Abortion, Texas Style

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Asphalt hoops: A basketball game in New York City on August 14, part of the annual Summer Streets festival, in which seven miles of streets go car-free.
HEREVER YOU WERE IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, is where you were when Roe v. Wade was overturned. That is when Texas’s flagrantly illegal abortion ban went into effect, turning the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision—which recognized and protected a pregnant person’s right to bodily autonomy prior to fetal viability—into little more than a suggestion, a thought bubble that Republican-controlled states are free to ignore. Such states are now free to force people to bring a pregnancy to term, against their will, even when the pregnancy was caused by the violence of men.

The right to choose has been under attack for some time. Over the years, Republican-controlled states have come up with all kinds of insidious ways to whittle away at abortion rights. TRAP laws, for instance, preserve the essential right to an abortion while making it nearly impossible to access that right. But conservatives are not satisfied with merely restricting access to abortions—they seek to outlaw choice altogether. Toward that end, a number of red states have issued restrictions on abortions earlier and earlier in the gestation process. The earliest of these, “fetal heartbeat” bans, outlaw abortions after a heartbeat can be detected, which is usually around six weeks after a person’s last period—before many people even know they’re pregnant.

The Texas-size version of this ban is one of the most extreme, and also one of the few that haven’t been blocked in court. Already, Republicans in Florida and South Dakota have promised to follow Texas’s example. If certain states can take away constitutional rights at will, then such rights cannot be said to exist. If the Texas ban is legal, then Roe is no longer good law. It’s as simple as that.

But there is another aspect of this Texas law, known as Senate Bill 8, that is extreme even by conservatives’ forced-birth standards. The Texas law places a cash bounty on abortion providers and empowers any citizen to come collect.

The law stipulates that any US citizen can sue a Texas abortion provider or a person suspected of “aiding or abetting” abortion services. The plaintiffs don’t even have to be residents of Texas to sue. Texans suspected of helping people make a private choice. Should the lawsuit prevail, the person who brought the suit will receive $10,000, plus attorney fees. Texas has created a cash incentive to haul not just doctors and nurses into court but also lawyers, reproductive rights counselors, and even receptionists.

This country hasn’t seen this kind of dystopian legal bullshit since Salem.

The bounty system is more than mere red meat thrown at a base that’s always eager to control the actions of others. It’s also key to Texas’s strategy of evading constitutional review. The bounty system puts enforcement of the law in the hands of private citizens, not state officials, creating what bad-faith conservatives think is a constitutional loophole by preventing abortion providers and others from filing lawsuits against the state challenging the government’s new abortion restriction. It’s as if Texas is saying, “We’re not violating due process, we’re just offering $10,000 to Batman for any Jokers who end up in jail, no questions asked.”

It’s an intellectually dishonest argument, and District Court Judge Robert Pittman didn’t fall for it. Abortion providers had filed a case, Whole Woman’s Health v. Jackson, and asked for a temporary injunction blocking the Texas law while the case proceeded. Judge Pittman temporarily enjoined the law, pending a full hearing that was supposed to have taken place on August 30.

But the Fifth Circuit, the most conservative circuit court in the country, rushed to support Texas’s constitutional trolling and not only vacated Judge Pittman’s ruling but also canceled his hearing. Then, on September 2, the Supreme Court rewarded Texas’s attempt to evade constitutional review by refusing to enjoin the law. The court discarded 50 years of precedent because the state of Texas empowered private bounty hunters to take away the rights of women for cash prizes.

These attacks on reproductive rights wouldn’t be happening if Ruth Bader Ginsburg were still alive—or if the Democratic Party hadn’t ceded the courts to a cult of forced-birth proponents. More abortion restrictions have been proposed...
and passed in 2021 than in any other year in history. Legislatures expect to get away with these restrictions, not because the law has changed but because conservatives now have a stranglehold on the courts. The fact that Democrats have shown neither the will, nor the strength, nor the courage to stop them has been a signal to these states to take their best, most creative shots at overturning the right to an abortion.

Frankly, as long as conservatives control the courts, there is no way to stop Texas or any other state that’s inclined to follow its lead. Moderates like to claim that expanding the courts would threaten both the legitimacy of the judiciary and the rule of law, but the Texas law is the kind of unconstitutional vigilantism that conservatives allow when they control the judicial branch.

If you want to protect the right to choose, the only solution is to expand the Supreme Court. That has been the only solution since reluctant abortion-allower Anthony Kennedy retired and ceded his seat to alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh. How many more rights, in how many more states, must be taken away before Democrats do the only thing they can to stop these people?

Or is a future in which forced-birth advocates sue doctors for 10 grand just something we all have to accept? A vocal minority of the country supports the barbarism of forcing women to give birth against their will. When will Democrats do what is necessary to stop them?

“I think many people across the nation actually don’t understand the severity of what’s about to happen.”

—Dr. Ghazaleh Moayedi, abortion provider

The Near-Total Ban

With Senate Bill 8 in effect in Texas, up to 90 percent of patients will be denied abortions in the state.

LIKE MANY OTHER ABORTION ACTIVISTS IN TEXAS, Amanda Beatriz Williams stayed up most of the night of August 31 and awoke to a terrifying silence. Her organization, the Lilith Fund, helps people pay for abortions in Texas. On a typical shift, they hear from 30 to 50 people. But on September 1, as a near-total ban forced clinics across the state to stop providing most abortions, the fund heard from fewer than 10.

“This is a huge drop in the number of people that we normally hear from, and that just tells us that those people are out there, pregnant against their will,” Williams said. “It is absolutely devastating.”

The law, Senate Bill 8, bans abortion after embryonic cardiac activity can be detected, which usually happens five to seven weeks after a woman’s last period, before many people know they’re pregnant and before an embryo has developed anything resembling a heart. Experts have estimated that the ban will force Texas clinics to turn away 85 to 90 percent of patients. It deputizes any private citizen to enforce the law by filing suit against anyone who “aids or abets” a banned abortion—a definition so sprawling, opponents warn, it could apply falsely, that the clinic was violating the law because of the number of people inside. Still, Hagstrom Miller said, the clinic was able to see every patient, the last abortion completed at 11:56 pm.

On September 1, there were 77 people on the schedule at the clinic, none of whom would be able to have abortions in Texas if their pregnancies had detectable cardiac activity.

The Frontera Fund, which helps people in the Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas access abortions, had seen a drop in calls to its help line in the previous week, because appointments in Texas were no longer available, according to executive director Zaena Zamora. Those who chose to travel would have to make a nine-hour drive to Louisiana—a state that has its own extensive abortion restrictions, and where it was unclear which clinics were in operation after Hurricane Ida cut off power to over 1 million people—or a 12-hour drive to New Mexico. For undocumented patients who live in the valley, traveling out of Texas is unsafe because of Border Patrol checkpoints as far as 100 miles north of the border. “There’s no leaving the valley without crossing a checkpoint,” Zamora said. “People might just take the risk, but they’re putting themselves in danger by doing that.”

Meanwhile, Anna Rupani, a co-executive director of Fund Texas Choice, which helps abortion patients travel outside the state to access care, was seeing a rise in calls, with...
more than double the number of typical clients in the last week of August. The fund’s callers were traveling from Texas to New Mexico, Oklahoma, and even Washington state, she said. In the days before the ban took effect, Rupani had been calling hotels in states as far away as California and Florida, trying to negotiate bulk rates.

Already, patients rushing to make decisions about existing pregnancies were facing wait times prolonged by clinic closures and staffing shortages. Hiring had been difficult because potential staff saw abortion jobs as temporary, Hagstrom Miller told The Nation. She added that some people were calling clinics before they had missed their periods, afraid that they wouldn’t find out whether they were pregnant until after the ban had taken effect.

“The power of the state to manipulate people’s lives is remarkable,” she said.

On August 27, the website for Planned Parenthood of Greater Texas, which offers abortions at four locations, warned people that they might need to travel. “Because of a new abortion ban (SB 8), Texas health centers are only able to provide abortion services within about 6 weeks of the first day of your last period,” an advisory on the website said. “We can help determine how far along your pregnancy is & find out-of-state care options if needed.” Planned Parenthood of South Texas has stopped offering abortions entirely.

“It’s hard not to feel alone to some extent here in Texas right now,” said Dr. Ghazaleh Moayedi, an abortion provider in the state. “I think many people across the nation actually don’t understand the severity of what’s about to happen.” Moayedi is facing the likelihood of being sued for doing her job, which she would have to report when she renews her medical license. Compounding the weight of the moment for providers like Moayedi is the fact that access to abortion has been severely curtailed in Texas twice before. In 2013, a law that required abortion providers to secure hospital privileges and clinics to meet ambulatory surgery center requirements shuttered about half of the clinics in the state. Whole Woman’s Health defeated the law before the Supreme Court in 2016, a landmark victory that came too late for many clinics, which were unable to reopen. Then last March, Governor Greg Abbott banned most abortions as nonessential services, leading to a dizzying four weeks in which access flipped on and off eight times.

Near-total bans like SB 8 were once considered too flagrantly unconstitutional for the mainstream anti-abortion movement. In 2019, a wave of similar bans led to a viral outpouring of support that raised millions of dollars in donations for abortion access groups. But because those bans relied on the state for enforcement, federal courts struck them all down before they went into effect. So Texas abortion opponents adopted a “civil litigation” strategy to try to make SB 8 court-proof. “This bill is written to succeed where 11 other states have failed,” John Seago, legal director of Texas Right to Life, told state lawmakers. Seago has estimated that the ban will prevent 10,000 abortions per year.

Using civil litigation as a weapon to stop abortion became popular in the 1990s, when the anti-abortion activist Mark Crutcher circulated how-to-sue guides to encourage right-wing attorneys to file lawsuits against abortion providers, according to Mary Ziegler, a professor at Florida State University. In 1997, Louisiana passed a law, still on the books, granting women who’d had abortions a tort remedy to sue providers. Since then, Ziegler says, states have mostly stayed away from this civil litigation strategy in order to focus on laws that give the Supreme Court an opportunity to overturn Roe v. Wade. Anti-abortion organizers in Texas appear to have revived the civil strategy in the hopes of shutting down access to abortions immediately. If the Supreme Court undermines Roe v. Wade in a way that allows for outright bans on abortion, the anti-abortion movement could push to make this vigilante approach even more widespread, because law enforcement may not necessarily prioritize abortion prosecutions or know when someone is buying pills online. “Whereas if you have sort of vigilantes whose whole lives are about doing this, you may have a much better chance of actually stopping people from having abortions,” Ziegler said.

But the Texas law has highlighted not only the anti-abortion strategy but the furious resistance to it. Abortion activists have seen a surge in donations and have launched NeedAbortion.org to direct patients to the closest location for care. After Texas Right to Life launched a website for people to report violations of SB 8, abortion access supporters inundated it with fake reports, and the site was shut down at least twice. Much of the energy of the movement has been channeled into figuring out the logistics of moving people to the nearest available clinic. But for Zaena Zamora of the Frontera Fund, a moment of victory came in June, when she and fellow activists prevented the passage of an ordinance to make the city of Edinburg, like dozens of others throughout Texas, a “Sanctuary for the Unborn.” While council members had expressed support for the anti-abortion measure, after three hours of testimony, “nobody wanted to touch it anymore,” Zamora said. “Things like that keep me going. That was a really important win that I keep in my pocket. We did that.”

