dialectic. “It was many years before I heard of her again,” Firestone concludes. “Then it was just an obituary stating that she had been found in a San Francisco hotel dead of lung disease.” In 2012, Shulie died alone, too, in her apartment, still presumably waiting for the right term, more all-encompassing than “revolution,” to be invented.

Rereading The Dialectic of Sex over half a century after it was written, I am angered by its travesty of a critical race analysis and amazed at its silence on colonized, lesbian, gay, and trans people, the pioneers of struggles in and against the family. I am disappointed with its middle-classness and its disgust at the pregnant body; unimpressed with its conflation of femaleness and gestational labor; and embarrassed by its complete inattention to sex work, empire, disability, lesbians, and queer life generally. A disloyal daughter to all family abolitionists who came before me, I actually disagree with more of Firestone’s individual points than not. But I see something
of my late mother in her biography, and I love—
sometimes to the point of weeping—her book’s
absolute negationism, its horniness, and its sin-
cerity. I support utterly its program of doing away
with marriage along with all forms of propertarian
kinship. Through a wrinkle in time, I lay claim
to Shulie, lovingly, irritatedly. I hold in my heart,
without quite understanding it, her commitment to
realizing “the conceivable in the actual.”

In an essay about another hilarious, well-
read woman who died lonely and mad in her
apartment—Marilyn Monroe—the artist Audrey
Wollen writes about the gift she and her friends
feel they received from Monroe’s brief, incendiary
contribution to human history: “Tending to our
impossibilities, we offered those around us both
the negative, the zero, and its accompanying wish.
That’s what Marilyn gave us.” Part of what Wollen
is saying here, I think, is that the urgent destruction
of this world, and the desire for a common life, are
captured in, well, a dialectic. And if so, then that
is what Shulie gave us too, I feel: a literal map
(“for that rare diagram
freak”)—though it’s
partly a joke—chart-
ing the way to a place
where it would be pos-
sible to be a heterosex-
ual feminist, a femme
intellectual, and a
comrade child.

Blind spots and
all, Shulie Firestone
merits revisiting in
the age of coronavirus
because she defamil-
iarizes (not to say guff-
aws at) the very building blocks of contemporary
capitalism—notably the private nuclear house-
hold—that the experience of Covid-19 can, despite
everything, teach us to call into question. While
the sanctuary of “family” has on one level grown
ever more invisible and unquestionable under the
United States’ botched waves of quarantine, lock-
down, and de-masking (which were themselves
premised on the society-wide sacrifice zones of
so-called care homes, not to mention global vac-
cine apartheid), the necessity of class conscious-
ness, care revolution, and children’s liberation has
also strained into view. Down with the chauvinist
micro-nationalism of family values, said Shulie—
which has been echoed by so many of us who
discovered, via “stimulus” checks, that the sky does
not fall when human survival is decoupled from the
wage. Down with nationalism and the competitive
micro-nations of family values, said Shulie: We are,
transgenerationally, the makers of one another,
the guardians of one another’s
health.

In a world without borders, I will never
have to write about immigration again.

KARLA CORNEJO VILLAVICENCIO

I

have a dream, a total fantasy, of what it could mean to
be an immigrant artist. In this dream, I am still me, nothing
has changed, but I can write about literally anything other
than immigration. I can write about the homoerotic relation-
ships of male bison—in my own voice, not in some plummy
British baritone fixatedly narrating stories about alpha males and
dominance hierarchy. I could write about the hard work of reha-
bitating German shepherds after careers spent working as trau-
matised and weaponized K-9s for problem police departments.
Maybe I could write about bees.

I would like to do all of this, but instead I am borne back,
always, ceaselessly, to immigration. To policy debates and talk of
solutions and stories, stories, stories.
First, the audience demands it: Because I am a formerly undocumented Latina writer, I am forever asked to play activist and talking head, to sing Greek opera about my childhood. After I released my first book last spring, I did what ended up being a year of press on Zoom, and for the first few months, I would deflect the inevitable questions about immigration policy or my early years in Ecuador before my family came to America with my signature loquacious demurring. Then I had my partner, a professor who doesn’t mince words, tell event organizers that I did not talk policy, particularly Donald Trump’s zero-tolerance policy, and I did not talk about my own childhood separation.

I don’t do it because I don’t want to, and because it’s not my fucking job. I am simply not interested in policy. It is a language I do not understand. It is advanced calculus, and I went to a high school that stopped teaching at trig. And policy is pain. I turned off my Google notifications for “ICE” and “undocumented immigrant” because human suffering can send me deeper into my already committed relationship with Silver Hill Hospital in Connecticut. As both a human and an artist, I want to be able to emancipate myself from what causes me pain instead of having to mine it for stories and then market myself by the bruises.

But other people like pain; pain is exactly what they like. They exalt my bravery when they read my work and then bring out the mounting pins for my bell jar—one queer, brown, Latina, undocumented immigrant. Strangers delight in rolling the Rs in a name nobody I love calls me. Karrrla, said when Karla is a choice, overenunciating it like they’re trying to speak through marshmallows stuffed in their mouths.

I could decide to stop and try my luck at making a living writing about television. But I’m very good at writing about immigration. It helps that I remember we are people first, capable of the entire spectrum of human emotions and behavior. And I write because I consider my reporting and my art to be payment in motion to my parents for having given up their upper limbs, health, and right to self-determination so I could be able to make a living typing words in an air-conditioned room. That helps. If I weren’t writing about immigrants, in the way I write about immigrants, I would be drinking all the time, because there aren’t enough other people doing it.

This country’s treatment of immigrants has been so inhumane that there needs to be a record—not only of injustices and grave suffering but of deep humanity, dignity, humor, and character. Beat reporters, journalists, essayists, and documentarians have taken great care to document not only the injustices but also the lives that go on, the people that keep living, not in shadows but in streets that are under sun, shade, sun, shade—all on the same block even. With parents risking the possibility of their children’s death through migration in order to avoid the certainty of their children’s torture back home, we need a record.

And so I write. I’ve written tens of thousands of words, fiction and nonfiction, most with extreme levels of cortisol in my blood, to arrive at the same old plea: a plea to those in power to create a world in which migrants can be people. Then maybe migrant artists can be free.

That world begins with a path to legalization for undocumented Americans that is closer to amnesty than what the current Congress favors. It also requires a world in which open borders would not be treated as some far-fetched policy goal to be accomplished in our lifetime but as a worldview that informs how we approach all sentient beings, particularly those of our species.

I don’t like comparing human migrants to any migratory species. Human migrants should inspire a deeper, more complicated affect than the miraculous call of a goose flying at night. But, to that end, I know that any person I meet who gets heated about an “invasive” species of bird in a suburb is not a person I would feel safe around as a brown woman, a migrant, and therein lies a sameness. Some of us are considered pests.

So long as I keep feeding the baby starlings in my backyard, I will keep writing about immigrants, because neither of us are welcome—and I suspect that means forever.

And so I write: a plea to those in power to create a world in which migrants can be people. Then maybe migrant artists can be free.
The most influential utopian thinker in American history did not write futuristic novels or imagine perfect worlds in which evolved humans dined on honeydew. He was a gritty political agitator who responded to the news of his day with manuals designed to inspire politically and economically disenfranchised people to immediate action. Yet even now, more than two centuries after his death, there is no mistaking the utopian promise of Thomas Paine’s declaration that “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

Paine, like so many other utopian thinkers, past and present, broke down religious, political, social, and literary boundaries in order to achieve “a renovation of the natural order of things” so sweeping that his 18th-century generation might be recognized as “the Adam of a new world.”

Therein lies the genius of Paine’s project at the founding of what remains the American experiment. He was not talking about the distant future. His was a practical utopianism—yes, that’s possible—which, in the words of Paine scholar Harvey J. Kaye, inspired readers to go about the work of “trying to build utopia in America.” Of course, Paine’s comrades fell short, stumbled along the way, and at times failed miserably. That was predictable. What mattered was the trying. This is the key to the most vital utopian thinking: It does not imagine perfection; rather, it proposes a dialectic based on what historian Eric Foner identified as a “new language” of possibility.

The notion that utopianism can be purposeful is what makes it radical. The most potent utopian thinking is seldom found in jet-pack-wearing flights of fancy or the imaginations of spacey future worlds where enlightened beings don flowing robes and await the arrival of a time-traveling Bill and Ted to encourage them to “be excellent to each other.” In Paine’s time, and in the best eras that have evolved from it, there was an understanding of the utility of utopian thinking as a political instrument. It could be adopted by visionary authors, playwrights, and presidents. It would be embraced by mass movements. But it was not a constant. Pragmatic utopianism has surged at critical junctures in our history—as when the radical social experiments of the 1840s were covered as breaking news on the front page of Horace Greeley’s New-York Tribune, and when, in 1966, A. Philip Randolph and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. thrust “A Freedom Budget for All Americans” onto the desk of President Lyndon Johnson—and it has receded.

To be sure, its recession in recent decades has been pronounced, as the world-weariness, the cynicism, and the craven calculations of political and media elites...
fostered a neoliberal consensus that delighted in recalling the crude language of Margaret Thatcher, who advocated for austerity with the declaration that “There is no alternative.” Rebecca Solnit did well and wisely observed a decade ago that “Utopia is in trouble these days. Many no longer believe that a better world, as opposed to a better life, is possible, and the rhetoric of private well-being trumps public good, at least in the English-speaking world.”

But, as Solnit knew, the Thatchers and the Reagans and the Bill Clintons and the Paul Ryans were on the wrong side of history. There was always an alternative. There still is an alternative. It can be imagined, and it can be achieved. But what will happen only if we pull utopian thinking off the pedestal and recognize the deepest truth of our intellectual and practical history: that there are few tools so powerful as a rough-and-tumble, unafraid-of-getting-dirty utopianism for organizing and achieving transformative change. Instead of an endless search for perfection, the utopian thinking that most frequently matters addresses immediate issues with a sense of urgency. It can and should be epic in scope and character, but it should also be willing to get specifically militant, as when French feminists argued for mandating equal representation of women in parliament with the suggestion that it was time to be “a bit utopian.”

Radical faith in grand visions—be they political or economic, social or spiritual—is supercharged by immediacy and the promise that rapid fundamental change is possible, that we can seize the moment and transform it. This is the faith that tells us technological progress need not enrich only the few but can in fact empower the many. This is the faith that says standards for public safety need not be dictated by mayors and the police unions that endorse them but can be controlled by the community. This is the faith that says a burning planet might not just be saved but renewed.

The seed of hope that inspires activism is also what makes utopian thinking so powerful. This power must be reclaimed if we are to harness the energy of a remarkable opening when—because of a pandemic that upended everything about what we thought possible, and of movements for justice that are finally being heard—it might finally be possible to address our contemporary variations on Paine’s American Crisis.

This rare opening highlights a need for utopian thinking, in all of its forms, that is more pressing than at any time since the end of World War II. If ever there were a moment that called for Paine’s “birthday of a new world,” this is it. Tens of millions of Americans, hundreds of millions of people around the world, see the possibility. More bold ideas are being advanced than at any time in decades. There are serious discussions about ending poverty, precarity, and inequality with universal basic income schemes. Demonstrators fill the streets to demand not just the defunding of police but the upending of systemic racism. A new generation of campaigners propose to save the planet and the people who inhabit it with a Green New Deal. Where UBI, abolition, and climate justice went unaddressed in the fall presidential debates of 2016, they framed the debates of 2020. The most important of those debates were not between Donald Trump and Joe Biden but between Biden and the future. Biden was resistant, declaring when the climate crisis came up that “The difference between me and the new green deal is they say, automatically, by 2030 we’re going to be carbon free. Not possible.” That was a frustrating response, but it was also an invitation to the sort of utopian thinking, and the sort of utopian demanding, that says, “Yes, possible.”

It was to be expected that right-wing Republicans in Congress would dismiss the Green New Deal as “a radical reshaping of American society in the name of utopian environmental policy,” as did Republican Representative Morgan Griffith from Virginia. That conservative commentators from the Colson Center would declare, “Abolishing police is the stuff of utopian fantasies.” That media outlets like Prairie Public Broadcasting would ask, “Is a Universal Basic Income too Utopian to Work?” What was unexpected, and hopeful, is the speed with which centrist Democrats like Biden, and even a few Republicans at the state and federal levels, have been drawn into discussions of these proposals since the pandemic hit and Black Lives Matter demonstrations filled the streets of American cities after the murder of George Floyd.

UTOPIAN THINKERS ARE ALWAYS SPINNING OUT IDEAS, as my friend Erik Olin Wright proved with his three-decade-long Real Utopias project, in which the late University of Wisconsin sociology professor brought together thinkers and activists to explore visionary responses to contemporary challenges. The conferences Wright organized from the 1990s to the 2010s were epic gatherings where great thinkers from around the world wrestled with everything from transforming the division of labor within families to redesigning the distribution of wealth within capitalist societies and genuinely empowering participatory democracy. The utopian responses that Wright and his comrades spawned did not get enough attention in their moment. But they are the sorts of ideas that get a second look in times of peril and uncertainty. These are such times. We can be overwhelmed by everything that’s coming at us. Or we can mount an overwhelming response that channels the visionary energy of Karl Marx, who declared that there is “a world to win,” and the humanity that Arundhati Roy expressed when she wrote, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.” —Arundhati Roy

“A Universal Basic Income too Utopian to Work?”

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

—Arundhati Roy

“A Universal Basic Income too Utopian to Work?”

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

—Arundhati Roy

“A Universal Basic Income too Utopian to Work?”

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

—Arundhati Roy
"A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now."

—Thomas Paine

Bernie Sanders introduced into our politics ideas that are common in many countries but are dismissed as utopian in the US.

Unfortunatelv, contemporary political and media elites are quick to reject visionary thinking of any kind. In today’s United States, the word “utopian” is often used to discredit progressive ideas and candidates. When Bernie Sanders ran as a democratic socialist for the presidency in 2016 on a platform that was radical only in the context of constipated American politics, his rival, Hillary Clinton, dismissed his agenda as “little more than a pipe-dream.” After she lost the fall race to Donald Trump, Clinton wrote a book in which, Vanity Fair noted, she argued that Sanders had “hijacked the Democratic primary and derailed her White House bid by misleading voters with his utopian, pie-in-the-sky proposals for free health care, free college, and free ponies for all.” A derogatory application of the “utopian” label to the Sanders candidacy was a constant. A Forbes headline declared, “Bernie Sanders’ Scandinavian Utopia Is an Illusion.” The Washington Times announced, “Only morons would vote for crazy Bernie Sanders’ utopian socialism,” while The Washington Post ridiculed the senator’s desire to create a Scandinavian-style social welfare state as “utopian fantasy.” The line of attack was so prominent that Sanders announced, “It is not utopian thinking to say that every man, woman and child should have access to health care as a right.”

There was no debating the point if you lived in Norway, New Zealand, or any of the other countries that guarantee health care. But the fact is that what Sanders was proposing—health care for all, free college, expanded Social Security, a $15-an-hour minimum wage, and requirements that employers provide paid parental leave, sick leave, and vacation time—sounded utopian for a lot of working-class Americans. The senator’s campaign acknowledged he was proposing a “political revolution.” So why, instead of getting defensive, didn’t Sanders draw inspiration from the author of the original American Revolution to explain how ideas once thought to be utopian can be mainstreamed? Sanders would have benefited by borrowing a page from Paine, whose tracts inspired immediate revolutionary action.

Paine opened Common Sense with an acknowledgment that “Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general Favor; a long Habit of not thinking a Thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of Custom.” With that, he outlined the argument for the rejection of the divine right of kings and a revolution against the wealthiest and most militarily powerful empire on the planet. The revolution ensued, formally beginning with the signing of a Declaration of Independence just six months after the publication of a pamphlet that concluded with a utopian cry, “A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand…”

Not a bad point of beginning, then. Or now.
Two years ago, the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, along with MIT and Oceanix (a start-up developing new ways to build on water), released a sprawling technocratic plan called Oceanix City, a community of 10,000 meant to float off the coast of New York City. Reading the press release is like assembling a collage of eco-technobabble, containing everything from the idea of being “resilient” (which here means “not flooding”) and the use of solar panels to hydroponic farming and a “zero waste” food policy. Of course, Oceanix City, an abstract utopia (meaning a utopia built by technocrats and operating within the existing social framework) assumes an almost entirely consumption-oriented habitat rather than a production-oriented one—meaning that other, less fortunate nations will still be the ones toiling in absentia to bring all the luxuries of everyday life. Ten thousand people, when considering the total population of New York City, is not a lot of people. And while the directive insists that the eco-villages will be affordable, nobody involved quantifies how affordability will be determined or maintained.

The more one reads into the design brief, the more one finds details that initially seem chipper but are, in reality, rather sinister: for example, the tidbit about how the project is meant to survive a Category 5 hurricane—something New York City itself is not. What we are seeing here is, in effect, a scarcity mentality couched in the jargon of sustainability, pure escapism masquerading as some kind of vague ideal society of (checks notes) people who live on floating solar-panel islands presumably working from home while the rest of New York drowns. Oceanix City is a project I return to frequently in my writing because it is a perfect example of everything wrong with contemporary design’s so-called big dreams. However, it’s not a stand-alone instance of egregious cynicism masquerading as idealism. No, the project is emblematic of a broader trend of endlessly salable techno-utopias, which include remarkably insipid things like 3D-printed tiny houses to solve homelessness, underground luxury bunker communities, and skyscrapers suspended from asteroids.

The technology for each of these ideas may be new (or even nonexistent), but they are, in fact, old ideas repackaged in glitzy new renderings—in the case of...
Oceanix City, by boyish starchitects who are very good at using PR and fantastical imagery to conveniently shield the fact that they are happy to work with environmentally destructive despos like Jair Bolsonaro (as Ingels attempted to do, unrepentantly). One can find a number of precedents for such projects dating specifically to the 1960s and '70s, a period not dissimilar to our own: one of financial and social crisis, beset with questions about the future of both the city and the earth itself. From financialization to gas shortages to housing crises to increasing existential dread regarding the environment, what's old is truly new again. It's no surprise that half-baked ideas from this former period have re-emerged in their current, even less inspiring forms. (At least the projects from mid-century both looked and were, in many ways, cool.) The first of these are megastructures. Megastructures are, according to the Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki (whom the historian Reyner Banham credits with inventing the term), “large frame[s] containing all the functions of a city, mostly housed in transient short-term containers.” They're further defined by a shared compositional form (“composed according to traditional Modern Movement precepts”) and group form (“accumulation of identical spatial or structural elements into larger complexes”). By that definition, Oceanix City, with its prefabricated, geometric patterns and installations, certainly fits the bill. However, just as Oceanix appropriates the imagery of sustainability (wood framing, green space, solar panels), the megastructures of the 1960s and '70s (almost all of which remain speculative and unbuilt) appropriate the hallmarks of high modernism. In the case of Paul Rudolph's mass housing proposal for the Lower Manhattan Expressway, that meant the highway. Rudolph's plan featured sprawling, angular brutalist apartment buildings suspended over the infamous proposed highway that was supposed to plow through Lower Manhattan and ended in being canceled, thanks to concerted community activism. Or consider the sublime industrial landscapes that litter the outskirts of many a metropolis, such as the massive, space-framed, fractal-like megacity plans of Japanese Metabolists like Maki and Kisho Kurokawa. These megastructures were typically conceived as massive, prefabricated closed systems, many of which were suspended above an existing urban fabric (often a highway) or, like Oceanix City, floating in a bay or harbor.

In these cities, both those that were speculative and those intended for real production, all functions of life have been designed and allotted modular units that would then be attached to a system of other units. Yet, in reality, all megastructures do, in the words of architecture historian Felicity D. Scott, is attempt “to make architecture congeal the...forces of capitalism as form and to adopt its modes of visuality.” For all their supposed flexibility, their functions resemble instruments of control as much as anything else. All of the terrible things in the world and in cities, things that are inherent to the oppressive division of social relations wrought by capitalism, would effectively still exist in these hyper-designed, hyper-rationalized spaces. This, of course, prompts the question: Utopia for whom?

The other thread in the Oceanix City vision of the future is one of ecological escapism. In this, it also owes much to the hippie mindset of the 1960s and '70s, when things like communes and dome cities seemed to promise escape from the aforementioned social relations (surely one cannot be alienated from one's own labor if one quits one's job and jets off to the desert to live communally!). Drop City, an experimental geodesic-dome building project founded in 1965 in a Colorado pasture, is perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon, of a city that aimed to sever all ties with existing social structures. Half extended art project and half bizarre interpretation of the ideas of Buckminster Fuller (the populizer of the geodesic dome), Drop City domes were made of both cheap, new, mass-produced building materials like silicone caulks and vinyl and items upcycled from junk yards, making it one of the earliest attempts at low-waste architecture, albeit somewhat kooky and misguided. Its building plans were provided by a zine called the Dome Cookbook, by an ex-mathematician named Steve Baer, a kooky character in and of himself who wrote sprawling, possibly acid-inspired treatises on innovative geometries. With the use of recycled materials, Baer and company argued that “everyone in the world can have a beautiful, comfortable dwelling unit for less than $1,000.” According to Scott, in order to declare independence from the lumber industry, the Droppers (as they dubbed themselves) invented a new shingle style out of recycled car tops. Citizens were essentially scavengers, feeding off the waste of a gluttonous America. If this sounds ill-fated to you, you’re right, it was. Domes, as cool as they are, are not practical; they’re notoriously leaky and are difficult to turn into functional homes with, you know, more than one room. Also, living out of domes made from trash had obvious health effects (all that sheet vinyl languishing in the sun stank and put toxic fumes into the air). Also, unfortunately, the mere revolutionary structure of the geodesic dome was not enough to actually bring about any real social revolution, and, as in many communes, times got desperate, things broke apart, and what was once an eco-paradise became nothing more than an abandoned trash heap in a goat pasture. So it goes.
While one cannot deny that Rudolph’s megastructure drawings and models for Lower Manhattan or a bunch of architecture hippies tripping on acid while living in trash domes are definitely cool, these utopias, in the practical sense of the term—as imaginaries of an ideal society—frankly suck. As a result, their progeny, be they in the form of 3D-printed tiny houses for the indigent or spurious off-shore eco-villages, also suck. The reason they suck is simple: Design, while obviously involved in the process of world transformation, cannot by itself solve social problems related to climate and urbanization.

That’s not to say that all utopian experiments and lines of thought in architecture suck. In fact, there’s a great deal we can learn from the utopian thinking of the past. Arts and Crafts movement pioneers and utopian socialists William Morris and Walter Crane, writing in the 1880s, argued for unalienated handiwork, authenticity in craft, and an escape from the new modes of mass production and their exploitative division of labor, which they saw as the destroyers of both art and life. At the core of their praxis is a simple but still revolutionary belief that we should be free to do as we please and labor as we want to, not as we are forced to in order to survive. This was an ideal that powered the Bauhaus in its earlier years, before its turn toward mass production. We can look also to the broadly humanitarian if not utopian visions that brought us what little remnants of the welfare state we have left: council housing in Britain and public housing in the US (both worthy and functional causes now picked clean by neoliberalism) or even the New Deal, which, though problematic, provided thousands of beautiful and functional public buildings in varying architectural styles across the country.

We have the tools and the protocols to build a real architectural and ecological utopia already at our fingertips. These include systems of alternative energy consumption and production; building systems like Passivhaus that use dense insulation and massive walls to conserve energy; landscape architecture that is sensitive to existing ecosystems; urban planning for mass public housing and transportation to replace oil-burning car dependence; preservation protocols to adapt, save, and reuse existing structures; and hundreds of years of architectural precedent to be influenced by. What we lack, actually, is imagination, drive, and political will. As we can see by the current movements in tenant organizing and advocacy for a Green New Deal, that’s changing too. All the ingredients for a better world are there—it’s now up to us as political and social actors to fight like hell for them.