The Nation is pleased to announce that, with the threat to legal abortion greater than ever, Amy Littlefield has joined the magazine as our abortion access correspondent.
The Next Phase

Learning to live with Covid-19 is not an individual state of mind.

After 18 months of being stuck in our homes—if we were lucky enough to do so—and being surrounded by death and suffering, we are all ready to move past this pandemic. The vaccines offered hope for this in the spring—it seemed that by summer the virus would be at low levels and people could safely gather again. Then the Delta variant, combined with current high rates of community spread, break-unvaccinated people, but if we fail to mitigate the risks as they are today. They claim that vaccination protects individuals sufficiently from death and hospitalization and that anyone who wants a vaccine has gotten one; vaccinated people can therefore return to normal life, and unvaccinated people can deal with the risks.

But while it is true that vaccines reduce an individual’s risks significantly, we cannot exit this pandemic individually. The risk of long Covid is 50 percent lower for vaccinated people than for unvaccinated people, but if we fail to mitigate the current high rates of community spread, break-through infections will be more common and more people—even vaccinated people—will face long-term complications.

This past summer, we saw the consequences of a premature return to normal life. Both unvaccinated people, who remain at much greater risk of hospitalization and death, and vaccinated people contributed to the spread of the virus as the use of masks disappeared overnight in many places. Pediatric cases of Covid skyrocketed because most children aren’t vaccinated yet. Hospitals became overwhelmed, mostly with unvaccinated patients. In the South, where vaccination rates are lower, non-Covid patients find themselves without a hospital bed, whether they are vaccinated or not. Of course, this puts immunocompromised people (for whom vaccines are less effective) at risk as well. Ignoring the virus is untenable.

A lot of discussions about the pandemic focus on returning to normalcy, proposing to relax restrictions and preempt the implementation of new measures. Instead, the goal should be to keep infections at a low level. This means we must accept that Covid will be a dangerous part of our lives for the near future and make plans based on that fact.

Learning to live with the virus is not an individual state of mind—it calls for a robust policy response. This will require two steps: reducing the rate of transmission and making sure we can contain outbreaks as they occur. To control transmission, we need to return to the measures we used early in the pandemic, which include mandating masks and issuing a stay-at-home guidance. But this time we need to pay people to stay at home for one or two months, which is especially urgent as enhanced unemployment benefits expire. Only seven states and a few cities have mandated masks, despite the fact that the CDC changed its guidance and now recommends that vaccinated people wear masks indoors. Vaccinations need to be ramped up with a thorough campaign that funds community outreach operations, publicly addresses concerns, and mandates vaccine sick leave.

Once community transmission is lower, we will need to make significant investments to keep it that way. Just as the Great Depression demanded the creation of temporary federal agencies, a Pandemic Response Agency should be created to manage funding and personnel for test-and-trace operations, quarantine housing, free masks, and ventilation upgrades to schools and other buildings. It must also ensure that the funds are actually being used. The American Rescue Plan...
made funds available to schools, but billions have yet to be spent. The ARP also provided funds to improve test-and-trace operations for vulnerable populations and to cover testing for the uninsured. Yet there is still insufficient capacity to properly test and trace new infections. For now, testing is mainly a way for people to check their own status, not part of a robust infection control strategy.

Many of our schools require ventilation upgrades, and some have no HVAC systems at all. Our public health departments face staff shortages and funding cuts. A dedicated federal agency could procure tests and masks and provide them directly to people, even in states whose leadership is opposed or unhelpful. It could also coordinate upgrades to schools’ ventilation systems and rebuild public health departments.

Despite initially trying to project a measure of optimism, the White House seemingly cannot ignore the Delta variant any longer. It has announced measures including reducing the cost of rapid tests, sending free tests to food banks and health clinics, and mandating an OSHA standard that requires employers of 100 or more workers to vaccinate or test weekly. But these measures are still insufficient. Rapid tests will still be too expensive for daily use for many Americans, and the OSHA standard leaves out measures like ventilation and masking to protect employees. A more ambitious response may seem politically unfeasible, but times like this demand the impossible.

Abdullah Shihipar writes about public health, race, class, and other social justice issues.

Subject to Debate
Katha Pollitt

Unreasonable Doubt
In the age of QAnon and the anti-vax movement, skepticism has become the province of the paranoid.

Titled my first book of essays Reasonable Creatures, after Mary Wollstonecraft’s famous remark “I wish to see women neither heroines nor brutes but reasonable creatures.” I’d never use that title now. Women are as rational as men, sure, but that’s not saying much. If Wollstonecraft came back to life, she’d have a heart attack. By comparison with her 18th-century day, we live in paradise, yet people seem as willfully ignorant and blinkered as ever.

The lack of progress has become staggeringly apparent since the onset of the pandemic. Is there anything less rational than people refusing vaccines that have been proved time and again to prevent a deadly disease? Well, yes—believing that the disease does not exist. If you’re feeling flu-ish, just follow the advice of noted medical experts Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and Joe Rogan and dose yourself with ivermectin, an anti-parasite drug you can pick up at the feed store.

I can just barely see how someone could think that virtually every doctor on the planet is wrong—after all, the medical consensus has been wrong before. But where’s the evidence that ivermectin cures Covid, let alone that the vaccines make you sterile, implant microchips in your blood, change your DNA, and magnetize you? What makes it possible to take the position that a virus that has already killed more than 650,000 people here and millions worldwide is a hoax that the government is using to scare you into submission? Billions of people have received the vaccines—if they prevented pregnancy or made spoons stick to your face, we would know by now.

It wouldn’t matter so much if these delusions affected only the believers themselves. After all, people do lots of foolish, dangerous things. But refusing to get vaccinated or to wear masks harms other people—that’s what “infectious” means. Yet one in eight nurses have so far refused the vaccine, as have many other health care workers, like the Kentucky nursing home worker who went on to infect 26 people.

Perhaps I shouldn’t be so surprised. According to a PRRI poll last May, 15 percent of Americans believe in QAnon. Yes, one in seven Americans agreed with the statement “The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child-sex-trafficking operation.” The strongest predictor of QAnon adherence? Reliance on Fox and other far-right news sources. Another fun fact: 39 percent of all Americans—and 85 percent of QAnon believers—think Covid-19 was intentionally developed in a lab. Perhaps not surprisingly, 73 percent of QAnoners believe the 2020 election was...
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stolen from Donald Trump, as do 29 percent of all Americans.

What do you do when a big swath of Americans believe things that are demonstrably false and have already led to events like the January 6 insurrection? Are we a nation of lunatics, some of whom found each other on the Internet, mobilized under Trump, and in a few short years took over the Republican Party? America has always had a lot of crazy right-wingers, but it's one thing to believe that the Soviet Union was out to destroy us and another to believe that the world is run by a ring of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who kill and eat children to get their adrenochrome fix. At least the Soviet Union actually existed.

What does the popularity of QAnon do to comforting bromides about the wisdom of the people? We're told to trust the voters because ordinary folk know what's what, but how can you trust the voters if so many of them think their paranoid delusions are reality? Liberals are castigated for “elitism,” for condescending to Republicans and red-staters and Trumpers and fundamentalists, who should be approached with empathy and respect. But how do you have an unthreatening, warm, friendly conversation with someone who thinks Oprah Winfrey and Pope Francis eat children? “That's interesting. Some people say Tom Hanks is involved as well, but that’s hard to believe, don’t you think? He's so nice! By the way, these cookies are great.”

It’s as if the Internet is bringing together all existing forms of credulousness. Whites and Christians feel their cultural preeminence slipping away, and they just can’t handle it, especially if superrationalism, racism, and male supremacy were all they had to begin with.

Well, maybe. It would be better for Alan's theory if present-day irrationalists were, like the members of other right-wing movements, disproportionately young white men enraged by their downward mobility and lack of girlfriends. But according to The New York Times, QAnon appeals to a much broader swath—“health-conscious yoga moms,” for example. The Times even managed to find a QAnon Harvard graduate, albeit one who believes an ornament on the White House Christmas tree is a coded message from Trump himself. It's as if the Internet is bringing together all existing forms of credulousness: Covid denialism, Trumpism, health nuttiness, hyperlibertarianism, New Age woo-woo, fundamentalist Christianity, and an unhealthy fixation on exaggerated or imaginary dangers to children.

Wollstonecraft's fellow Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire famously wrote, “Anyone who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.” He was thinking of religion, but the same holds true for our present-day right-wing paranoids, who have already been implicated in numerous violent crimes, like the January 6 insurrection, the attempt to kidnap the governor of Michigan, and the recent gruesome murder of two children by their father, who believed they had serpent DNA. Maybe Gramsci said it best: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” Covid denialism may be just the beginning.
Was Occupy Wall Street More Anarchist or Socialist?

Anarchist

NATASHA LENNARD

It feels most apt to mark the 10th anniversary of Occupy Wall Street by reviving a debate that is resistant to resolution, open to endless disagreement, and primed for messy expressions of political ideology. How very Occupy!

If you had asked me at the time whether Occupy was more anarchist or socialist, I would have answered, without missing a beat, that it was an anarchist movement. Though I most likely wouldn’t have said “movement”—I would’ve said “moment,” out of respect for Occupy’s anarchistic departures from traditional organized politics. Of course, I would have also said that socialists were among the many thousands of people who participated in Occupy with great commitment. Some of my best friends today are socialists from Occupy!

I still believe Occupy was more anarchist than socialist, and that this was a good thing, even if the movement’s rejection of representative structures and formal demands made it vulnerable and difficult to sustain—reliant as it was on maintaining physical sites that needed constant protection from violent police eviction. Over the years, I’ll grant, Occupy has found a place in the socialist legacy, especially for those who were too young to have joined at the time. Occupy is recognized as having “changed the conversation” on economic inequality and having birthed many of the activist constellations that would fuel Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaigns and the expansion of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Such an outcome, I would have said in 2011, would constitute a co-optation by electoralist interests, a reversal of Occupy’s radical rejection of party politics. In 2021, I’m less interested in purity. But while I can admit that democratic socialism is the tendency that won the day in shaping Occupy’s place in history, I submit that we lose a lot by erasing Occupy’s anarchist forms.

I reported on the protests as a stringer for The New York Times, while at the same time aligning myself with an anarchist cadre that helped orchestrate the Zuccotti Park occupation. My gig with the Times ended when the far-right Breitbart “exposed” the already public fact of my support for the encampment—the so-called revelation was based on a video of a debate on, in essence, whether Occupy should be more anarchist or more socialist; I was arguing on the anarcho-communist side. And I was terribly drunk.

Socialist

NIKIL SAVAL

The signature figure of Occupy Wall Street was the debtor. Student debt, medical debt, rental debt, credit card debt, mortgage debt: So many people were underwater. The financial wizardry being done in the buildings surrounding Zuccotti Park both created debt and transformed it into financial products. Following the trail of inequality led many to indict the entire system—and to seek its replacement. Electoral politics seemed to offer little: It had enabled and expanded this system. Thus, when protesters occupied the park, they observed self-governing practices. People sought consensus, not majority rule; they tried to lift up marginalized voices first. The movement could have taken an anarchist direction and tried to build a new society in the shell of the old. But 10 years later, the legacy of Occupy is best seen in the reemergence of a socialist movement, the roots of which were planted in the inhospitable soil of Zuccotti Park, a public-private square that itself was a byproduct of tax credits and debt financing for commercial real estate.

A coalition developed through Occupy that formed the foundation of so much socialist organizing today: precarious semiprofessionals and the younger members of a deindustrialized proletariat, many of them involved in the service sector and caring professions. Though gulls in education, country of origin, and often race separated these two groups, their interests aligned thanks to the nature of the capitalist system in the early 21st century, which put downward pressure on both. Indebted professionals had lost status and suffered material deprivation; the deindustrialized working class had endured wage stagnation, rapacious employers, and high rates of eviction and housing instability. Virtually no political figure spoke for them.

Occupy produced an unusual fluidity between theory and practice that characterizes the best movements. Many who were involved will recall the General Assemblies, but Occupy’s forms of direct action drew public attention to the injustice of the state’s priorities. The magnitude of the police presence that surrounded the occupations and the violence that police conducted against the Occupiers—many of them unhoused—highlighted how massively municipalities had invested in their police forces at the expense of even basic provisions for ordinary residents, such as public bathroom facilities (a constant struggle for the Occupiers).

In time there would be dozens of occupations
I was present for the pre-Occupy meetings that stretched long into the summer nights in Manhattan, in which a few dozen people made plans to occupy Wall Street. The late, great anarchist anthropologist David Graeber was there; so, too, were several activists who had taken part in the square movements that had emerged in Spain and Greece that year. The Egyptian Arab Spring was not yet a revolution undone. The international context matters here: We aimed not simply to protest Wall Street's turpitude but to act in concert and solidarity with a spread of global revolutionary eruptions.

Even prior to its inception, Occupy was anarchist in structure: burdensome consensus-based decision-making, no (official) leaders, and a commitment to creating untested political spaces. The insistence that the means of our undertakings be consistent with our desired ends and that we establish radical political forms of life in the present is decidedly anarchist. But there were other ways the movement/moment was situated firmly within the contemporary legacy of anarchism in the US: It was overwhelmingly white, lacked a sufficient analysis of class struggle, and targeted capitalism but failed to understand the world-ordering force of capital as, in the words of the late Cedric Robinson, “racial capitalism.”

These flaws are not unique or intrinsic to anarchism. We can disagree over the extent of Occupy’s anarchist or socialist bent, yet it should be obvious that the movement was grossly deficient in its abolitionism. Occupy was inspired by the Arab Spring and Europe’s square movements but failed to adapt to an American context, shaped as it is by a history of slavery and Indigenous extermination and dispossession. Even at the time, some of us bristled at the idea of “occupying” already stolen land.

The Indigenous-led climate struggle and Black liberation uprisings in the years since have taught us better. The 2020 George Floyd protests were a reminder, far more powerful than Occupy, that rupturous rebellions are worthy even when they don’t translate smoothly into legislative undertakings.

It would be a great shame if Occupy’s anarchism—its embrace of utopian and confrontational space-taking, horizontalism, and political experimentation—were ignored in its retelling. We should remember: “Occupy” was and is a verb. I do not want young people to miss that legacy and thereby foreclose a political imagination that goes beyond electing better politicians and making legislative gains. For those of us who embraced Occupy’s anarchist forms as inherent to its content, it was about living the politics we wanted to see in the world, albeit on a stretch of drab concrete in Lower Manhattan where middle-management bankers now eat their sandwiches.

It would be a great shame if Occupy’s anarchism were ignored in its retelling.

Nikil Saval is a writer and represents the First District in the Pennsylvania State Senate.

With impressive swiftness, Occupy transformed US politics in a way the labor movement was failing to do. That this history is ignored is a great shame.

Natasha Lennard is a columnist at The Intercept and the author of Being Numerous: Essays on Non-Fascist Life.
It was messy, provocative, and passionate. Where did all that movement energy end up?
EN YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, OCCUPY WALL STREET UNEXPECTEDLY inaugurated a new wave of protest. The domestic manifestation of a worldwide explosion of digitally networked social movements, it scaled up rapidly, attracting enormous public and media attention. But the protesters were evicted from New York City’s Zuccotti Park and other occupied spaces after only a few months, and Occupy dissipated soon afterward. Some commentators have dismissed it as a meteoric flash in the pan, while others have criticized its “horizontalist” structure and lack of concrete demands.

After speaking recently with more than 20 activists who were centrally involved in the movement, we beg to differ with such negative assessments. “Occupy wasn’t a blip, it was a spark!” declared one, veteran organizer Nastaran Mohit. “It was a turning point, a spark that led to many fires.” Musician and educator Sonny Singh agreed: “It was the beginning of a movement trajectory that we’re still in. Occupy being the catalyst, socialism is cool now.” Mohit and Singh were among the 25 New York Occupy veterans that we interviewed earlier for a study funded by the Russell Sage Foundation and published in 2013, most of whom agreed to speak with us again this year. In that study, titled “Changing the Subject,” we argued that Occupy had shifted the national political conversation to focus on rising inequality and had transformed the political trajectory of the participants themselves—changing the subject in both respects.

As the 10th anniversary of the Zuccotti Park occupation approached, we reconnected with our interviewees to explore their political activities since 2011 and to hear their reflections on Occupy’s legacy. Our earlier research had targeted people who were key architects of the effort as well as others engaged in a broad range of related activities. Some of the interviewees were seasoned organizers with extensive experience in progressive movements; others were younger activists with formidable social media skills, including a few who had been radicalized in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

They all remain politically engaged. Some helped launch Occupy Sandy, Strike Debt, and other immediate offshoots of the movement. Many met one another again at Dakota Access Pipeline or Black Lives Matter protests. Some are full-time organizers; others are writers or professors. The follow-up interviews show that we have not seen the last of them.

A decade later, none regret their involvement in the 2011 effort. They all agree that Occupy did what was possible at the time, and did it spectacularly well. Not one had expected the Zuccotti Park encampment to last more than a few days, and all were amazed when it garnered so much traction and attention. Interviewees also reflected on the movement’s limitations, including flaws in its analysis of race and gender, the
Sending a message: Images of Occupy Wall Street demonstrators circulated rapidly, extending the movement far beyond Zuccotti Park.
The signature contribution that gave Occupy lasting influence was its laser-sharp focus on skyrocketing inequality.

Outsider FEMA: Occupy Sandy organizers spearheaded food and clothing drives following Hurricane Sandy’s destruction.

UT occupy had limits as well, and those too have preoccupied our interviewees over the years since. The iconic call for the unity of “the 99 percent” enabled a euphoric feeling of solidarity and helped attract increasingly diverse crowds to participate in the occupation at Zuccotti Park. But while appreciating the movement’s powerful centering of class, many participants also criticized it for underemphasizing racial and gender oppression and other divisions within the 99 percent. Some had tried to promote an intersectional approach from the earliest days of the occupation and struggled to create space for people of color and women to play leading roles. Most observed that subsequent waves of movement activity—from Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to trans advocacy, immigrant rights, and Indigenous struggles—have generated a far more complex understanding of capitalism and power, as well as a far more diversified leadership. Those movements built on Occupy’s success but also moved the left in a more intersectional direction.

The easy reproducibility of occupations and the “mini-society” of Zuccotti Park and other occupied spaces, with their spirited prefigurative social relations, helped catalyze Occupy’s explosive growth, creativity, and connectedness. No one we spoke with expressed regrets about the defining feature of the movement: the taking of the space at Zuccotti Park and at the thousand other encampments that radiated out from there. But some participants had critiqued the term “occupation” from the outset, with its evocation of Palestine; others noted that as a tactic, occupation had serious limits. Holding physical space required enormous work, and while the park provided participants with a place to sleep as well as food, medical care, and culture, it soon became overwhelmed by problems endemic to the larger society, such as the needs of New York’s vast unhoused population as the number of homeless within Zuccotti began to rise. Safety became an increasingly important concern, and there were reports of women being sexually assaulted while encamped there. The difficulties involved in providing security in a mini-society of tents in a downtown park became increasingly apparent. Occupy simply lacked the organizational capacity to address these formidable challenges. Most of our interviewees came to see encampment as a temporary and transitory tactic, at best. As one interviewee who wished to remain anonymous reflected: “Before it gets too weird, let it die.”

Occupy famously aimed to create inclusive horizontal structures that maximized participation and democracy, yet it soon was plagued by “the tyranny of structurelessness,” in Jo Freeman’s unforgettable phrase from the 1960s. As the movement mushroomed, meetings of the General Assembly were increasingly dominated by white and male voices and got bogged down in speechifying, rendering decision-making nearly impossible. The participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds and political orientations, which led to clashes. Meetings were also vulnerable to disruption and infiltration: As protest consultant Lisa Fithian told us, “You can’t keep the police out of an open movement space.”

After experiencing these problems, some Occupy activists adopted new approaches in their subsequent movement work, preemptively anticipating the conflicts and needs that arise in open participatory forms. They developed accountability mechanisms designed to rein in individuals who behave badly, for example. As writer and sociologist Marina Sitrin put it, “Rules are fine. Rulers, no—but rules are a good thing. Without having rules and agreements, it’s much more difficult.”
Similarly, many interviewees in retrospect considered Occupy’s signature “leaderlessness” and refusal to focus on specific demands as necessary elements in its success, yet ultimately insufficient. Many concurred with journalist and media studies professor Nathan Schneider’s observation that “the strategy of building institutional power, electoral power, state power, has become much more widely embraced by people who during Occupy times might have been more anarchistically inclined.” Occupy’s unexpected traction with the public helped embolden this shift in perspective.

The very lack of left infrastructure in the United States in 2011—after decades of decline for organized labor, left parties, and movement organizations—both enabled the explosive creativity of the Occupy moment and presented an obstacle for those who, in its aftermath, did not “want just to be a bunch of people in a park,” as organizer Yotam Marom explained. “We want a piece of this thing! We want to win.”

Some of our interviewees put their post-Occupy energies into the labor movement, pushing it in new directions. Others began building new organizations or helping existing ones grow stronger. But the biggest shift involved electoral work. Some Occupiers had been engaged in electoral politics before 2011, but the large majority had been skeptical about its efficacy. For some, this reflected disillusion and disappointment after having supported Barack Obama in 2008; for a certain number, aligned with an anarchist perspective, it was a matter of long-standing principle. Today, however, many of our interviewees are either directly engaged in electoral work or see it as a key terrain of political struggle. There are also those who are more ecumenical than they were in 2011. Only a few remain thoroughly averse to electoral efforts.