Recently I read an excellent book: The Soviet Novel, by Kata-rina Clark. In it she observed that the USSR’s socialist realism suffered from what she called “modal schizophrenia,” because the writers were supposed to stay true to the situations they described while also evoking the better world socialism would bring. They were caught trying to bridge that gap between what is and what ought to be.

Clark’s diagnosis made me laugh. I’ve been writing utopian novels for a long time, and I recognized all too well the syndrome she described. The novel is usually regarded as a realist art form, and I’d go even further: By telling the stories we use to understand our lives, the novel helps create our reality. In novels, things go wrong—that’s plot. People then cope. That’s realism.

Utopia, on the other hand, is famously “no place,” an idealized society sometimes described right down to its sewage system. In utopia, everything works well—maybe even perfectly, but for sure better than things work now. So utopias are like blueprints, while novels are like soap operas. Crossing these two genres gets you the hybrid called the utopian novel: soap operas put in a blender with architectural blueprints. It doesn’t sound all that promising.

Then came Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed. Published in 1975, this was the first great utopian novel, and it demonstrated just how good the poor, misbegotten hybrid can be. Of course, there’d been earlier utopian novels, like William Morris’s News From Nowhere, or H.G. Wells’s A Modern Utopia, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland, or Aldous Huxley’s Island. These were all interesting efforts. But Le Guin’s book was a triumph. What she showed is that by describing a utopian society in a moment of historic danger, you create for it all kinds of problems that its characters must solve. It will get attacked from the outside, corrupted from the inside; things will go wrong, and so you have your plot. Le Guin combined an intriguing utopia with a compelling novel, and the result was superb. The people on her habitable moon, Anares, have formed an alternative society to the imperial capitalist world, Urras. They devised a system that is feminist for sure and either democratic socialist or anarcho-syndicalist, but in any case in a state of flux, its people doing everything they can to keep what’s best about their
system while also fending off impositions from the home world. It’s political fiction at its best.

Inspired by Le Guin’s example, I’ve often tried this hybrid form, and been stymied by its problems and spurred by its potential. One weakness I’ve become aware of is how often the authors of utopias set them after a break in history that allows their societies to start from scratch. In the 16th century, Sir Thomas More began the use of this device with a physical symbol: His utopia’s founders dug a Great Trench, cutting a peninsula in two and creating a defensible island. Other kinds of fresh start appear in utopias throughout the centuries, always clearing space for a new social order. Even Le Guin’s Anares is founded by exiles from Urras.

But in this world, we are never going to get the chance to start over. This was one of the reasons Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels objected to 19th-century utopias like that of Charles Fourier, the French designer of small communes living in perfect harmony: They were fantasy solutions that served only to distract people from the real work of politics and revolution. They were also in competition with Marx and Engels’s own ideas, so there was the usual left infighting. But it was a legitimate complaint: If utopia isn’t a political program, then what is it for?

The answer should be obvious. Utopias exist to remind us that there could be a better social order than the one we are in. Our present system is the result of a centuries-old power struggle, and it is devastating people and the biosphere. We must change it—and fast. But to what?

Utopias are thought experiments. Imagine if things ran like this: Wouldn’t that be good? Well, maybe...let’s live in it fictionally for a while. What problems crop up in this system? Can we solve them? What if we tweak things this way, or that? Let’s tell this story and then that story, and see how plausible they feel after we spend some imaginative time in them.

The problems that might develop in a proposed better system both propel the novel’s plot and give you things to think about. Then, hopefully, you can apply what you’ve learned to your current political situation. Having glimpsed a destination you like, you can then consider the actions available in your own time to get there. The great feminist utopias of Joanna Russ (The Female Man) and Marge Piercy (Woman on the Edge of Time) gave life to the experience of women’s political solidarity, and readers were then encouraged to change their present situation in those directions.

Now the onrush of catastrophic climate change has forced a reckoning. We either invent and institute a better way, or a mass extinction will take us down with it. Necessity has thus jammed utopia into history and turned it from a minor literary genre into an important tool of human thought. We need it like never before, and as the need has become acute, the bar has in effect been lowered: If we manage to dodge a mass extinction event, then we can call that utopia. People in any non-catastrophic future can heave a sigh of relief, grateful for such a stupendous effort by our generation. A healthy relationship to nature will create and require lots of good work as well as a commitment to justice for all Earth’s creatures—humans very much included. That may be as close to utopia as we’ll ever get, and it would be close enough. After all, you don’t want to deprive future people of their plots.

In 1964, following the unrest in Harlem roused by the police murder of James Powell, age 15, the poet June Jordan received an invitation to write for Esquire. Perhaps the invitation reached her in a manner that would feel familiar to some during our time. That is, perhaps she had been invited to explain.

But Jordan elected not to account for the conditions that had led to the boy’s death that July, or for the subsequent six days of violent protests, wherein steel-helmeted members of New York City’s Tactical Patrol Force descended on Harlem by the busload. They confronted peaceful crowds of up to 1,000 marchers as well as less decorous assemblies who greeted the police with their own tactical operations: bottles and debris hurled from the rooftops. All were met with the uniform dispersal strategy of shots fired into crowds.
would be substantially larger than in typical public housing, boasting balconies and parking spaces—“every window would have a view.” New highways would connect Harlem to its surroundings, conveying people in and out of the neighborhood and opening up what had been cut off by borders literal and imaginary. It was a design that yearned for expansion and connection—but also a total obliteration of what had come before. “Partial healing is not enough,” Jordan wrote in a text accompanying the proposal, “a half century of despair requires exorcism.” When the article was published in April 1965, Jordan’s byline appeared (under her married name, June Meyer), but the collaborative design—though the collaboration was at her instigation—was attributed to Fuller alone. The title she had chosen for the piece, “A Skyrise for Harlem,” was changed to “Instant Slum Clearance.” Jordan’s text offered specifics indicating that she and Fuller “fully expected its enactment”: a construction time line of three years, prefabricated elements to be delivered by helicopter, a budget financed by private investment. But the illustrations, as Jordan later noted with some despair, were captioned as “utopian details.”

The same month Jordan and Fuller’s dream of a “reconstructed Harlem” was published in Esquire’s pages, entering the history of the unbuilt, another project in the neighborhood was nearing completion. Intermediate School 201 was designed before the riots, which were themselves preceded by a February 1964 school boycott in which over 400,000 students declined to attend school to protest their segregated education. One flyer rallying them to the cause showed a Black boy staring through the broken shards of a mullioned window with the caption: “I don’t have a good integrated school.” Integration was understood as the force that would elevate their lives—because the best indicator of better opportunities was the presence of white people. So when the plans for IS 201 were published, they immediately caused a furor. The school would be situated at the confluence of Black Harlem and El Barrio, its eastern face abutting the elevated train traffic of the Park Avenue viaduct. Tenements, decrepit brownstones, a warehouse, and at least one church were demolished to make way for the new school: instant slum clearance indeed. But the rest remained. Black parents knew what this location meant. It was too deep in the ghetto to ever be integrated; white people would not send their children there.

As Marta Gutman details in a chapter of Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community, authorities responded with a logic that continues to govern the still-unresolved problem of unequal education available to poor, Black, and brown children. The city assured Black parents that the white bodies supposedly so necessary as vectors of excellence and justification for investment would be lured to the “showcase school” by its comforts and innovations. The school would have flexible-space, open-plan classrooms and would be the first in the city to be air-conditioned. These amenities, along with innovative teaching, would be the prize for white families daring a descent into what Time magazine called “Darkest East Harlem.” Such improvements were not for the sake of the existing community alone. (A similar idea operates in Jordan and
The idea of building it without windows was so the parents couldn’t look in and see it was segregated and the kids couldn’t look out to see it was Harlem!" —Amsterdam News

Fuller’s Skyrise project, which by its visionary design planned to attract and accommodate “an additional quarter-million residents, everyone willing to participate in the integrated transformation of a ghetto.” The New York Times noted how, in pursuit of white students, the city sent “10,000 four-page ‘invitations’ to pupils in the schools of the Northwest Bronx and Queens. The leaflets stressed the educational opportunities available at the new school and offered special bus service to and from East Harlem.” A total of 10 white families reportedly signed up for school tours, including one headed by Bruno Piscitello, who told the paper, “I wouldn’t be doing this for integration… as his wife nodded in agreement.” Instead, he would enroll his daughter only if the school in Harlem was better than the one in their neighborhood. If they did come, it would not be as participants in an experiment of transformation, but as a kind of resource extraction.

By then, a version of this self-interest had also begun to alter the aspirations of the neighborhood parents, who threatened and then carried out another boycott. Now, instead of agitating for the dream of integration, their efforts were governed by realpolitik. Geography being destiny, the location of IS 201 determined that it would be segregated. Therefore, parents and activists argued, let it offer “quality segregated education” under community control. As the Harlem-based sociologist and organizer Preston Wilcox asserted in 1966, “If one can believe that a predominantly ‘de facto segregated’ white school can be a ‘good school,’ then, one must believe that a ‘de facto segregated’ and predominantly Negro and Puerto Rican school can also be a ‘good school.’”

This struggle, first articulated by parents, soon found supporters—or as The New York Times described it, “Militant Negroes Move to Aid Group in Harlem.” There was Stokely Carmichael, still of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, having just declared for Black Power; a young Louis Farrakhan, ascendant just after the elimination of Malcolm X. Ella Collins, the sister of the slain leader, then attempting to guide the remnants of his Organization of Afro-American Unity, also lent her support: “We must create for ourselves and plan our own destinies.”

When that fight was won, at least temporarily, the school opened in April 1967—a year later than originally planned—after a three-week boycott, picketing, and prolonged negotiations. But in the midst of the struggle over what kind of school it would be, parents and activists began to notice the matter of the building itself—the work of New Orleans–based architects Curtis & Davis, imagined without any input from the local community.

At a cost of $5 million, it was then the most expensive school in New York’s system, and won prizes and praise for its design. But some parents and activists—including members of the Harlem Parents Committee, already organizing in the neighborhood for a decade, and other groups formed in the midst of the IS 201 struggle for school control—saw this architecture as an affront. Wilcox called it “a palliative for anger.” The facility was said to support students’ ability to concentrate, boasting ideal climate control, consistent lighting, and ease of maintenance. Each of these qualities was the result of a single feature: The classrooms had no windows. (Recall the broken window in the school boycott flyer—according to the Board of Education, broken windows were among the greatest expenses in maintaining school properties.) The windowless structure dampened the rumble of the elevated train and also, the Times noted approvingly, “shut out noise, dirt and distraction” from the “squalid slums outside.” The designers’ remit was predicated on the belief that students’ ability to concentrate required them to dissociate from the places they called home. The school’s exterior, sheathed by brick screening, was repeatedly described in a positive appraisal by Architectural Forum as a shield. While every room in Jordan and Fuller’s towers would be graced with its own view of a Harlem reimagined after the riots’ destruction, a political cartoon in the Amsterdam News derided “the windowless school”: “I think the idea of building it without windows was so the parents couldn’t look in and see it was segregated and the kids couldn’t look out to see it was Harlem!” And the building—again, designed before the riots—seemed prepared for future sieges. Seeking a design fix for the problem of the noisy elevated train, the architects were able to subvert a code requiring light in school buildings by having the structure qualify as a fallout shelter.

Years later, when I lived in Harlem, I sometimes passed that way, and IS 201 did not seem out of place. This was not a positive achievement. The building—in those days it housed the school of the Boys Choir of Harlem—seemed naturalized with its adjacent landscape, the one it had been designed to exclude. It was already old, and in my memory it was always covered in scaffolding and ringed by a tall chain-link fence, like something undergoing reconstruction. I did not know, or think to inquire, about its history. So I was unaware of the picket lines and controversy, or the brief, aborted experiment in community control. I did not know about the 12-inch walls and floors designed to withstand nuclear war. But the forbidding brick façade—shield—communicated something about what Jordan had been trying to avoid when she wrote to Fuller in the midst of their design collaboration, urging curvilinear features “to overcome physical patterns of inevitability; the sense of inexorable routes, the impossibility of a differentiated approach, of surprise.”