In 2014, the victory of socialist city council candidate Kshama Sawant in Seattle, along with the passage of multiple citywide minimum wage ordinances around the country, were early post-Occupy examples of what was possible with focused local efforts. But the carrot and the stick of the electoral turn were more fundamentally embodied by Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. The Sanders campaign largely embraced Occupy’s ideological perspective and, as writer and organizer Jonathan Smucker told us, it “was a way of giving people who have no power power right away.” After that, they were ready and eager to move on to bigger projects.

The past decade has witnessed some of the largest protests in US history, as well as the unprecedented impact of Sanders’s presidential campaigns and the growth in the number of young people (and some growth among older ones as well) who openly support socialism. Would all of this have happened without Occupy Wall Street? It’s impossible to know for sure, but for us, Yotam Marom sums it up best: “Occupy was a really significant psychological shift, from righteous losers—which was my experience beforehand—to contenders. Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, the Bernie campaign are within the context of a world in which the left can contend. Occupy cracked something open!”

“Occupy was a significant psychological shift, from righteous losers—my experience beforehand—to contenders.” —Yotam Marom

Critics were quick to label Occupy a failure once the police cleared out Zuccotti Park and the other encampments that sprouted across the country. But Occupy involved far more than the physical occupations: It inaugurated a new wave of social movement efforts and inspired a new generation of activists. The tactic of occupying public space succeeded beyond all expectations in riveting worldwide attention on the crisis of inequality. That tactic was not capable of reversing the massive increase in inequality that had occurred—on the contrary, inequality has continued to widen. But the Occupy moment gave beleaguered longtime organizers the confidence to build organizations and movements to bring about lasting change, and it inspired a new generation of activists to join them. As minister and Occupy activist the Rev. Michael Elick told us, it “was a way of giving people who have no power power right away.” After that, they were ready and eager to move on to bigger projects.

Ruth Milkman teaches at the CUNY Graduate Center and the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. She is the author, most recently, of Immigrant Labor and the New Precariat (Wiley).

Stephanie Luce is professor of labor studies at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. Her books include Labor Movements: Global Perspectives (Wiley) and Fighting for a Living Wage (Cornell).

Penny Lewis is professor of labor studies at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. She is a coauthor of the forthcoming A People’s Guide to New York City (University of California Press, 2022).
Leaderless Revolutionaries
in Their Own Words
Zuccotti Park occupiers reflect on their experiment, ten years later.

The Rev. Michael Ellick

How do you hack this conversation of the modern media by creating magic and creating things that will invite people in? Before Occupy, if you took a shot at capitalism, you were a problem. And now it’s commonplace. There’s a lot that Occupy did to reimagine the playing field.

You get used to losing, but suddenly a lot of things started seeming possible. It was like the rising tide. It captured some collective-imagination moment, and it just moved past what anyone foresaw. Just having people in the same physical place drove an engine that made people not able to turn away. I’m coming from a church, but the church is set up where we don’t live together, we don’t talk to each other the same way that you could in that camp.

It felt like, “We have seen the other world, and we know how to get there.” We had a tribe going for a second there! The thing that we did best was to build joy and friendship. And we’ve all learned a lot about sustaining ourselves and our friendships and our communities.

A lot of people came together; it was a cooking of ideas. Occupy popularized a certain tactic set for a generation, and now you are seeing that played out writ large. People are continuing to build. It’s shocking to think back about how many trails go back to Occupy—“Oh, I met him there too!” There was a lightning-rod effect, not just for those who were on the ground but for those who were moved by the ideas and the possibilities. It was a way of giving people who had no power power right away.

But a lot of it was spectacle. We had not done the deep work with one another. Especially around race. There was some toxic, toxic behavior toward people of color, toward women.

The Rev. Michael Ellick is the minister of Judson Memorial Church and an organizer for Occupy Faith NYC.

Sonny Singh

Occupy was a little sliver of what could be possible for radical movement building. It became a hub around so many different social-justice issues, which was deeply inspiring to me. It showed us the importance of space, physical space, like the commons. I know it was just a tiny little public-private-partnership park that we took over, but just having that was so powerful. Symbolically powerful. I don’t think it can be overstated how important that is to our movements, our relationship-building, just having that intersectional, physical hub.

It was the beginning of a movement trajectory that we’re still in, that BLM very much picked up on and built out. And the Bernie Sanders campaign, too. The millennial folks who have now become leaders and organizers and, for better or worse, Twitter activists—a lot of them came out of Occupy.

Occupy brought a class analysis and an anti-capitalist politics to social movements in the US that the labor movement hadn’t been able to do for my generation of activists. The impact has been massive! Occupy being the catalyst, socialism is somehow cool now. It’s something that we can identify as and talk about in all kinds of spaces. DSA is now an undeniable force—it’s incredible that they were kind of irrelevant in 2011.

Sexual harassment, gender-based violence, is less and less tolerated. And there has definitely been a shift in consciousness with regard to uplifting the voice of gender-nonconforming and trans people and working to create spaces that are truly gender inclusive. But race reductionism is still an issue, maybe as much an issue as it was back then. It’s still with us. It should have been thought about very deliberately from the outset in a way that I don’t think it was. It just got so messy so fast.

Sonny Singh is a trumpet and dbal player, singer, songwriter, and educator-activist based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Yotam Marom

Occupy was a really significant psychological shift, from righteous losers—which was my experience beforehand—to contenders. Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, the Bernie campaign, are within the context of a world in which the left can contend. Occupy cracked something open!

A lot of the people came out of Occupy energized but feeling deeply the limitations of that moment, and wanting more—wanting actual power. We were saying, “We don’t want to just be a bunch of people in a park. We want a piece of this thing! We want to win.”

What pops and what doesn’t, we rarely get to control. Often things generate momentum for a whole host of reasons that we didn’t plan for, sometimes even despite us. Here you are, camped out in a park, and that’s what’s working. And along the way, your sense of what’s possible has changed. You can’t build a social movement without that shift happening. It was epic and transformative, and we’ve seen the consequences of it over time.

We’re often just following what regular people think is moving. Take the Bernie campaign, for example. You’ve got this old New York Jew who lives in Vermont, and suddenly, for some
reason, regular-ass people are just willing to die for this person, and he fills stadiums bigger than anything we ever filled!

One of the main contributions of Occupy was “the 99 percent.” That was one of the major gifts. It was the first time, in my life at least, that class was being put on the table, front and center, without any equivocation, and that was a huge gift to the left, that it became popular and clear and simple. A bunch of things that got replicated and spread were incredible. The participatory nature of the thing, that you can just come to the park and you’re a part of it—that’s magic! And this inclination toward direct action. But we also had a bunch of poisonous, toxic things, like the pretense of not having leaders. We were a so-called leaderless movement with no demands. The lack of demands was part of its initial success. People could see themselves inside of it. It was like an empty signifier that gave people a lot of room to imagine. But we never got past that, and we never created structures that support leadership development, that hold leaders accountable.

The task after a big movement moment like that is to go and build, so that the next time there’s momentum, we can capture it and make better use of it.

Yotam Marom is an organizer based in New York City.

Cathy O’Neil

Occupy certainly radicalized me, as someone who had left academic math and gone into finance. I did not know what finance did, but I believed the hype that mathematicians and the mathematical approach to finance would make the markets more efficient. I just thought Larry Summers seemed really smart. With the financial crisis I was disillusioned, but I had no direction for that. And then when I joined Occupy, it pointed me quite firmly in a progressive direction.

The group that I helped organize during Occupy is still meeting. It’s been meeting every week since October 2011. The original name was the Alternative Banking Working Group, but later we changed it to Occupy the Future. Mostly it’s a discussion and reading group, but we talk every week about recent news from Occupy’s perspective.

We created a playing card project, The 52 Shades of Greed, with a bunch of other groups. And then we wrote a book, Occupy Finance, together, a few years after Occupy. Personally, I have become an author, and I started a company to audit algorithms. Honestly, I don’t think I could have written my book, Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy, without the education I got from my fellow Occupiers.

Cathy O’Neil is an American mathematician, data scientist, and author. She is the founder of the blog MathBabe (mathbabe.org) and has written books on data science, including the New York Times best-seller Weapons of Math Destruction.

Suresh Naidu

SEATTLE AND THE ANTI-GLOBALIZATION MOVE- ment was the political experience that set me on my particular path, along with anti-war activism. And so much of the undercurrent of that was anarchism—this idea that you didn’t need hierarchical organizations and you wanted to do everything in horizontal ways.

And there’s still some real power in that, and I don’t want to give it up entirely. I’ll probably swing back the other way once there’s some lefty bureaucrat telling us what to do and that this is the program and you have to get with it—the iron law of oligarchy in action! There’s something really powerful in the anarchist countercurrent that should be maintained to protect us from that. But that horizon crested in Occupy, and then there was a strategic reorientation toward much more traditional electoral and institutional politics.

I was throwing up my hands at Occupy and its decentralized networks and thinking, This is not where the US is right now. The institutions of the left have not burrowed deep enough into everyday life to generate mass action. We are not at a place where something decentralized and spontaneously organized can change enough about US institutions. We’re just not there.

I think my cohort and cohorts younger than mine took the lessons of Occupy and went into other domains of institutionalized politics to effect change. I don’t know how many people are conscious about that being a reaction to Occupy, but in my view it almost certainly is.

Part of the rise of the Sanders campaign and of DSA was other people thinking, “What the hell were we doing with that Occupy stuff? We’ve got to march through the institutions and build structures.” We can’t win with street encampments alone, without holding power in legislatures.

Along these lines, there’s no horizontal substitute for big, bureaucratic organizations that have steady sources of revenue and staff and lawyers, and we need these given the terrain of political conflict in an advanced democracy. There’s obviously a crucial role for street politics, but we also need to win in workplaces, courts, agencies, and governments. So we need to build tools and organizations that can fight and win on that terrain as well.

Suresh Naidu is a professor of economics and international and public affairs at Columbia University.

Sandy Nurse

Most people in Occupy were deeply apathetic and disillusioned by the political system. What drew me there was outrage against the billionaire class and their grip on the entire planet. We were angry and outraged but not sure how to get in front of a global extraction system that’s chewing people up and spitting them out and leaving them to die. Occupy elevated a feeling that capitalism is the crisis, the exploitation and extraction of wealth in service of that top 1 percent. It just falls out of everyone’s mouth now.
It totally blew my expectations, because I thought it was going to be a plain old march, or a standoff for a few hours. It taught me the importance of visible, physical dissent. We were suddenly mashed into this space with all these people with a shared mission. We had a physical home for radical thought and discourse and creativity and experimentation. That created deep relationships, and long-lasting effects rippled out from those relationships.

The biggest lessons I learned were around leadership and communication. During the encampment, a defining moment for me came when a person sat me down and asked me to take responsibility for some things. That was the first time I recognized that I was being seen in a leadership role.

It cut across race and class. People of color were in strong de facto leadership roles and have continued as leaders since then. Occupy did have the pitfalls of being focused on just capitalism and class, and not racial capitalism or intersectionality. But it’s important not to erase or dismiss those of us who were there. At least in New York City, I saw a lot of participation from nonwhite folks. Nationally it was more of a white movement.

At that time, we didn’t see elected officials explicitly naming things that most people who showed up in the park were outraged by. Since then, Bernie Sanders was the first politician I have ever donated to in my life. He got $4 from me on a monthly basis, which was a big deal for me.

Since Occupy, I’ve been organizing in my community in Bushwick, Brooklyn. I started two nonprofits. One is BK ROT, a youth jobs program centered around creating convenient fossil-fuel-free composting options for residents and small businesses. I’m also a cofounder of the Mayday Space, which is like Zuccotti Park inside a building. It’s a neighborhood resource, a home for grassroots organizing, and a citywide destination for movement-building.

My working in the neighborhood, and the decision I made to build where I live, made me realize that without sympathetic folks on the other side of the table, these are much bigger uphill battles. It humanized local politicians to me. In 2019, I was encouraged by some local residents to run for office. I ran for about three or four months for State Assembly before our local City Council seat was vacated and a special election kicked off. Then we decided to switch. A community meeting decided that the City Council seat was a priority because of the length of time someone holds it.

Sandy Nurse is a community organizer and the Democratic Party nominee to represent District 37 in the November 2 election for the New York City Council.

“Occupy elevated a feeling that capitalism is the crisis, the extraction of wealth in service of that top 1 percent.”

—Sandy Nurse

Sandy Nurse is a community organizer and the Democratic Party nominee to represent District 37 in the November 2 election for the New York City Council.

A retrospective podcast series produced in partnership with Belabored, Economic Update, New Dawn, Start Making Sense, The Dig & Upstream

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Where We Stand

$15 MINIMUM WAGE
Occupy Wall Street shined a bright light on the vast amounts of money hoarded by people at the top, but it also got the country talking about the meager wages paid to those at the bottom. Just a year after protesters occupied Zuccotti Park, the Fight for $15 movement began demanding a minimum wage of $15 an hour, plus the right to unionize, and it has experienced astonishing success. Ten states and Washington, D.C., have now passed legislation to raise their minimum wage to that level, as have dozens of cities. During his administration, President Obama supported a $9 an hour minimum wage, but by 2016, the Democratic Party had a $15 minimum wage in its platform. Democrats have yet to pass an increase while controlling Congress and the White House. President Biden did take executive action, however, to increase federal contractors’ pay to that level, affecting at least a quarter-million people.

FREE COLLEGE
The protesters who camped in Zuccotti Park created the Occupy Student Debt Campaign with the goal of building a movement to abolish all student debt. One of the core principles was agitating for free public higher education, and it has left a mark. Since 2011, 16 states have launched statewide programs that make college free for students at certain types of institutions. It’s also an idea that has resonated with federal lawmakers, even if they haven’t passed legislation yet. Members of Congress have introduced a bill to offer tuition-free college, and after campaigning on two years of free community college for all, President Biden included it in his American Families Plan, which is now part of the Democrats’ stand-alone infrastructure package.

STUDENT LOAN FORGIVENESS/CANCELLATION
“Debt is a tie that binds the 99%,” according to the Occupy Wall Street offshoot Strike Debt. Eliminating student debt was a core principle of Occupy Wall Street protesters, so much so that the movement’s Rolling Jubilee bought up and forgave millions in student loans. But the call to eliminate all student debt hasn’t yet been met, and the federal government has whipsawed on the issue. President Obama allowed students who were defrauded by for-profit colleges to have their debts forgiven, eliminating $600 million in debt, but the Trump administration at first refused to carry on the program and then made it nearly impossible for students to access it. Biden has once again reversed course and canceled $1.5 billion in debt for students defrauded by for-profit institutions since taking office.

STUDENT LOAN DISCHARGE IN BANKRUPTCY
Walking through Zuccotti Park in 2011, it was common to spot signs with specific and wonky policy demands. Discharging student loan debt in bankruptcy was one of them. Despite the ability to offload medical, credit card, and other forms of debt in the bankruptcy process, student loans have been exempted since 1976. Congress hasn’t changed the rules since then, but those rules may be shifting anyway, given that a bankruptcy judge recently allowed private loans to be discharged without proof of “undue hardship.” A bipartisan group of members of Congress has also introduced a bill to make that an option for all kinds of loans.

Fighting income inequality is now on the political map in a way it wasn’t before Occupy Wall Street.

BY BRYCE COVERT
Occupy Wall Street was criticized at the time for railing against systemic problems without offering a concrete list of solutions. Yet protesters did speak out about policies they saw as unjust and about others that would address the ills they stood against. The movement has left an indelible mark not just on the national conversation about inequality but on the laws and structures that enable it. The rampant inequality Occupy decried has been perpetuated through decades of policy choices—and can be undone by the same. Below, we identify eight policy areas in which activists and lawmakers have, since 2011, tried to work toward a fairer America.

—Research by Katrina Janco and Gloria Oladipo

HIGHER TAXES ON THE WEALTHY

If the country wants to address income inequality, the phenomenon famously summed up by Occupy Wall Street protesters in the chant “We are the 99 percent,” it needs to tax top incomes and use the revenue to provide social services and support to everyone else. And there has been some movement to do so. The average federal tax rate on the top 1 percent of households rose 6 percentage points under Obama, although Trump’s big tax-cut package lowered taxes on the wealthy. Democrats are now considering “tax fairness for high-income individuals” as an offset for their reconciliation infrastructure package, but that’s still being developed. Some states have taken action in the interim: California, New Jersey, and New York have all increased taxes on millionaires, and Hawaii is considering legislation that would increase the top tax rate to 16 percent, which would be the highest state income tax rate in the country.

WEALTH TAX

Occupy Wall Street protesters highlighted the vast disparities between the very rich and the rest of us that have yawned wider and wider in recent decades. Besides the huge gap between the income of top earners and of everyone else, there is also a vast chasm between how much wealth the rich are able to stow away—which has only grown more significant in recent decades—and the smaller or nonexistent savings of the rest of us. The idea of a wealth tax got a big platform when Senator Elizabeth Warren put it at the heart of her run for president in 2020, but so far the federal government hasn’t taken any action on it. States haven’t acted on it either, although last year California considered a new tax on rich residents’ net worth.

BANK REGULATION

Occupy Wall Street happened in the wake of the Great Recession, a global economic meltdown caused by bank malfeasance, and much of the protesters’ anger was directed at the Wall Street firms that surround Zuccotti Park. But it also took place after the federal government had already mounted its response to the 2008 financial crisis by passing the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform Act. While its implementation is ongoing, Congress hasn’t passed any major bank reform legislation since then. States don’t have a lot of power to regulate banks on their own, but one thing they can regulate is non-bank entities that prey on the poor, like payday lenders. Since 2017, California, Colorado, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Ohio have capped interest rates on such loans.

MONEY IN POLITICS

Why has the country allowed banks to run amok and income inequality to spiral out of control? One answer Occupy Wall Street offered was the role of money in politics—the ability of Wall Street and wealthy Americans to donate to politicians and persuade them to act in the donors’ interests. But campaign contribution rules have not changed significantly, although some states have experimented with reforms. In 2015 Seattle started giving residents “democracy vouchers” to support local candidates of their choosing, while Alaska voters in 2020 approved a ballot measure to require additional disclosures of campaign contributions.

ILLUSTRATED BY JEREMY PARAAN
An Occupy for All of Us

Occupy Wall Street put class at the center of its organizing. But dozens of Zuccotti Park activists pushed the movement to confront race and gender oppression as well.

In the streets: The movement's participants included more women and people of color than many media outlets acknowledged.
The thousands of people who flocked to New York City’s Zuccotti Park 10 years ago this fall to protest capitalism run amok were far more diverse than the media let on. “It’s true there were a lot of white people, but in the NYC encampment there were many BIPOC people and women of color, like myself, who had very visible leadership roles,” says Sandy Nurse, a carpenter and local organizer who recently won the Democratic primary (and effectively the election) for the 37th District of the New York City Council.

In the fall and winter of 2011, I interviewed dozens of women at the encampment—mostly queer and BIPOC—who led marches and demonstrations, got kettled and arrested, facilitated contentious meetings, and participated as fully as their white male counterparts. Some had arrived to express anger at the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis (summed up by the chant heard everywhere that fall: “Banks got bailed out / We got sold out”) or just ambled over out of sheer curiosity. And though the tumultuous energy of the early days of the occupation drew them in, they quickly took on a second job: teaching their fellow protesters about racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and how those forces work together, even in the would-be utopia of the park.

Mel Butler, who now lives in western Canada with her family, arrived in Zuccotti Park thinking about economic exploitation and ended up doing mostly feminist work. Recalling her time in New York, she says she watched these “isms” rear their head, being continually surprised, and then unsurprised, that many Occupiers were focused only on class issues. “Maybe the original goals of Occupy were not broad enough,” she says. “How can you just deal with one form of inequality?”

She and her fellow activists pushed back on language that erased race. They called attention to police brutality against people of color and confronted sexual assault in the park. They denounced transphobia within women’s spaces. They raised questions about who was doing work like running the kitchen and facilitating meetings and whether that work was getting respect. They implemented a “progressive stack,” which allowed people from marginalized groups to speak first. As the year went on, they even held a series of community dialogues about power and privilege to bring a race and gender analysis into their public-facing activism and into the park itself. “We were hacking through, little by little,” says Ariel Federow, a longtime activist and recently a public defender. “Occupy tried to be a space for those conversations.”

The results were mixed. By the spring of 2012—after the Zuccotti Park encampment was brutally evicted—events like the jubilant May Day march and a new encampment in Union Square were led by, and centered around, women of color, immigrants, care workers, and unhoused people in a newly intentional way, according to the participants. But the larger Occupy movement, with its decision-making assemblies and spokescouncil meetings, never fully recovered from the combination of police crackdown and internal strife. The manarchist reputation lingered.

Now, in interviews 10 years after Occupy, many of these activists note that almost every issue they drew attention to has gone mainstream, such as when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez talks about being an assault survivor on Instagram, or when Elizabeth Warren focuses on Black maternal mortality, or when TikTok stars hype intersectionality. In fact, intersectionality—the term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how various oppressions interact with one another—is such a keystone of the left that it has engendered a conservative backlash. Despite those attacks, left movements like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Indigenous water protection, disability justice, and even Covid mutual aid all strive to acknowledge the overlapping oppressions that had to be painstakingly explained at Occupy meetings.

Marisa Holmes, who made a film about Occupy, thinks the movement’s internal struggles and even its failures have helped sow the seeds for a decade of social change because of the unique way the protests worked: continuous and out in “the square.” “We were putting these practices and ideas out in the open, in public space,” she says. “A lot of people were newly radicalized. Maybe Occupy was their first point of contact.”