Despite their different origins, the Jordan-Fuller collaboration and the Harlem school fiasco raise similar questions. Neither design, not the built or the unbuilt, achieved its end. While it is easier to decry the school as a failed experiment imposed on the community and undone by its assumptions, it is not hard to imagine Jordan and Fuller’s Skyrise meeting a reception at least as bewildered and possibly becoming every bit as reviled. Neighbors referred to IS 201 as “the prison,” “the warehouse,” “the fortress,” and “Fort Necessity.” Other undoubtedly colorful local nicknames might have been earned by Skyrise, depending on what unforeseen problems the
design created or solved. In recent years Jordan and Fuller’s collaboration has been resurrected and celebrated by scholars as a lost instance of black feminist architecture and, rightfully, an achievement of Jordan’s speculative imagination. But both operate in architecture’s heroic, and thus truly utopic, mode.

Jordan rightly invoked the imaginative leap necessary to transform Harlem, but this was framed as “a proposal to rescue a quarter-million lives by completely transforming their environment.” The notion of an architectural rescue mission may be where Fuller’s imprint is most visible. In early 1966—just before the struggle began over IS 201, its design and control, and how these would combine to determine what kind of future was possible in Harlem—Fuller was quoted in The New Yorker making claims that might have been used to justify those windowless classrooms: “You can’t reform man, and you can’t improve his situation where he is.” Fuller further described his theory of change with the language of conquistadors and corsairs: “The tiny minority that went to sea, for example…immediately found [themselves] outside the law.” This “outlaw area” was the place where technology was developed and change was possible. If Harlem were an such an area, then Preston Wilcox’s harsh assessment of IS 201—that it was “a monument to absentee-decision-making, colonialism”—may have been equally applied to Skyrise, even if it was codesigned by Jordan, a native daughter of the neighborhood.

Maybe neither is more utopian—or dystopian—than the other. One reached skyward, the other burrowed underground and oriented inward. But of both, it is worth asking: Whose utopia is it?

Interestingly, the two projects shared a design element. Jordan writes of the innovation, developed with Fuller, to build the new towers on columns above existing tenements. This way they’d avoid the displacement summed up in the Harlem aphorism “Urban renewal equals Negro removal.” Instead, residents would stay in their homes during the construction process and then move up, into the new towers, which would begin 10 stories above street level. Only when the ascent was complete would the old buildings be razed, the empty space below becoming public park space and roads.

IS 201 also hovers above street level, elevated on tapered concrete columns or pilothi that earned it another of its nicknames: a “tomb on stilts.” In Educating Harlem, Gutman wrote that these were among the design’s allusions to “classical European, African, and Native American” influences, but another observer, writing in 1973, called them an “inspiring example of modern American riot architecture.” What the architects thought would be a covered schoolyard was instead sought out as shelter for Harlemites who lived out of doors, its shadows inviting in the deprivation the building attempted to shut out—neatly contradicting Fuller’s notion that every use could be determined by design. Surely the 100-story towers of Skyrise would have created as much shadow as shade.

Darryl Williams, who was among the first students to attend IS 201, has posted a short documentary on YouTube in which he attempts to make sense of the time he spent there, wondering if “people knew that IS 201 was built out of struggle.” To a soundtrack of Gil-Scott Heron, he drives through the neighborhood, interviewing his fellows from the schoolyard and the block, boys who had played together in those streets before the school was erected and are now almost old men. Williams’s own impressions of the school are salutary. He attended during the brief period when the local-control experiment was allowed to unfold, so he recalls the community groups whose after-school activities flourished in the building, pressing inward from across Harlem with “Jazzmobile, Each One Teach One, Malcolm-King College, Night Center, self-defense classes, and talent shows.” He has a precise memory of the building’s 56 concrete pillars, as if the number itself were a cipher whose meaning is known only to the initiated. His film ends insisting that the value of the school be brought to light, “because its history remains in the dark.”

When I lived in Harlem, IS 201 did not seem out of place. This was not a positive achievement.
imagined there were no people. Or, if there were people, they could be civilized and perfected—or, should they resist, vanquished and exterminated.

It is easy to recognize in More and those who followed him not only the blueprints of an unbuilt world but also, in some cases, the world that came and maybe the world that is coming. More’s Utopia—that happy place, or no place—was socialist while also a slave society; Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, offered a proto-feminist entry with The Blazing World, ruled by an empress and “so well ordered that it could not be mended; for it was governed without secret and deceiving Policy; neither was there any ambitious factions, malicious detractions, civil dissertations, or home-bred quarrels.” Sir Francis Bacon, in his unfinished The New Atlantis, described an island that flourishes after the rest of the world is destroyed by rising seas.

Each was dreamed up not only as a deliberate design of a new world but because of a world that no longer existed, a world—following the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter—whose people and their vision of how or what the world might be had been destroyed by European encounter. The relationship between utopian thought and conquest is that of Borges’s “map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.”

But if More’s neologism lodged in Western tradition as mere idealization, Vasco Quiroga, the Bishop of Michoacán, read Utopia as a builder would read a blueprint, determined to make it “the Magna Carta of European civilization in the New World.” Utopia was the plan Quiroga would follow when attempting to smooth over the inconveniences arising in 1530 when the Purhépecha began to rebel after the execution of their leader, Tzintzicha Tangáxoa II. Opposed to enslaving Indigenous people, preferring rather to pacify them by indoctrination and instruction, Quiroga proposed to fix the problem of the indios scattered throughout the countryside (where they were likely in retreat, recuperating from violent reprisals). They would be brought to live in cities, “that the natives may have enough for themselves and for those whom they must support; that they may be sufficiently well kept and that they may be properly converted, as they should be.” This would be achieved through elaborate design: a six-hour workday, property held in common, and all corrupting luxuries eschewed. Quiroga’s plan called for reordering patterns of living with mathematical precision. The natives would be gathered into hospital-towns, which he called Republicas de Indios: “a city of six thousand families—each family composed of from ten to sixteen couples—would be ruled, regulated, and governed as though it were a single family.”

The “Indian Utopia” founded by Vasco Quiroga persists, his good works still celebrated today. A Mexican tourist website describes the legacy of Tato Vasco, as the bishop is fondly remembered, whose program of training is classed as an enduring success in the villages of Santa Fe de Mexico, Santa Fe de la Laguna, and Santa Fe del Río. As if the production of tourist handicraft was the destiny of a people who had fought against their obliteration, travelers are instructed to visit “Paracho for guitars, Tzintzuntzan for pottery, Santa Clara for copper products and Nurío for woven woolen goods.” The website does not record the prophetic vision of a Purhépecha woman who predicted an apocalyptic punishment meted out by an offended goddess, announcing European arrival, the coming rip in time, and the end of the known world:

Break all those jugs for it shall not be from here on, as it has been up to now when we were very prosperous. Break all the wine tubs everywhere, leave off the sacrifice of men and bring no more offerings with you because from now on it is not to be that way. No more kettle drums are to be sounded, split them asunder. There will be no more temples or fireplaces, nor will any more smoke rise, everything shall become a desert because other men are coming to earth. The grass will become a desert because other men are coming to earth. They will spare no end of the earth, to the Left Hand [west] and to the Right [east], and everywhere all the way to the edge of the sea and beyond.

Perhaps, then, the point is not whether utopia can be recovered to organize a new politics—a utopia of the grassroots—but how much the world we live in is already someone’s utopia. How are we to be delivered from it, by it, when we are still in it? Sylvia Wynter has scoffed at the compromised position of a scientific community that created climate change now attempting to respond to it. Recognizing the longue durée spanning from the early modern age of discovery to ecological collapse, you could say if the New utopians, as Wynter did, “The proposals that they’re going to give for change are going to be devastating!”

I was young and responsible for no one’s survival but my own when I decided my book Harlem Is Nowhere would be the first volume of a trilogy studying Black utopias. The settings—Harlem, Haiti, and the Black Belt of the American South—were of my choosing; though they were not places I belonged to by origin, I felt my origins tied up with them. The phrase “Black utopia” had been supplied by a mentor when I told him about those places, and it was with an irony that I did not question but was not exactly my own.

Occasionally I am asked to explain her, the one whose dream this was, by people who hear me name those places and think that, like the 10,000 invited to attend school in Darkest East Harlem, they cannot possibly be utopias because they would not like to go there. Plenty have been bold enough to tell me that those places are dystopias. At some point it became plain that I was operating with a different working definition of utopia than the (white) people asking me for clarification. It was not the Blazing World of Margaret Cavendish, a place “so well ordered that it could not be mended.” I had come to think of utopia as a location of the unbuilt, the not-yet, a place of unachieved dreams. I realize now this was just one of a group of words for which I had private, alternative definitions, owing to the mother tongue I had learned in my native country, the family of origin. I was
a teenager, soon to discover on my mother’s bookshelves June Jordan’s Civil Wars, with its essay on the Skyrise for Harlem, when a teacher questioned the way I sneered dismissively whenever the word “politics” crossed my lips. I was speaking the dialect of my parents, who by the time of my birth had mostly left politics behind—though they were still very young. Politics made fatherless daughters, for though mine resided at home, I knew he lived in the Revolution. My definition of utopia had been formed growing up in a world measured against the unachieved, where time was told by an event—a revolution?—that had not happened, or had not happened yet, where dreams (and people) were thwarted, and the substance of these things was available to me only as an aura I experienced as a small girl leafing through political tracts stuffed in boxes in closets, bearing an unaired, nostril-burning scent I came to associate with the early 1970s. That was utopia, this not-yet of the past that was also still ongoing.

This conditionality, besides a flexibility of tenses, caused me to avoid some territories I recognized as home but would not enter: no campus sit-ins, protest marches, or even petitions; never a raised fist. I did not disagree with such measures, but when I was young I had an aversion to anything that appeared to me as reenactments of my parents’ time in the Revolution. They had met as members of something that, until a few years ago, I knew only as “The Organization.” There was a discontinuity between these two varieties of future: the one my peers claimed to be moving toward and that of my parents’ not-yet. Unable to reconcile these futures, for years I avoided anything that could be understood as a movement, until a time when moving, with others, became what I was doing in the present tense.

This, and the fact that I am older now—responsible for the survival of someone besides myself—is why, when reading histories of the not-yet, I remain less interested in heroic contours. Instead, I search for the people who did not join the picket lines or the boycotts—the ones meant to be kept out by the windowless classrooms. I search for the people who did not join the picket lines or the boycotts—the ones meant to be kept out by the windowless classrooms.

I needed a new word. Then I came upon the work of the Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor, who speaks of Native “survivance” as the persistence of stories, insisting on a Native presence in time if not in history, as peoples if not in politics. In this survivance, maybe there is a means to continue, against what the Purépecha knew was coming to rule “the edge of the sea and beyond.” And thus, perhaps, positioned to continue against the rising of the sea itself.

In early June last year, my father said something I still haven’t worked out completely. He told me that what we are living through now—a world ablaze with a pandemic, wildfires in California where he lives, and the so-called racial reckoning that was happening, is happening, has already happened, or has not happened yet—felt familiar. It all reminded him of 1968: irresistible forces transforming everything, all at once and unpredictably. My father was too young to see action that year of the Revolution, but he had absorbed the chaos and promise and hurting change. What he said next surprised me, though I responded with silence. His conclusion was that, in light of the current happenings, all that was left to do was “to hunker down and take care of your people.”