Holmes and other activists I spoke with are quick to credit the work that began before Occupy—especially INCITE!, a 2000s-era network of radical women of color who organized within an abolitionist framework, as well as the global uprisings of 2011 that stunned the world as young people in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, and elsewhere took over public space and refused to surrender it—along with the work that followed Occupy for inspiring the movements that have emerged since. And many see Occupy as key to their own awareness of both the possibilities and the limitations of organizing. “A lot of young activists took what we learned there about race or gender and said, ‘How do we build groups where this is the focus?’” says Manissa McLeave Maharawal, who is now an academic and has worked on housing policy and eviction defense since Occupy. “How do we find groups that are doing this work and continue learning?”

“Maybe the original goals of Occupy were not broad enough. How can you just deal with one form of inequality?”

—Mel Butler

Sarah M. Seltzer is a New York City–based writer and the executive editor of Lilith magazine.
It was unpopular to say, ‘I don’t want to include someone who is racist.’ People were saying, ‘We can teach them.’”  
— Manissa McLeave Maharawal

York City, was introduced at a General Assembly, the horizontal, consensus-based decision-making body of the encampment. As it was being read for approval to a crowd of hundreds, a few listeners were struck by language that seemed to ignore racism: It referred to the world as “one people, united,” with no mention of race. In a move to amend the language, a group of South Asian activists, including Maharawal and Hena Ashraf, took part in a “block” of the resolution. “I am someone who isn’t afraid to speak up,” Ashraf, who is now a filmmaker in Los Angeles, told me this summer. “They were using language that I wasn’t feeling.” The small group sat down and drafted new language while walking skeptical white participants through the basics of racial oppression. Their subsequent blog posts about the interaction, highlighting the presence of people of color at Occupy, the naiveté they encountered, and the opportunity to move past that ignorance in a public way, were widely circulated. It was both exhausting and galvanizing—“so real it hurts,” as Maharawal wrote. But at activist gatherings today, Maharawal says, such confrontations, and all the messy learning they entail, aren’t necessary. “It’s a relief,” she says. She credits Black Lives Matter with easing, if not eliminating, the burden of Racism 101 conversations.

BLM protests have brought the danger of Black peoples’ daily existence to the fore while also drawing attention to the racialized nature of economic exploitation. For Maharawal, the movement achieved many of the goals set forth by the Occupy People of Color Caucus that formed after that fateful General Assembly. “I remember a couple years later I was at a march against police brutality, and I saw some other people from the POC caucus. I was like, ‘These are the kinds of protests we were trying to have. This is the analysis we were trying to bring to Occupy,’” Maharawal says.

In the decade following Occupy, the constant stream of videos showing police brutality created one flash point after another and helped shift the focus, even for those who were already personally affected by police brutality, like Occupy participant Shaista Hussain, and her family, who she says were scarred by racist policing on Staten Island. “During Occupy, I still didn’t have the words to say, ‘This is the most important thing we need to talk about right now,’” she says. “If you don’t deal with race and racism in NYC, that’s not direct democracy.”

Just as activists of color had to combat ignorance about race, Mel Butler found herself doing feminist work at Zuccotti. “It started with people saying, ‘Don’t just hug people who might not want to hug you back,’” she says. Butler joined Occupy’s feminist and Safer Spaces working groups early on, and she soon found trans inclusion to be a stumbling block. “There were some people that were transphobic, but the issue I confronted more often was ignorance and confusion,” she says. “I remember being ridiculed by so-called feminists for bringing trans issues up, because they thought it wasn’t a real thing.”

While her efforts to educate people within the working groups slowly made inroads that year, Butler says the changes of the past decade have made those discussions easier. A few years after Occupy, at the gym, she heard a Top 40 radio station covering Caitlyn Jenner. “They were talking about pronouns and lingo that seemed so radical for us to try to discuss during Occupy in 2011,” she says. “I was crying on the Stairmaster!” Similarly, the basic concept of consent has become easier to bring up in mixed-gender groups since the #MeToo era. There’s still room for improvement, but “there’s been a huge shift,” Butler says.

Yet sometimes the new language masks old problems. Ashraf says she feels gratified that queerness and different gender identities are more accepted today. “But I do feel kind of jaded,” she adds. “Because people now say, ‘I know all these inclusive words and how to use them,’” but they’d still rather listen to themselves.”

As the allegations of sexual harassment at Occupy encampments multiplied, many participants tried to create ways to handle these and other safety issues through mediation and an internal system of security, even escorting offenders off the grounds rather than alerting the police. Harassment survivors and other Occupiers didn’t always think that worked in practice, even if they understood the problems with a criminal-justice-based response or knew that law enforcement was often indifferent and even hostile to victims within the movement.

Ashwini Hardikar, who was organizing a radical child care collective in 2011, arrived at Occupy as an anti-capitalist interested in racial justice. But then she was sexually harassed at Zuccotti Park, and after a post she wrote about it went viral, she began to hear stories of harassment in Occupy encampments all over the country. “I think that being at Occupy was one of my first experiences being in a space where at least a small faction was trying to utilize abolitionist-style ways to address sexual harass-
ment and violence,” she says, recalling the mediation processes and community agreements the Safer Spaces Working Group attempted to put in place, even as reports of inappropriate behavior and assaults multiplied at Zuccotti.

She retains some reservations about efforts to build a restorative justice utopia while simultaneously running a movement. “In theory, yes, I'm totally for it,” she says. “But the reliance on long amounts of time for participation is a big challenge. You have to be in a community with someone to have a process like that work.” The protracted, sometimes enervating process of consensus-building isn’t always sufficient to address urgent threats of violence. In fact, despite many attempts, the Safer Spaces group never officially passed its community agreement through the fractious decision-making bodies of Occupy, even if in practice it put those elements in place.

When the movement for prison abolition went national during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, and communities like ChaZ—an encampment and “autonomous zone”—popped up in Seattle, Hardikar watched to see whether the activists there would have more luck threading the needle. “I do think that women and nonbinary survivors of color are asked to take on heroic and creative roles and be the guinea pigs,” she says, especially when it comes to reintegrating the people who made them feel unsafe. “Occupy really showed me how challenging it is to put these ideals in place.”

Maharawal also feels that Occupy’s mission to be open to all was a limitation. “It was unpopular at the time to say, ‘I don’t want to include someone who is racist,’” she says. “People were saying, ‘We can teach them.’” Today’s post-Trump polarization, along with a new understanding of police surveillance, she adds, has made it less likely that today’s lefty groups will err on the side of welcoming all comers. Ariel Federow puts it more bluntly: “What I hope is that, in progressive spaces, we are less likely to tolerate fuckery.”

Another concern is the ways that the movement’s attempts at openness fell short of a real welcome. Several of the people I spoke with now have young children. All are living through Covid. They’ve been thinking about who was absent in 2011, who didn’t have the time, ability, or immigration status to participate: caregivers, people with health issues, essential workers. Even for them, the need for self-care was eclipsed by the desire to be part of this juggernaut. Holmes points to the chant heard at marches: “All day / All week / Occupy Wall Street.” “There was a sense of urgency,” she says. In her organizing in the years since, including at the NYC Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council, Holmes has tried to be more vocal about the toll that facilitating takes and the need to train others to do the work, in order to make the movement more resilient, fairer, and harder to target. “It’s a very feminized role, to hold space for a collective,” she says. “It's taxing. But you can't have a horizontal or directly democratic movement without facilitation. I understand now that it's a generation-long struggle. We need to build communities of care first, and dismantle the ableism and patriarchy and white supremacy that we’re bringing in.”

For all their critiques, however, everyone I spoke with felt that Occupy achieved at least some of what it set out to do. It changed the conversation in the United States about wealth inequality, paved the way for stronger stances from figures like Warren, Ocasio-Cortez, and Bernie Sanders, and brought policy issues like debt and health care to the fore. Sandy Nurse points to the Cancel Student Debt movement, “which started in Washington Square Park in a huddle of the Occupy Student Debt Working Group.” “The fact that Sanders and Warren ran on the promise to cancel student debt to some degree is a testament to that work,” she says. Occupy’s critique of dark money in politics has had an impact too, Nurse adds. “In my own race for city council, we were able to run a grassroots campaign without money from special interests. That is now the norm for leftists and progressives looking to run for office.”

Nurse’s successful campaign is one example of how Occupy helped to prime New York for change. On a more basic level, the echo of “the people’s mic” is heard at almost any protest here. “Occupy was ended by the cops but trickled out in all directions,” Federow says. “Organizing is, at its core, about building relationships and skills, and for me, those relationships and that trust came back around in other work later.” Friendships, new ideological commitments, and even families began at Zuccotti Park. Butler recalls picnics with her Safer Spaces comrades, who became her best friends. There’s a substantial list of spouses and partners who met at Occupy.

That’s because, for all of Occupy’s flaws, there was something exhilarating and unforgettable about being part of what Federow calls “a real moment in New York radical history.” It’s a chapter that people will study in textbooks someday: being kettled on the Brooklyn Bridge. Defending the park with brooms. Talking about the personal toll taken by capitalism over the sounds of drum circles.

Husain, who now organizes tenants in Brooklyn, says that while the policy issues from the Occupy era have gained new prominence, “what is missing is the horizontalism, the direct democracy, and the mutual aid.” She firmly believes that electoral politics can’t create meaningful change without mass demonstrations. As society weathers one crisis after another, she imagines a new Occupy-like movement that integrates the lessons of the past decade, finally getting right what the previous iteration got wrong. “The true meaning of ‘progressive stack’ goes beyond intersectional: The people who are the least visible become the most visible,” she says. “One day we’re all going to put it into practice and have our shit together.”

“We were putting these practices and ideas out in the open, in public space. A lot of people were newly radicalized.”

— Marisa Holmes
Afropessimism
and Its Discontents

A guide for the perplexed, the puzzled, and the politically confused.

BY GREG TATE

Afropessimism is all the rage among millennial Black academics and activists—most notably among Black feminist critical race theorists, who themselves are now the prime targets of the MAGA crowd. Black intellectuals haven’t enjoyed this much pop currency among the right wing since Black Power took over buildings to demand Black studies in state universities and the Ivies 50 years ago.

Afropessimism’s recent emergence in the mainstream of Black political conversation could not have been better timed. Particularly for that critical race sistren group, given their issues with suddenly woke white America—especially their “bête blanche,” white academic feminists. Here the grounds for suspicion are not gratuitous but experiential and statistical: 48 percent of white women voted for Donald Trump. Beyond that tempestuous internal struggle between feminists of different hues, though, just what is Afropessimism? And why should you, dear reader, even give a good goddamn?