This was not the vision of politics I had expected from him. I was alone in lockdown with my son, his grandson (a miracle of a phrase I did not expect ever to pronounce because of the language spoken in my native country). I listened to my father as I stood in the quiet green backyard of the rural-ish exurb where I’ve lived since taking my son from the city. We had arrived here a few months before the pandemic and the uprisings, so for a long time I had the feeling of experiencing a near-miss. In the evenings I followed the news of updated death tolls and learned which cities were under curfew, using headphones so my son would not hear. It was a future I had not prepared for, a location in which my world had become much smaller, and some of my dreams further away, because I was trying to find the best way for us to survive.
If Americans approached aging and disability not as an individual crisis but as a collective responsibility, what kind of safety net could we build?

* Bryce Covert*
Brandon Will had a life plan: go to grad school for creative writing in New York City and eventually get a job in publishing. But then his mother, Janice, came to visit. She had lost a “startling” amount of weight, he said. At 62, she wanted to take cabs for short distances. He noticed a stiffness in her facial muscles that made it difficult for her to express emotion. “I’d be taking selfies and she couldn’t smile,” he recalled.

Within a year she would be diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. “It got real serious real quick,” Will said. He decided to sublet his room in New York and move home to Detroit for three months. “I thought we’d get her back to where she’d been before the spiral happened.” It’s now been five years, and Will still lives with her, monitoring her meals, doling out her medications, and helping her get around the house without falling.

Will said his family was “very blue collar.” His father was an electrician, and his mother paused her freelance writing career to be a stay-at-home parent. “We had always been kind of broke, but my parents did a great job working with so little,” he said. There were no college funds, but there was always food on the table and money for book fairs. In retirement, Janice lives on a modest 401(k) account and receives a portion of Brandon’s father’s pension. A few years ago, a doctor wrote Janice a prescription for home health care, and an aide came to assess her. He outlined a care plan, but Medicare refused to cover it. Medicaid might, but Janice’s modest income makes her ineligible for it.

One way or another, long-term care is likely to touch all of our lives. Those with incomes low enough to qualify for Medicaid can get coverage for nursing home stays or, for a lucky few, care inside their homes, and an even smaller number can afford private long-term care insurance. Outside of that, there is no system for helping us afford the care we need if we are fortunate enough to live long lives.

“Our country has never had a long-term care system,” said Ai-jen Poo, director of the advocacy organization Caring Across Generations. When the United States implemented programs like Medicare and Medicaid, life expectancy was far shorter and support for aging wasn’t on the agenda. The issue hasn’t garnered much political attention since then. Americans don’t like to think about death, aging, or disabilities. “We’ve been youth-focused and ability-focused,” said Sarah Szanton, director of the Center for Innovative Care in Aging at the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing. “We have so much ableism, and we have viewed [aging] traditionally as a private matter.”

Today, the United States has a tattered state-by-state patchwork instead of a comprehensive social safety net. “We call it the nonsystem of long-term care,” said Susan Reinhard, senior vice president and director at the AARP Public Policy Institute. Most people assume that Medicare will cover long-term care, but it doesn’t automatically pay for even short-term assisted living or nursing home stays. In rare cases it will cover short-term in-home care from a certified aide. Medicaid covers nursing homes and, in some states, will sometimes cover home care, but many only qualify after they have spent down their assets—often by paying out of pocket for costly nursing home stays.

There’s also a serious mismatch between what families can access through Medicaid and what Americans want when they age. Nearly 90 percent of Americans say they want to age at home, but few get to do so. More than 800,000 people are on state waiting lists to get home-based care through Medicaid. Waiting lists are a problem of supply. Home health care aides make a median hourly wage of $13, frequently don’t receive any benefits, and have few possibilities for advancement. The job is physically demanding and emotionally taxing, so there is a chronic shortage and lots of turnover.

If they can afford it, Americans can buy private long-term care insurance, but very few—7.5 million—do. The policies tend to be restrictive about what services and providers they’ll cover, and they often deny coverage based on preexisting conditions. Some won’t pay benefits in the case of common conditions like Alzheimer’s or diabetes. And premiums are high, since only those who are most vulnerable and costly to insure tend to buy it.
Brandon Will and his mother were always close. If he was sick or short on rent, she’s the one he would call. Even when he lived in New York, they would go to see the same movie at the same time in their different cities and get on the phone to talk about it afterward. Will had, even in his 30s, already envisioned what the future would look like for the two of them: He would move back to Chicago after grad school, and Janice would retire and move close to him. But that was supposed to be when he was in his 40s or 50s—not now. And yet today they’ve moved to a one-story house in Chicago; Will has a bedroom in the garage.

Janice has cognitive and balance issues from Parkinson’s. She also began to suffer from debilitating chronic pain that turned out to be fibromyalgia. After the home health aide came, Will took the binder of physical therapy activities he left behind and began trying to implement the regimen himself. But less than a year after the aide visited, his mother fell and snapped her femur while trying to negotiate the surface change between the kitchen tile and the hallway carpet. Will thinks she “absolutely” wouldn’t have been so severely injured and needed surgery if they’d had more support.

These days he helps Janice with things large and small. He lines up activities and phone calls to keep her mind active. Walking is difficult for her, so he has to be at her side even though she uses a walker. It can take her almost an hour to get to the corner of the block. He makes sure she eats at certain times so that she can take her medications as prescribed. After another bad fall last summer, he helps her get to and from the bathroom at night.

Will bemoans the fact that her care is reactive, not proactive. Medicare will cover things that are medically necessary, such as the walker after Janice broke her femur, but not assistive devices that could actually prevent a fall, like bars to help her get in and out of the bathtub. He’s done what he can to learn how to be a good caregiver: reading articles, going to Parkinson’s caregiver support groups, joining groups on Facebook. He takes notes every time Janice has physical therapy sessions so he can help her repeat the exercises. “But man, I wish we’d had this one guy who was ready to tell us everything,” he said of the home health aide who came for the assessment. “You’re thrown out there on your own, and you’re trying to piecemeal assemble your plan.”

The situation also makes it difficult for Will to pursue his career. He had just been offered a low-level job in publishing when he moved home to care for Janice. For the first few years he kept thinking he could get back to that plan, or at the very least use the time at home to finish a book he’s writing. “Yeah, it was not a writing retreat,” he said with a laugh. “Your anxiety is growing: Am I going to miss my window?” He’s started freelancing, but he doesn’t have the mental capacity to hustle for more work, nor does he have consistent days and times when he knows he’ll be free to do it. Finances are incredibly tight, and they eased only slightly during the pandemic, because his student loan payments were put on hold.

Having a home health care aide help Janice, even for a few hours a week, would make an enormous difference. “It would completely change my life if we could get someone to come a couple times a week,” he said.
more hours, particularly when he’s alone overnight, often having to sit in his own waste. Still, it looks far different here than in most other states, where the ability to get care at home is severely limited.

“Washington leads in everything,” Reinhard said. AARP has ranked the state number two in the country for providing long-term care supports, in part because over 60 percent of its Medicaid and state-funded long-term care funding goes to home-based care, compared with a national average of 45 percent. One of the state’s most important innovations is the way it treats home health care workers. “The state invested in home care in a very real way,” said Sterling Harders, president of SEIU 775. For two decades, home care workers have been organized through Harders’s union, and they’ve secured some of the best pay and benefits for such work in the country. The starting wage is now $16.72 an hour, Harders said, and the workers get raises every six months. They can obtain health insurance for $25 a month and have access to an employer-paid retirement program. They even get paid sick leave and mileage reimbursement for driving their own cars to work. Washington also offers “the most robust training program for caregivers in the country,” Harders said. Home care aides must complete 75 hours of basic training, akin to what certified nursing assistants receive, and most do another 12 hours a year to stay up-to-date on best practices or learn about the specific needs of their clients.

Because of these reforms, “home care is much more available,” Poo said, “especially in the rural communities.” It means that there are 23 home health and personal care aides for every 100 adults who need one—still not enough, but above the national average. It also means that caregivers are well trained and well compensated, offering clients more peace of mind.

Washington residents who need long-term care will soon experience the country’s first-ever social insurance program to help defray the cost. Eventually any state resident who pays into the system for 10 years—not only those on Medicaid—will be able to receive $100 a day, up to a lifetime cap of $36,500, if they need help with daily activities like eating or bathing. The money will cover everything from a home health care aide to the installation of a shower bar. But while residents will start paying in January 2022, the benefits won’t be made available for another three years after that. And the benefit is likely to increase the demand for home health care aides, necessitating more supply.

“We may be best in the nation, but it’s still not enough,” Harders noted. Even the higher wages are often not enough to live on, and health insurance is available only for workers and excludes their children.

More than 40 million Americans are providing elder care but not getting paid for it.
MUCH COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED SIMPLY BY CHANGING the way we approach caring for the aging and disabled: not as an individual crisis but as a collective obligation. That mindset is at the heart of some smaller-scale innovations that rely heavily on the idea of community.

In 1999, a group of elderly homeowners in the Beacon Hill section of Boston faced a conundrum: They wanted to stay in their homes, but they were too wealthy to receive Medicaid—and yet not wealthy enough to afford the services they needed. So they founded a “village”—a collective in which members pay dues (a few hundred dollars a year) and typically hire someone to oversee the services they need to stay in their homes, such as transportation, social programs, or help with housekeeping tasks. Some even hire a shared chef or a nurse. There are now about 300 such villages affiliated with the Village to Village Network across the country.

These villages can’t solve everything or include everyone. It takes 18 to 24 months and often significant resources to get new ones started. Members have to be mobile, and the villages don’t offer medical services. Barbara Sullivan, the executive director of the Village to Village Network, wants to see government resources help more of them start up and keep going. “If Medicare can reimburse, through the Advantage program, Uber and Lyft for [rides to] medical appointments, why can’t we get reimbursed?” she asked.

Someday people who need assistance might choose to live in something like Carehaus, a residence where the elderly and their caregivers live together. Artist and filmmaker Marisa Morán Jahn and architect Rafi Segal, who are launching the first Carehaus next year, started the project because of their personal experiences. Morán Jahn, the daughter of Chinese and Ecuadorian immigrants, has dealt with struggling to find care for her young son and also with worrying about her isolated grandmother. Segal’s father and grandparents grew up on a kibbutz in Israel. Combine those things and you get Carehaus. Older residents live in private rooms clustered around a large shared space, and each floor is dedicated to an activity or need: a kitchen, an art workshop, a fitness area. Caregivers, meanwhile, get an affordable place to live with their families and can share the work.

The details matter. There are no corridors, so it’s easier for older people to orient themselves. Each floor has a mural in a different color to help them find their way. The color changes as the wall meets the floor to help those who are visually impaired differentiate the two. It will also look “hip,” Segal said, to change the way we think about where the elderly live.

The first Carehaus will be a 20-unit building in central Baltimore housing 12 seniors and four caregivers and their families. Morán Jahn and Segal hope many more will follow. They’re already looking for new sites in Houston and Miami.

elder care is “something that’s been really hard to get political momentum behind for as long as I can remember,” said Poo. But there’s a growing recognition that aging doesn’t have to be all about “decline and vulnerability and frailty”—warehousing the old in facilities until they die. “The thing we always forget is that aging is actually living.” With the right support, older Americans can continue to have full lives. “We think of children as an investment and older adults as not an investment,” Szanton pointed out. But “older adults have a lot to provide.”

The policies are slowly shifting accordingly. Thirty years ago, Reinhard said, states were spending resources almost exclusively on nursing home care. Now that is nearly evenly shared with home-based and community-based care. The Affordable Care Act included the CLASS Act, which would have established a national, voluntary social insurance program for long-term care. But without a mandate that Americans buy plans, it never became solvent and was shut down in 2011. During his 2020 run for president, Senator Bernie Sanders included long-term care coverage in his Medicare for All proposal, and it was also included in congressional legislation.

Then Joe Biden campaigned on a care package that included elder care, and as president he has proposed a $400 billion investment in home- and community-based care for seniors and the disabled in his American Jobs Plan. The pandemic revealed not just the shortcomings of our nursing homes—which turned into nightmares as sickness and death spread inside them—but also that care for our loved ones enables us to live full lives.