The titular Godfather of Afropessimism, Frank B. Wilderson III, states the case best in his 2020 book Afropessimism. In a nutshell—and consider this nutshell more kola-sized than pecan—Wilderson believes that the binary frame for the world’s pathological anti-Blackness shouldn’t be whites vs. Blacks but “Slaves” (Blackfolk) vs. “Humans” (white dudes, mostly). In that construct, the structural violence legally inflicted on Black flesh on the antebellum plantation has been sustained into the 21st century. According to Wilderson, Blackfolk have never transcended slave status to become human in the eyes of the law, and are therefore still subject to routine systemic violence by various white authorities—not just the police—and routinely treated as a population who have no constitutional or human rights.

As The New York Times’ special issue “The 1619 Project” revealed, anti-Black outcomes remain algorithmically inscribed in every dominant American institution—legal, medical, economic, educational, cultural, scientific—anywhere the power of life and death is held over Black bodies by anti-Black institutional authority. Hence not just police brutality but mass incarceration, medical racism, infant-mortality-rate racism, environmental racism, cyber-surveillance racism, etc. Malcolm X may have most succinctly defined and caught the spirit of AP when he told a 1960s Black audience:

You don’t catch hell because you’re a Methodist or Baptist. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Democrat or a Republican. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Mason or an Elk. And you sure don’t catch hell because you’re an American, because if you was an American, you wouldn’t catch no hell. You catch hell because you’re a black man.... So we are all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves. You are nothing but an ex-slave. You don’t like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn’t come here on the “Mayflower.” You came here on a slave ship, in chains, like a horse or a cow or a chicken, and you were brought here by the people who came here on the “Mayflower.” You were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers.

Where Wilderson has proven most controversial, however, is not in ID’ing the usual pale-skinned-male suspect and source of global oppression, but in his opposition to what he describes as “mystifying analogies” drawn in multiethnic coalitions between Slaves and every other oppressed group we may find ourselves allied with. These include Indigenous folk, non-Black feminists and non-Black queer folk, Asians, even Palestinians. (Wilderson tells of a young Palestinian named Sameer he worked with at a security job who felt out of favor when he made a shocking revelation: In Palestine, there was nothing more disgusting for his brothers than to be stopped and frisked by Israeli police when the cop was an Ethiopian Jew. Wilderson’s realization that Native Americans could be anti-Black came when his father met with a group of tribal leaders to help resolve a dispute with his university employers. During the meeting, a Native man shouted at Wilderson’s dad, “We don’t want you, a nigger man, telling us what to do!”)

As Wilderson sees it, our movement allies’ negotiations with the Humans never start with the assumption that they are nonhuman or slaves. To Wilderson, all non-Blackfolk—even those he personally loves, partners with, and politics with—are “junior partners” of the Humans. Not least because Wilderson sees the junior partners’ oppressions as resolvable by a restitution of rights that we Slaves, still being legally violated as nonhumans, have never had. Most resonant is the point he makes that non-Blackfolks’ oppressions have a transactional potential to be remedied
“To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time.”

—James Baldwin

Wilderson—a snarky signifying furthermucker on the page—describes a moment of extreme annoyance after a film lecture he gave in which junior partner exceptionalism figured in his narrative analysis. A distraught white female academic beseeches him, “What about solidarity between races?” Wilderson’s now-infamous reply: “I don’t give a rat’s ass about solidarity.”

Wilderson’s Afro pessimism appeals powerfully to critical-race-and-gender-theory millennials because it provides both an ingenious analytical framework for Black oppression and a novel, weaponized language for blasting away at the silencing of Black suffering, Black trauma, Black despair, and Black depression by the junior partners in academia and progressive contemporary multi-identity coalitions.

Wilderson devoted several pages of his first memoir, Incognegro, to recounting the betrayal of Black feminist academics by white feminist academics at his college in San Jose once they’d achieved administrative power. In this aspect of his agenda, Wilderson recalls Frantz Fanon’s warning that Black revolutionary cohorts need to be wary of opportunistic comrades who don’t want to defeat their oppressors but instead merely replace them. Or the comedian Dave Chappelle, who has a bit where he tells a white woman that her only problem with white supremacy was that she didn’t get a big enough cut.

In Afro pessimism, Wilderson—a snarky signifying furthermucker on the page—describes a moment of extreme annoyance after a film lecture he gave in which junior partner exceptionalism figured in his narrative analysis. A distraught white female academic beseeches him, “What about solidarity between races?” Wilderson’s now-infamous reply: “I don’t give a rat’s ass about solidarity.”

Shocking and enraging as that response might be to some—and hilarious and rallying to others—the fact is Wilderson, who teaches at UC Irvine and is in a long-term partnership with a white female poet, can’t actually escape solidarity with the junior partners. There are, in fact, according to one prominent Black woman race theorist, Asian women in academia who now describe themselves as Afro pessimists. Which speaks to the cool factor of AP as yet another example of Blackfolks’ ability to make any odd thing we touch—like Timberland boots and scratch DJ battles—seductive and hip to the non-Black junior partners.

James baldwin said, “to be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time.” But what he didn’t say was that, on a good day, it is mostly a sublimated state of rage since folk got bills to pay and sanity to keep. There are many successful Black women in the corporate world and in academe who are currently angry as f**k at having been hauled in to wet-nurse Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion sessions by their employers—in addition to doing their 80-hour-a-week jobs. Since they don’t want to be identified as That Angry Black Woman, no one is the wiser in the hierarchy. This may partly account for the current Afro pessimism boom, in which Wilderson’s desublimation of his own rage into the highfalutin language of anti-racist structural analysis provides the sisters a safety valve and an intellectual alternative to depression or going all “Pirate Jenny” (see Nina Simone’s slave-revolt take on the Brecht-Weill dirty) on fools at their gig.

According to a couple of Black critical race feminist profs we know, there are undergrad students who haven’t actually read Wilderson but have nonetheless adopted AP as their rallying
The annoying and earnestly woke young Wilderson’s torture of his bewildered parents with his Soul on Ice–inspired ultra-Blackness sets up Afropessimism’s best one-liner. One 1960s pre-Nixon-impeachment day, young Frank, ever the adolescent scamp-provocateur, rolls up on his mother and blindsides her by proclaiming his newfound desire to fight in Vietnam. Mom exhales, then professes pride in her renegade Marxist-wannabe spawn finally embracing the American way. At which point Wilderson launches his spring-loaded ambush: “You don’t understand me. I didn’t mean the White man’s army, I meant the Viet Cong!”

By contrast, some of the most moving and painful writing in Afropessimism occurs in the book’s conclusion, when the author recounts his deeply admiring final reflections and memories of his mother, before dementia renders her a complete stranger to him:

Then she asked me if I had just come from the Washington Monument. When I said no, we’re in Minneapolis, not in D.C., she said I never did have a sense of direction, no wonder I’d come late for my sister’s recital.

“What recital,” I wanted to know, “where?”...
“What do you mean, where? The Jack and Jill convention, down the hall in the ballroom, silly.”...[S]he held up her index finger. “Listen. Your sister plays beautifully.”

The Jack and Jill convention must have been in 1970, and my sister had not played the piano for almost forty years. But I sat with Mom and listened to the end of the concerto or was it an étude? Then came an ice age of silence in which she said nothing and seemed not to notice I was there. Snowplows groaned in the street below her window. The branches of trees were bare and starred with frost. Where was the woman who danced slowly in her stocking feet with my father in the living room at night, Johnny Hartman on the hi-fi and not a worry in the world? The woman who said my stock was good and my mind was strong. Where was she, the woman who made me want to write?

Her hair was as white and thin as dandelion puffs. She had not spoken for a while. Then, as if she’d been looking at me. “Didn’t I tell you, boy, people have to die? I know I told you that.”

Then she fell back into her eyes.

I went into the hallway so she wouldn’t see me cry. When I returned to the room, she asked me who I was.

Earlier, after giving both still-very-lucid parents a full description of Afropessimism, Wilderson recalls his mom querying him as to what purpose something like that could have for his students, and whether it might help them become “good citizens.”

The mature, middle-aged Wilderson doesn’t claw back. But after you smirk at his mother’s seeming naivete, you’re left wondering if Ma Dukes didn’t just signify on her boy in that blithe and cunning way Black mothers can do so well: cutting their grown and tenured progeny’s vestigial outlaw illusions off at the neck so cleanly they never even felt the slice of the blade.

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cry after coming home from Black Lives Matter protests despairing that nothing they do “is going to stop these cops from killing us.” For some, this despair leads to their own feelings of “F**k solidarity” and a petulant, pissed-off urge to withdraw from interaction with white people—especially the staunchest of former allies—while they sort themselves out.

Nonacademic Blackfolk from the grassroots activist side of the table sometimes ask: So what’s Wilderson’s “solution”? In the late ’80s and early ’90s, Wilderson lived in South Africa, where he was a mostly report-writing member of uMkhonto we Sizwe—the military wing of the African National Congress. He dedicates Afropessimism to “assata Shakur and Winnie Mandela, for everything.” So it’s not a huge leap to guess his vision for making real change in the systemic anti-Black state of things is aligned with a version of theirs. But Wilderson has never positioned himself as a movement savant. AP is not a political directive toward anything—other than Blackfolk not getting fooled again by the promises of solidarity from junior partners whose reality-construct is as dependent on the reproduction of Black suffering—upon not being the nigger—as the titular Humans (white boys by any other name).

While Wilderson’s hard line on the place of Slaves, Humans, and junior partners might lead you to believe Afropessimism is a full-throttle tract, the book is much more of a classic bildungsroman. Wilderson has led a dramatic life—and he is also an adroitly and acerbically self-dramatizing furthermucker, and an exquisite writer of modern, novelistic prose.

Among our key critical-race-theory guiding lights, he is hands down the one you read for pleasure, pathos, cringingly vulnerable interpersonal confessions—and sometimes even wrathful, biting comedy. The brother of Afropessimism, Wilderson reclaims his mom querying him as to what purpose something like that could have for his students, and whether it might help them become “good citizens.”

It’s hard to imagine, for example, another Black male writer who’s devoted himself so unsparingly to excavating scenes from his parents’ marriage—Spike Lee’s Crooklyn is the only work that resonates on similar frequencies—or detailing his multiple, tear-jerking inadequacies in nearly every romantic relationship of his teen and adult life (though not without much picaroesque laughter as well).
Beyond the State

David Graeber and David Wengrow’s anarchist history of humanity

BY DANIEL IMMERWAHR

Protest speaks a language of forceful insistence. “Defund the police,” “Build the wall”—the unyielding demands go back to Moses’ “Let my people go.” So it was curious when the July 2011 issue of the Vancouver-based magazine *Adbusters* ran a cryptic call to arms: a ballerina posing atop the famous *Charging Bull* statue on Wall Street, with the question “What is our one demand?” printed above her in red. The question wasn’t answered; readers were only told, “#OccupyWallStreet. September 17th. Bring tent.”

In retrospect, it’s astonishing that such a vague entreaty worked, especially since *Adbusters* declined to organize the action. After issuing the call, the magazine...
had “almost nothing to do with it,” its cofounder admitted. Instead, an unaffiliated group called New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, composed largely of socialists, announced a planning meeting the next month at Bowling Green in Manhattan’s financial district. The meeting was tacked on to a protest the group had organized against Republican attempts to enforce the federal debt ceiling and gut social services.