“Beforehand, if you didn’t have the ability to afford long-term care, you just thought of it as a personal failure,” Poo said. “Now we’re talking about what is our responsibility as a nation to support our collective ability to take care of the people that we love.”

Will is determined to try to get more care for his mother again—just someone to come to their home for a few hours a week. He plans to reapply to Medicare to cover the cost of an aide. But having been disappointed once, “it’s hard to even get my mind in the game,” he said. “We are hopeful. But I am expecting a long process with no promises.”
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Is an animal a being or a boundary? Is it a kind of living organism or a threshold that anyone might cross—if pushed far enough? As the scholar Jack Halberstam argues in his latest book, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, many of our associations with animals and their natural habitat are rooted in colonial practices of categorization that distinguished “the domestic/tame/civilized” from “the foreign/wild/barbaric.” However, far from urging us to dismantle this binary, Halberstam asks us merely to reorganize the judgments we attach to it so that the wild and animalistic might not be something we fear descending into but rather something
we might actively embrace. Much as queer theory seeks to recuperate the word “queer” itself, Halberstam notes, so too should we reclaim “wildness” as not a disparagement but as a mode of resistance. To be wild is not to fail at being civilized but to recognize the failures of civilization to sustain life—physically and spiritually. Wildness, he argues, “functions as a form of disorder that will not submit to rule, a mode of unknowing, a resistant ontology, and a fantasy of life beyond the human.”

Filthy Animals, the novelist Brandon Taylor’s first short story collection, is filled with characters who crave the kind of feral freedom that Halberstam describes. The opening story, “Potluck,” begins with a character looking into the window of an apartment on a frigid Wisconsin winter night: “Noise of an undifferentiated party variety drifted out into the deep blue cold, meeting Lionel under the sunroom window, where he had stopped to peer inside.” Varying degrees of ferociousness await him there: classist disdain from the academics in attendance, unwanted sexual advances, and wanted sexual advances that presage jealousy-driven acts of cruelty. Interior spaces do not offer warmth and protection from the elements but instead leave Lionel and many of the other characters in the collection (many of whom are queer, women, and people of color) vulnerable to the predations of stronger human animals. At one point, Lionel finds himself sitting next to the girlfriend of a man who has been flirting with him and senses “a kind of heat” transferring between them, “some kind of animal recognition.”

This first story lays out the basic terrain of Filthy Animals. Over the 11 stories, mostly set in Madison, Wis. (where Taylor attended graduate school in biochemistry), the spaces of civilized domesticity are revealed to be the dirtiest, bloodiest, most dangerous places in which a wounded animal could find itself. This is conveyed quite literally at times: The humans of Filthy Animals are prone to biting their teeth, making fists, shedding or drawing blood; on occasion, they even bite. A largely middle-class array of professionals—mathematicians, ballet dancers, medical students—their mouths seeming perpetually open and ready to attack, their hands rarely far from a sharp object to throw at their rivals or lovers.

The violence in Filthy Animals is that of gentility. It is domesticated. As Taylor’s characters brutalize one another in recital rooms, lecture halls, coffee shops, and other spaces that we are conditioned to think of as full of erudite, well-mannered types, we are left to conclude that these kinds of places—formal and informal corridors of power—in fact provoke the worst and basest instincts in people. More than being in the wilderness, it is within the shimmering towers of civiliza-

several characters who will return subsequently in “Flesh,” “Proctoring,” “Mass,” “Apartment,” and “Meat.” These stories revolve around Lionel and two ballet students, Charles and Sophie. Lionel, it is revealed, was in the mathematics graduate program but took a medical leave of absence following a suicide attempt. His motivations for trying to take his life are deliberately presented as murky and diffuse, but his family suspects it is because “he’d been running and running with all them white kids at school.” Lionel contests this suggestion: “His aunts and uncles saw his desire to kill himself as an extension of all those things they didn’t like or understand,” but “it was nobody’s fault. Things happened.” We learn that the party is his first attempt to socialize after a stay in a mental health facility. Uneasy, he looks around the potluck table for grains and greens, careful to avoid meat, which he has stopped eating since his suicide attempt: “The thought of consuming dead things, when he had been so close to dying, when he had wanted to die, was too much.”

From the dinner party, we get flashbacks to Lionel’s time at the facility, which was designed to give the appearance (despite windows that could not fully open) that a person there could come and go. Referring to the delicate and unimposing material of the locking mechanisms on the windows, Lionel realizes that it was intended “to look not threatening,” that the staff “wanted the people at the facility to feel affirmed by their captivity.” At the party, he is a captive to different forms of social pressures and nearly buckles under their weight, at one point having to excuse himself to go to the bathroom. When he meets Charles and Sophie for the first time, he discovers a couple of kindred spirits, at least in one important way: They too are ambivalent, as any domesticated animal would be, torn between the competing desires for safety, protection, and enclosure and for absolute and boundless freedom.

As Lionel gets to know them, he discovers that Charles and Sophie are in a nonmonogamous relationship. They pretend not to belong to each other, but that pretense unravels frequently and with ferocity. After the party is over, Charles follows Lionel home in the snow, leading to a sexual encounter between the two men that eventually binds the three of them together. Sophie forces Lionel into a tense friendship, seemingly unsure how to balance her various conflicting urges—to affirm her commitment to free love, but also to win, to beat out the competition. When Lionel becomes uncomfortable with it all and tries to leave her apartment, Sophie tries harder to bait him and starts to bare her fangs, literally. “Do you think I’ll eat you?” she asks, as she “snapped her teeth playfully at him.”

In “Little Beast,” we find out what the other side of this kind of entrapment—a full-on embrace of being feral—would look like. Fittingly, it is a story about a child. It centers on a seemingly twentysomething babysitter named Sylvia and the little girl she’s in charge of along with her brother, and we quickly realize that either one could be the titular beast. The girl gets into all sorts of muck; early on in the story, she walks over to Sylvia and reveals that her hands are covered in dog shit. Later, Sylvia finds her jumping up and down on her parents’ bed, totally naked, covered in scratches, her hair filled with twigs and dirt. “How has she done this to herself? She looks like a wild thing,” she thinks in frustration. Sylvia does not handle this kid with kid gloves: She plunges the little girl’s shit-covered fingers into hot, almost scalding water. “It would be nothing, would take nothing,” she thinks, “to rend this girl to pieces.” Taylor compares Sylvia in this moment to the wily beast in “Little Red Riding Hood,” describing her as “part wolf,” though not because Sylvia is angry with her; it is more that she sees herself too much in the girl. Recently out of a relationship and engaging in self-destructive sexual behavior with the father she babysits for, Sylvia recognizes in the girl’s wilderness a burning thirst she likewise feels at the back of her throat. It is the same burning that led her to leave her boyfriend, to be unbound by the needs and expectations imposed on women by men: “Sylvia thinks she can understand the girl. She knows what it is to be trapped inside a thing, inside a life. She knows what it is to want to tear a hole in everything.”

In Taylor’s title story, “Filthy Animals,” we meet a pair of young men who are not quite at that point yet, not entirely ready to bare all and give in to sheer instinct. Its main characters, Milton and Nolan, two Black teenagers, have just gotten high in a basement when they get a text from a white boy named Abe and his friend Tate, who invite the pair to a “burner” out in the woods. “Burner,” it is explained, “means there will be ten to fifteen people they vaguely know and kerosene-soaked rags torched in metal barrels. Cheek whiskey, cheap beer for the Christians. Coke, molly, and weed for the true believers,” rounded out by the scent of “Tommy Boy cologne” and the look of “dark denim turned white in the crotch and ass from wear.” Tate and Abe, Taylor alerts us, “bring out the worst in Nolan, excite the animal part of him.” The boys all know each other from Sunday school and have a history of becoming violent in their encounters. These scuffles and fistfights are often just an excuse to touch one another, to be intimate and physical in a way that does not stir up feelings too complicated—until it does. Desire subdues breeds violence, and that night things go too far; the usual roughhousing gets complicated by the insertion of a rock. When it is all over, Milton steps out of the woods looking to clean the blood, dirt, and cum off of his hands. (The trees had offered a brief hiding place from the rest of the world.)

The other stories in the collection maintain an interest in physicality and bodies and force. In “Mass,” a young man named Alek thinks about his brothers, type-A medical students who used to beat him up as a kid; one even ground into his arm. “Perhaps it was always this way with brothers,” Alek speculates, “a truce brokered only after
an equilibrium of physical strength had been met, as if the potential for mutual destruction were the only thing that kept them from tearing each other limb from limb.” In “What Made Them Made You,” a young woman with cancer feels a mysterious presence suffocating her at night but is told not to fear it, as she is made of the same stuff as any monster found on earth (which reads, particularly in the context of the story, as an allegory about family in a culture that tells us to accept or paper over the violence they can inflict on us).

Only in “Anne of Cleves,” the story of a woman, Marta, settling into her first lesbian relationship, do we get something like a reprieve, an example of humans living in harmony with the natural world, not so much taming it as fusing together with it. Marta finds in this relationship a safe place where, unlike at work or in her previous relationships, she no longer feels compelled by men to give them what they want from her, to protect their egos, to circumvent their anger. In Sigrid, her new partner, she is freed from that, and their relationship slowly becomes surrounded by vegetation, by wild things that nurture. “They had grown vegetables in a little plot behind the house and pickled them,” Taylor writes. “They opened jars of okra and peas and beans. They made their own kraut. Their house smelled like vinegar, but it was the healthiest that Marta had felt in a long time.”

In recent months, Taylor has also emerged as a talented (if self-deprecating) cultural critic. Whenever he’s about to publish an essay, he tweets a picture of Taylor Swift dressed in a serious-looking black sweater with her hair in bangs. “You know what this pic means,” he announces to his followers. “Essay time!” one responds. The image of Swift is Taylor’s way of gently mocking the “internet essayists,” a term he has never quite defined but that I think from contextual clues refers to bad-faith takes on identity engineered to get clicks but not to move the conceptual needle forward. Taylor’s own online writing shows us that this is such a waste of the Internet, which in his hands is reminiscent of its earlier, unfettered iteration. He uses the freedom of online publishing to take risks, to tell the truth about your faves. His popular newsletter, Sweater Weather (named for his love of the garment), defies simple categorization. Launched in 2019, Sweater Weather ranges in modes and registers and includes everything from erotic Stanley Tucci fan fiction to commentary on race in the contemporary horror genre (“How do you make something to terrify a people who have lived for generations in a state of constant besiegement?”).

Taylor has also written about the “internet novel,” a category that seems to have finally arrived this year as a legitimate subgenre, thanks to entries by Lauren Oyler (Fake Accounts) and Patricia Lockwood (No One Is Talking About This). Publicly voicing a frustration shared privately among Black writers and critics, Taylor notes that “through no fault of their own,” these books were credited with capturing the whole of online culture, rather than what felt like a distinctly white understanding of the Internet as primarily a source of emotional disturbance: “None of the transformative capacity or will to change that animates so much of online life for black and brown and queer people exists in these novels.” Referring to the message boards and chatrooms he spent time in growing up, Taylor notes that “the internet saved my life when I was younger…. Because while the world I lived in told me one thing about myself, the greater world told me I could be something else.”

Neither Real Life nor Filthy Animals could be described exactly as being Internet fiction, though each depicts a world that Black and queer online spaces could offer refuge from. His characters (especially Wallace and Lionel) are undeniably isolated, surrounded by people who make demands of them both to be things they are not and to not be things they are—and to read these people’s minds about when it’s the proper time for each. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Taylor’s writing, from his fiction to his Twitter page to his newsletter, has created precisely that space for readers now: a refuge from the beastly terrors of marginalization—an untamed, unruly, ecstatic wilderness.
Age of Predation

The sinews of Reaganism

BY THOMAS MEANEY

VER SINCE RONALD REAGAN BECAME GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA in 1967, we have relied on two native informants about his time in power: Joan Didion, of Sacramento, and Mike Davis, of the San Bernardino Valley.

For Didion, a onetime “Goldwater girl,” Reagan was one of the few Americans of his generation to experience something approaching luxury socialism. As a ward of Hollywood, which rented and furnished his homes; then of US corporations such as General Electric; and finally of state and federal governments, Reagan, for most of his life, never lived in anything resembling everyday America. As Didion reported, Nancy Reagan carried cash only when she needed to leave the house for a manicure. “I preferred the studio system to the anxiety of looking for work in New York,” she recalled in her memoir.

For Mike Davis, one of the country’s most formidable working-class intellectuals, the critical components of Reagan’s ascent were economic and geographical. Reagan was the herald of the new business class of the American West and Southwest, much of whose profits came from war-related industries. Long predating recent epiphanies on the American Right, such as that of Christopher Caldwell, Davis saw that the crucial innovation of the Reagan strategy was to give up on the Goldwater dream of shrinking the US state and instead mobilize it to transfer wealth upward and launch a Vernichtungskrieg against unionized labor.

Reagandland is the final installment of Rick Perlstein’s history of the postwar American right. It is a tribute to his skill as a writer that he combines Didion’s determination to pin down the aura of the Reagan era with some measure of Davis’s capacity to explain its material components. Examining Reaganism at both the molecular and stratospheric levels, Perlstein attends as much to its underlying dynamics as to its spectacle. Like Davis, he reminds us that much of
the action took place offstage, with “Ronald Reagan” serving as the vehicle for a new band of conservatives and social movements not content to be hemmed in by the old Republican order.

One of the tonics of this rare combination of historical narrative and structural analysis is how much it throws the Trump years into relief, allowing for a more sober consideration of the past half decade. The sense of recklessness that corporate Republicans, including the Chamber of Commerce, imputed to Reagan recalls their successors’ treatment of Trump in the lead-up to his winning the Republican nomination. The fervor of today’s Trumpists was even exceeded by the most ardent Reaganites of yesteryear. When a group of Situationists stormed the 1980 Republican convention and distributed copies of J.G. Ballard’s short story “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” (“In assembly kit tests Reagan’s face was uniformly perceived as a penile erection”), with the title page replaced with the presidential seal, they got nowhere. The pamphlet was taken in stride by the faithful: just another position paper outlining the advantages of their candidate.

But perhaps the largest service Perlstein has rendered in Reaganland comes in its form. The book refuses to travel the endlessly repaved road of presidential biography, with personal psychology and moralizing at the center. To a greater extent than in Nixonland and The Invisible Bridge, Perlstein surveys the wider political landscape of which Reagan himself is but one feature. Reaganland not only teems with political operatives and hustlers—on the right, center, and left—but also suggests that the most potent forces of American political change lie outside formal politics. All the more striking is that this message comes when the American left is more invested in electoralism and its promise than at any point since the 1940s.

In the arena of American political writing, Perlstein’s oeuvre presents a dissent from the Great Man theory of history that reached its contemporary apogee in the work of Robert Caro, in which figures such as Lyndon Johnson and Robert Moses make history through their unyielding will and have the tragic dimension, the singular essence, that Caro also attributed to his first biographical subject, Ernest Hemingway.

The trouble with such a method is less that it simplifies historical change than that it lends itself to a further mythologization of American power. If the hubris of American democracy has been borne by the occupants of its highest office, then the country can correct its future by simply finding worthier figures to fill it. Perlstein is more interested in how an administration inherits a set of problems and develops an ideological response to them. Whereas Caro locates himself into the bobsled of biography, Perlstein prefers to skate around the ice and to bump up against all manner of mobilizations and movements that, in mass-market books about American politics, typically exist only on the margins. Reagan is the face and voice of a radical right vanguard in Perlstein’s account but not its beating heart.

Perlstein devotes much of Reaganland to a figure who belongs to the territory as much as Reagan himself: Jimmy Carter. For it was Carter, the most conservative Democratic presidential candidate since John W. Davis in 1924, who revised the New Deal coalition of the Democratic Party—drastically cutting the federal budget, turning away from détente with the USSR, scaling back the urban jobs program, and ending labor law reform—and opened a Pandora’s box of political innovations of which Reagan was the ultimate beneficiary. A Southern Baptist who retreated to the biblical mountaintops to make big decisions, Carter also proved that evangelicals could take power.

On foreign policy, Carter cleared the ground for his successor. The Reagan administration effectively domesticated Carter’s human rights agenda and employed it as a Cold War battering ram. (Trump, too, far from dismissing human rights, simply emphasized different ones—the right to religious freedom, for instance.) Finally, and most decisively, Carter undid the postwar Keynesian pact between capital and labor that had made full employment a loudly utterable priority in Washington. By appointing Paul Volcker as his Federal Reserve Board chair to fight inflation by the most draconian means possible, Carter virtually guaranteed the very recession, along with its accompanying explosion of unemployment, that buried his chances for reelection. It was a spectacular instance of political self-sabotage undertaken in a fit of what Carter was convinced was fiscal responsibility.

Reagan’s real electoral competition was the array of seemingly more plausible candidates for the 1980 Republican nomination. As Perlstein notes, Reagan regularly led the polls, but much of the press and pundit class expected a more vigorous Republican competitor to knock him out of contention. The establishment scion George H.W. Bush promised to anchor the GOP in donor-friendly harbors. But Reagan faced a more serious threat from John Connally, the former governor of Texas, who was favored by the US Chamber of Commerce and the business contingent of the Republican Party. Connally was effective on the stump and was a bruising phrasemaker: “They just put speeches in front of Reagan to read,” he told The New York Times, and dismissed Bush as “a bed-wetting Trilateralist.”

As Perlstein shows, Reagan was the most skilled politician on the campaign trail. He also experienced considerable good fortune. Bush made the mistake of trying to reinvent himself as a populist; the man once known in Congress as “Rubbers” for his patrician enthusiasm for birth control became an unconvincing convert to the anti-abortion cause. Bush’s international experience—he’d headed the CIA and served as ambassador to China—also made him vulnerable to being tarred as a proto-globalist. In the kind of detail that mysteriously escaped Jon Meacham’s attention in his 400-page memorial for Bush, Perlstein tells how Bush used his diplomatic ties to Beijing to score a deal for his private oil company to prospect on China’s coasts, back when Beijing’s idea of the national interest was rather different from what it is today.

*Thomas Meaney teaches at Humboldt University in Berlin.*
Connally detonated his own chances against Reagan on the unusual terrain of foreign policy. In order to gild his credentials in that sphere, he put forward an anodyne plan for Middle East peace that included restraining “Israel’s creeping annexation of the West Bank.” Reagan’s aides had deleted such a phrase from a Reagan op-ed earlier in the year out of fear of a backlash. They were well advised: Within days, Connally was being lambasted by the right wing as well as the liberal press, with *The New York Times* comparing him, in unfavorable terms, to Jesse Jackson.

A great merit of *Reaganland* is how Perlstein examines which foreign policy questions impinged—and which did not—on Reagan’s rise. One stubborn myth he dismantles is that Carter missed out on a second term because of his performance during the Iran hostage crisis. But an NBC poll at the height of the crisis showed that 72 percent of Americans approved of Carter’s handling of it. “The 17 percent of voters who cited the crisis in Iran as the most important issue preferred Carter by a heaping margin of two-to-one,” Perlstein writes. “Carter won the hostage issue.”

s for Reagan, the man himself, Perlstein upends the conventional liberal wisdom that he was a Hollywood automaton plugged into a teleprompter and delivering tinselly right-wing talking points. “Reagan had won practically every debate he had participated in,” Perlstein writes. In 1967, after being outfoxed by Reagan in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. Kennedy ordered his staffers never to have him face off in a debate, Robert F. 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When it comes to the overall phenomenon of Reaganism, Perlstein hesitates to offer too strong of a theory. A longtime Chicago resident, he must be familiar with the scene from a certain 1980s crowd-pleaser in which the despondent third wheel in a Red Wings jersey stares for too long at a Seurat painting at the city’s Art Institute. The pointillist canvas of *Reaganland* is mesmerizing, and Perlstein feels obliged neither to provide a hierarchy of causes for Reagan’s ascent nor to weigh up the chief components of Reaganism.

This panoramic perspective has its advantages. At its best, *Reaganland* is a history of interlocking and abutting mobilizations, a study of the social forces at the end of the 1970s. In discrete mini-histories of Phyllis Schlafly’s campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment and Anita Bryant’s antigay crusade, as well as of opposing ones—Ralph Nader’s highly successful consumer protection movement (where is the Netflix miniseries on this?) and Harvey Milk’s organizing in San Francisco—Perlstein wants to stress how forces outside the formal party matrix were in many ways more important than those within it. Power is diffuse in *Reaganland*, and Reaganism was the field where disparate interests could join together.

Alongside his empirical prowess, Perlstein does stake out the substance that distinguished Reagan and his backers from their right-wing predecessors. If Nixonism was characterized by the traditional exercise of state power and Keynesian management of the economy—“We have learned at last to manage a modern economy to assure its continued growth,” Nixon declared in his first inaugural address—Reaganism was distinguished by its desire to cover itself in an aura of extra-governmental activism and to incorporate the instability of the economy into its governing dynamic. Under Reagan, the US state continued to grow, but worrying about the deficit was for losers. The underpinning for this assumption was what the influential Reagan apparatchik Jude Wanniski called the “Two Santa Clause Theory.” The idea was that, even as Carter and the Democrats became fiscal hawks modeled on the Republicans, the Republicans grew content to ignore mountains of government debt in order to enact tax cuts while leaving the deficit-pruning to their foes. Unlike the postwar Keynesians, the

**Reaganland makes the case that the right’s ideological triumph was the result of a technological one.**
“Toby Miller offers bold governing principles to secure the rescue, perhaps even the thriving, of humans and the planet. However one might amend his charter, it is impossible to reject its premise, which positively screeches from Miller’s accounting of how the pandemic was lived in four nations: we cannot go on like this.”
—Wendy Brown, author of In the Ruins of Neoliberalism

“Miller makes a cogent argument for the need to change course in economic and social policy, both nationally and globally. The COVID pandemic has made it possible for many to see that the current economic system and the legislation that it promotes do not work.”
—George Yúdice, author of The Expediency of Culture
Reaganites were explicit about not caring how, or to what ends, capital was allocated, if at all, as long as the GOP’s upper-class loyalists amassed more of it.

It is on the relationship between Reaganism’s political and economic policies and its engagement with various right-wing social movements that Perlstein ventures to present a theory, though one common enough among left-wing observers. As Perlstein sees it, Reagan’s overall economic policies were not popular in themselves, and so they required a cultural component to make them more palatable to the public. Toward this end, Reagan and his cadres of supply-siders and corporate lobbyists embraced the right’s culture war. As Reagan strategist Paul Weyrich pointed out, “sex” was the “Achilles’ heel of the liberal Democrats,” and Reagan and his Republican allies were prepared to bet that the electorate was still much more traditional than liberals were willing to allow. They concocted lurid fantasies of gay public school teachers corrupting the young and a netherworld in which women worked all day while their infants were wards of the state. Such stuff was nothing new, of course, for the Republican Party. What was novel was the efficiency and magnitude of the funding available to push cultural nightmares into the mainstream media and the public realm.

To what degree is Reaganland a contribution, or at least a commentary, on political strategy? In the summer of 2004, Perlstein wrote an article for Boston Review, subsequently published as a pamphlet, in which he called on the Democrats to learn from the success of Reaganism. “Ronald Reagan used to say that there are no easy answers but there are simple answers,” Perlstein wrote. “The Democrats need to make commitments, or a network of commitments, that do not waver from election to election.” He called for a long-term commitment to economic populism, one that needed to be sustained even in the teeth of political defeat. On this point, he was on solid ground. Despite his worshipful faujisme, Reagan was, after all, never very popular. As Sheldon S. Wolin noted in The New York Review of Books at the time, less than half of the electorate voted in the 1980 election, and among those who did, only 10 percent described themselves as “true conservatives.”

The story of Reaganism, then, is the story of a political vanguard: how a small band of merry supply-siders put on culture-war paint, mobilized conservative social movements to excite the party’s base, and brought about a new economic order and a new political dispensation. While Perlstein’s book certainly presents the fullest picture we have of the Reagan years, its lessons for opponents of Reaganism are far from clear. For even if economic populism is, well, popular, the same is harder to know of some other urgent platforms today, such as the Green New Deal.

Political parties are also not nearly the vehicles for political change they once were. The Democratic Party is even less of an integrated apparatus today than it was when Perlstein delivered his advice to it 15 years ago. These days, it includes awkward groupings of the tech elite and neoliberal conservatives, as well as socialists, many of whom, paradoxically, have come to see their fate bound up with its fortunes. In many ways, the challenge of smashing the legacy of Reaganism is harder than anything solvable by a vanguard schooled in strategic patience. A left version of the Mont Pèlerin...
Society or the Mises Institute—willing to throw an election away, as the right did with Goldwater, only to return with a vengeance with the next generation’s Bernie Sanders—does not seem as viable when the intertwined crises of climate change, viral disease, and financial capitalism present threats too urgent to wait out. Kamala Harris could be in power until 2036.

The ascendency of Reaganism also requires us to look more closely at the global economic conditions that made it possible than at the local contingencies it seized upon. In the past, Perlstein has been taken to task by some of the best writers on the American left—Peter Frase and Tim Barker, most prominently—for describing Carter and Volcker’s actions as “heroic and self-sacrificing,” when in 1979, they introduced punitively high interest rates to combat inflation, which ultimately ended the recession but delivered a blow to American labor from which it has never recovered.

In *Reaganland*, Perlstein has tried to correct his sails: The Volcker shock now appears as a comedy of errors that Carter set in motion when he forced his treasury secretary, Michael Blumenthal, to resign for launching a corruption investigation of Bert Lance, the director of the Office of Management and Budget. That sent the stock market into a plunge so steep that only appointing someone with the stature of Volcker—a Chase Manhattan veteran—could soothe Wall Street’s jitters. But despite his nimble navigation through the contingencies of Reaganism, Perlstein does not fully reckon with how the Volcker shock was a response to a much larger, harder-to-avoid iceberg. Volcker was trying to stabilize an American imperial project that had been undermined by its own success: Cold War allies in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere were flooding the global market with goods that undercut American corporate profits. US corporations continued to invest at home in preparation for the next boom. But the Keynesian creed that had governed the American economy in the postwar decades, during which high productivity and growth were taken for granted, was experiencing a dark night of the soul. Volcker’s shock was not meant to expunge the faith; it was a Hail Mary attempt to clear the “dead wood” of the economy (that is, hundreds of thousands of working Americans), to rationalize it, and to create the conditions for another boom.

But the boom never came. At some point during Reagan’s time in power, American capitalists became conscious of the new reality. Their action changed shape: from profit-seeking and industrial production to predation, in Robert Brenner’s recent term. If elites could not capture increased gains from a growing economy through innovation and expansion, they could at least capture them from a stagnant economy through lobbying, legal-suturing, and ideological pressure. In a world of reduced productivity, culture-war-fighting becomes less about class defense and more about caste-marking, since access to the returns on capital is an increasingly political activity. This was the new political-economic dispensation that matured under Reagan, which was always bigger than him, and which now seems to be experiencing a crisis of its own. The mantra of Reaganism—“growth,” “freedom,” “sovereign people”—looks in disrepair today. But we would do well to remember: The rites of a religion can long survive the death of its god.

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**Cortés Burning the Aviaries**

Last night, I let in all the birds.
I told my grandmother to stay awhile.
You are not the only one who can fly.

I told my grandmother to stay awhile.
There is something in the wind. I recognize your voice.
You are not the only one who can fly.

Have you seen Montezuma’s aviaries—still green, full of breath?
There is something in the wind. I recognize your voice.
You talk to me all at once with your mouth full.
Have you seen Montezuma’s aviaries—still green, full of breath?

Cuídate, I thought you were blessing me.
You talk to me all at once with your mouth full.
I don’t believe in god but I do believe in Mexicans.
Cuídate, I thought you were blessing me.

I am sorry I picked all your red tulips.
I don’t believe in god but I do believe in Mexicans.

MONICA RICO
The creators of HBO’s *Mare of Easttown*, a murder mystery set in a small Pennsylvania town, aimed for verisimilitude. Its main cast studied the phonics and cadence of the Delaware County accent—all the downturned O’s and “water” pronounced to rhyme with “rudder”—which Kate Winslet (who plays the titular Mare Sheehan) described as “amongst the top two hardest dialects I’ve ever done.” The costume designer sent snapshots of people in line at Wawa, the legendary Pennsylvania convenience store, to director Craig Zobel for inspiration. Clothes were distressed with scrubbing brushes, holes added. In terms of its content, the show can occasionally feel like a primer on the problems facing suburban and rural America. Its characters contend with the opioid epidemic, insufficient health care, precarious and low-paying jobs, a lack of support for the elderly, and ambitious young people moving away for college with no plans to return. Crime in Easttown is driven less often by passion or malice than by the desperation of people forced to get by on less.

The exception is the show’s central mystery. Late one night, Erin McMenamin, a young mother with ties to many in the Easttown community, is killed by a relative, her body left in a creek. The investigation that ensues sends shock waves through the town and devastates the family of Mare’s close friend Lori Ross (Julianne Nicholson). The family becomes isolated from Easttown life, but not, the show implies, forever: In the penultimate scene, Mare and Lori manage some kind of reconciliation as Lori sobs in her friend’s arms on the kitchen floor.

Verisimilitude on its own can seem clinical; in *Mare of Easttown*, it is counterbalanced with a finely tuned emotional realism, as if the series’ relationships had been buffed until they felt sufficiently timeworn as well. As with climactic moments like Lori and Mare’s, the town’s petty affairs are rendered in as much detail as its tragedies. There are gossips and cruel teens, squabbling couples, women drawing on their eyebrows to attend a funeral. The show depicts several loving relationships in which neither party, on a day-to-day basis, can stand the other.

Brad Ingelsby, the show’s creator, describes himself as “totally new” to the TV murder mystery genre, and *Mare of Easttown* does not depart significantly from the standard structure: dead girl, gruff detective, cliffhanger at the end of each episode, red herrings leading away from the real killer, who is revealed in the finale. But the attention paid to the mundanity amid the tragedy distinguishes *Mare of Easttown* from other detective shows. Its unique strength is that it presents pain, loss, and forgiveness as collective rather than individual processes, the stuff of everyday life rather than dramatic aberrations from the norm. Injuries large and small, with consequences that spill out beyond any single victim, take a village to repair.

At the center of many of these processes is Mare, a vape-sucking, cheese-ball-eating detective who lives in a split-level home with her mother, Helen (Jean Smart); her teenage daughter, Siobhan (Angourie Rice); and her grandson, Drew (Izzy King). (In interviews, Winslet described Mare as the kind of person “who looked at herself in the mirror when she brushed her teeth in the morning and would not look in the mirror again [all day]” and added that she “doesn’t drink water once in the entire show.”)
Mare is still mourning the death of her son, Kevin—Drew’s father—who died by suicide roughly two years earlier, something she avoids thinking about, mostly through work and alcohol.

Mare is exceptionally good at her job, both the traditional detective work and the part that involves fielding early-morning calls from senior citizens about graffiti. In the show’s first episode, she receives a call that the home of her friend Beth Hanlon (Chinasa Ogbuagu) has been robbed by Beth’s brother Freddie (Dominique Johnson), presumably to buy drugs. After finding Freddie with a cache of stolen sports memorabilia in his freezing-cold home, Mare arranges an alternate place for him to stay the night and instructs an officer to get in touch with the utility company; shutting off heat during the winter is illegal. “Call PECO Gas. Let them know they’re breaking the law,” she barks.

This arc ends with a detail I almost missed: When Mare finds Freddie dead from an overdose in his home several weeks later, the heat is off again. As Mare and Beth sit quietly on the back of a couch, their breath frosts in the air. Who knows whether the cop forgot to call, the gas company stonewalled, the heat came on but then went off again, or something else happened. It probably would not have prevented the death, but the tragedy of the cold house struck me in a way that the conclusion of the show’s central plot didn’t, in part because it felt more realistic—because it was the product not of an unspeakable act but the sum of myriad small failures, some of which were likely motivated by cruelty and some of which were simply oversights, which is how bad things happen in real life.

Mare’s cliffhangers and reveals occasionally seem shoehorned in—an arc involving a kidnapper who holds young women captive in his bar-slash-home feels especially dissonant, as does the revelation of Erin’s killer—which might make for an imperfect mystery. Still, the show’s enduring appeal is that its creators seem more interested in Easttown itself, its small failures and successes, than in the murder. “In a lot of crime dramas, you sort of open with the death and the investigation really starts from the opening shot,” Ingelsby told The Wrap. “Whereas in [the first] episode of Mare of Easttown, most plotlines are tied up neatly but the end, and the climactic choice that Mare makes at the investigation’s conclusion is a principled one. But there’s also the pull of the entropy of everyday life: futures shaped by reactions and adjustments, contingencies, the decisions you make to get through the day.

The show is willing to accommodate the idea, for example, that maintaining a significant lie may keep your family safe; that there are some situations in which burying or delaying the processing of trauma keeps you sane; that doing something awful and then going on with your life is both monstrous and human; and that you can love someone deeply without liking them very much. Not the most satisfying of narrative conclusions, but things we have all experienced, to a degree that seeing them onscreen offers a different kind of catharsis than watching the detective unmask the perpetrator of a crime. They offer a different model of heroism, built of imperfections and compromises, in which repairing old wounds happens slowly but inevitably.

Erin Schwartz is a contributing writer for The Nation. They write frequently on television, popular culture, and books.
Letters

Holiday Spirit

Re “Democrats Should Create More Federal Holidays,” by Ed Burmila [June 14/21]: Those who work for private businesses often don’t get federal holidays. Instead of making up new holidays, require that businesses provide paid days off for the existing ones.

Barbara Meyer

The Other Greenhouse Gases

Re “Junk” [May 31/June 7]: Bill McKibben reviews Mark Bittman’s food history, Animal, Vegetable, Junk, without a single mention of how factory farms emit massive amounts of methane and nitrous oxide, two of the most potent greenhouse gases. There is a proven strong link between animal agriculture and the climate crisis, but McKibben never notes that the vast amount of the wheat, corn, and soy raised in the world goes to feed livestock. We can go to feed livestock. We can continue to eat 80 billion land animals a year.

Greta Thunberg has the courage to say that we must supercharge by our totally unnecessary overconsumption of all animal products, subsidized by the government and profiting the same agribusiness companies that push their junk on us. Michael Betzold

Detroit

A Last Resort

I hope it’s not too late to respond to “Abolish Guardianship and Preserve the Rights of Disabled People,” by Sara Luterman [March 22/29]. Not all guardianship is plenary, meaning people under guardianship do not simply lose all of their rights. As a professional guardian, I need to state clearly that our goal is always to restore rights whenever possible.

Here in Florida, people with disabilities may get a guardian advocate instead of a guardian, because they are able to determine some aspects of their lives with support. While we all have the capacity, it is important that we get our affairs in order to avoid guardianship in the future. On this we can all agree. We may be an illness (virus?), car accident, or addiction away from confusion or the inability to meaningfully express our wishes. Guardianship is a last resort.

Pam Wiener, PhD
West Palm Beach, Fla.

The writer is director of the Alpert JFS Guardianship Program and a board member of the Florida State Guardianship Association.

Correction

Because of an editing error in “An Absolute Shit,” by Mina Tavakoli [May 31/June 7], the name of the French poet who was referenced as “admiring and despising [Wagner] in equal measure” was omitted. It is Catulle Mendès.

Robert Haining

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The secret to making an impact is small.

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It’s one community, sharing.
It’s one organization, listening.
It’s one founder, creating.
It’s one fund, caring.
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