“They were going to make speeches, and then we were going to march under waving banners,” said the anarchist David Graeber, who attended the meeting. “Who fucking cares?” Graeber and some like-minded thinkers defected to the other side of the park, sat in a circle, and discussed less hierarchical possibilities. “We quickly determined we had no idea what we were actually going to do,” he recalled. And yet it was this freewheeling collection of anarchists, Zapatistas, and squatters that formed the organizational seed of Occupy Wall Street, an explosive movement that held Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan for two months, made headlines, and set off more than 200 occupations globally.

What was the occupiers’ one demand? They never said. And as they practiced a leaderless form of democracy, there was no one to say. The movement did have a slogan, “We Are the 99 Percent,” informed by recent economics research exposing the gap between the top 1 percent and everyone else. Yet the occupiers didn’t seem particularly inspired by the technical solutions that economists proposed. When Joseph Stiglitz, the World Bank’s former chief economist and a critic of unregulated capitalism, came to Zuccotti Park to complain about how financial markets had “misallocated capital,” he looked adorably out of place in his collared dress shirt and khakis, surrounded by activists in kaffiyehs, baseball caps, and hoodies.

Journalists trying to understand this inchoate insurgency turned for answers to Graeber, a seasoned veteran of the global justice movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s and a central figure in Zuccotti Park. It helped that he was a witty commentator with a knack for summing things up crisply. He’d been the one to suggest the language of “the 99 percent,” which he’d adapted from an article by Stiglitz. Graeber was also, as some of his fellow occupiers were surprised to learn, a major anthropological theorist. Starting as an expert on highland Madagascar, Graeber had become a free-range thinker specializing in questions of hierarchy and value but interested in virtually everything. He’d recently written a 600-page ethnography of the protests against neoliberal globalization—protests he’d joined himself.

Graeber’s academic career had faltered when he was denied tenure at Yale and was effectively locked out of the US academy (he suspected that his politics were the problem). But he’d found a new position in London, and his fifth book, the hefty Debt: The First 5,000 Years, had come out to significant buzz just months before Occupy Wall Street began. Its sweeping attack on the economic assumptions behind austerity politics seemed to fit the moment perfectly.

And it truly was a moment. Occupy Wall Street, Spain’s Indignados movement, and the Arab Spring all erupted in 2011, sending shock waves around the planet. Occupations took place from Oslo to Tel Aviv. It seemed briefly as if the foundations of our corporate-led order might crack—and, in a way, they did. In the United States, the language of “the 99 percent” is now commonplace, and Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez were all arguably propelled to their high perches within Democratic politics by the protests of 2011.

Yet these are socialist-style successes. What of the protest’s anarchist origins and principles—its governance by general assembly, working groups, and “spokes councils”? Occupy was more than a plea for financial regulation; it was also a stunning display of how much hell utopians sleeping in tents could raise. For Graeber, those utopians’ nonhierarchical forms of organization, not their indistinct demands, were what really mattered. Most people, he wrote, “have been taught since a very young age to have extremely limited political horizons, an extremely narrow sense of human possibility.” Their idea of democracy is limited to voters electing rulers, and they struggle to imagine free people collectively managing their own affairs. Zuccotti Park’s leaderless decision-making showed what that might look like.

Another way to show that, Graeber believed, was for anthropologists to document societies that have gotten by without structures of domination. And so, for more than a decade, he worked with the archaeologist David Wengrow on another book, focused on early non-state societies. What began as “a diversion” for the authors became an epic, the 700-page first installment of a tetralogy that would “easily outsell The Lord of the Rings,” Graeber playfully predicted. Wider in scope than even Debt: The First 5,000 Years, the projected series was to be a grand retelling of the history of our species.

But it was a story that Graeber would never fully tell. On August 6, 2020, at 9:18 pm, he declared the first volume finished. Less than a month later, on September 2, he died suddenly of necrotic pancreatitis in Venice. Wengrow carried the book to publication, just in time for Occupy Wall Street’s 10th anniversary. The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity is a work of dizzying ambition, one that seeks to rescue stateless societies from the condescension with which they’re usually treated. Yet it succeeds better in uprooting conventional wisdom than in laying down a narrative of its own. The result is a book that is both thrilling and exasperating, showcasing the promise and the perils of the anarchist approach to history.

History, as a field, is often inhospitable to anarchists; its usual fare—kings, battles, and Nazis—doesn’t offer them much to work with. But push further back, into the eras we know about from archaeological digs, and things perk up. Many early societies, Graeber and Wengrow note, lacked states as we would recognize them.

Why didn’t early humans construct durable hierarchies? The conventional and oft-repeated wisdom is that they simply lacked the capacity. Life then was a primordial soup of politics, a sea of anarchy. “Civilization” evolved only in time, the first halting steps taken by the handful of societies that managed to spawn cities, mint coins, and erect tem-

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The Dawn of Everything challenges the notion that the state is inevitable.

The Dawn of Everything asks why did the parade end? How did a crazy quilt of social possibility become the wall-to-wall carpeting of stratified states? The usual answer is that states are evolutionarily dominant, that there’s something natural or at least inevitable about them. Give people enough time, goes the theory, and they’ll form durable hierarchies, because states are the big-boy pants of politics. The Dawn of Everything rejects that view and instead offers hundreds of pages of people thoughtfully avoiding states, subverting them, or replacing them with alternatives.

Still, the ubiquity of hierarchical states today is the challenge that any anarchist history must confront. It resembles the challenge that Karl Marx’s theory once faced: If capitalism is supposed to collapse under the weight of its contradictions, then why isn’t the whole world communist by now? There was a generation or two of Marxist writers who, tasked with answering that question, hacked through the thickets of modern history. “Ah, Poland,” they would exclaim. “The problem there was Dmowski’s nationalistic movement, an ultimately bourgeois formation that misdirected working-class political energies.” In a way, the inaccuracy of Marx’s central prediction proved extraordinarily generative. It forced Marxists to theorize incessantly; they needed a take on everything.

The Dawn of Everything has a similar feel. Confronting the statist theory that durable hierarchies are inevitable, Graeber and Wengrow cede no ground and fight at every corner. They care—a lot—about whether the ancient town of Çatalhöyük sourced its crops from dry land or riverbeds. (“The distinction is important for a variety of reasons, not just ecological but also historical, even political.”) They care, too, whether the palace at Taosi in 2000 BCE was razed in an imperial reshuffling or a revolt. Does the difficulty we have reading graven images from the Chavín de Huántar site in Peru prove that it wasn’t an “actual empire”? Graeber and Wengrow have views.

This relentless revisionism can be exhilarating, but it’s also exhausting. Consider the pre-Aztecs of Teotihuacan in modern-day Mexico. It is an immense site with pyramids, but its pictorial art is short on recognizable rulers. Does that mean it “had found a way to govern itself without overlords,” as Graeber and Wengrow posit? Perhaps, but there are images of Teotihuacano lords at the Mayan site of Tikal. Cue a four-page section in which Graeber and Wengrow argue that the lords depicted weren’t true royals but “unscrupulous foreigners” who’d arrived in Tikal claiming ranks they’d never attained—a sort of ancient Mesoamerican stolen valor.

The readers of Graeber’s previous work will recognize this provocative style; he was a wildly creative thinker who excelled at subverting received wisdom. But he was better known for being interesting than right, and he would gleefully make pronouncements that either couldn’t be confirmed (the Iraq War was retribution for Saddam Hussein’s insistence that Iraqi oil exports be paid for in euros) or were never meant to be (“White-collar workers don’t actually do anything”).

In The Dawn of Everything, this interpretative brashness feeds off our lack of firm knowledge about the distant past. When only potsherds remain, conjecture can run wild. Graeber and Wengrow dutifully acknowledge the need for caution, but this doesn’t stop them from dismissing rival theories with assurance. It’s hard not to wonder whether this book, which zips merrily across time and space and hypothesizes confidently in the face of scant or confusing evidence, can be trusted.

Certainly, the part closest to my area
of expertise raises questions. In arguing that people hate hierarchies, Graeber and Wengrow twice assert that settlers in the colonial Americas who’d been “captured or adopted” by Indigenous societies “almost invariably” chose to stay with them. By contrast, Indigenous people taken into European societies “almost invariably did just the opposite: either escaping at the earliest opportunity, or—having tried their best to adjust, and ultimately failed—returning to indigenous society to live out their last days.”

Big if true, as they say, but the claim is ballistically false, and the sole scholarly authority that Graeber and Wengrow cite—a 1977 dissertation—actually argues the opposite. “Persons of all races and cultural backgrounds reacted to captivity in much the same way” is its thesis; generally, young children assimilated into their new culture and older captives didn’t. Many captured settlers returned, including the frontiersman Daniel Boone, the Puritan minister John Williams, and the author Mary Rowlandson. And there’s a long history of Native people attending settler schools, befriending or marrying whites, and adopting European religious practices. Such choices were surely shaped by colonialism, but to deny they were ever made is absurd.

Perhaps this misstep doesn’t matter. Graeber and Wengrow can indulge in outsize claims and pet theories because they don’t need to always be right. The Dawn of Everything aims to shoot holes in the myth of the inevitable state, to deflate the notion that advanced societies can’t function without leaders, police, or bureaucrats. The 700-page book is a hail of bullets; if only some hit the target, that’s enough.

Skeptics believe that overarching hierarchies are both natural and desirable. Graeber and Wengrow energetically attack that position, but the big question still looms: If states aren’t inevitable, why are they everywhere? This question becomes even more of a stumper if, like the authors, you attribute a great deal of agency to non-state peoples. The more thoughtful and capable you take them to be, the harder it becomes to explain how they all came to live in the sorts of societies they ostensibly wouldn’t have chosen.

Two popular history-of-everything writers, Jared Diamond and Yuval Noah Harari, have an answer. The sequence of farming, private property, war, and states was a trap, they write. Humans entered it without realizing they wouldn’t be able to leave, and for most of history, all they found was despotism and disease. The agricultural revolution was thus “the worst mistake in the history of the human race,” as Diamond asserts, or “history’s biggest fraud,” as Harari does.

Graeber and Wengrow recoil at this explanation. Were our ancestors truly doltsish enough to tumble, one after another, into the same trap? More important, they’re wary of Diamond’s and Harari’s fatalism, of the suggestion that State Street runs only one way. In Graeber and Wengrow’s rendition, agriculture was, like everything else, a considered and revocable choice. The Dawn of Everything thus tells of people “flirting and tinkering with the possibilities of farming”—taking it up, putting it down—without thereby “enslaving themselves.”

Yet somewhere, something did go “terribly wrong,” Graeber and Wengrow admit. People went from creatively experimenting with kings and farms to getting “stuck” with them. That metaphor—being stuck in states rather than evolving to them—is useful, in that it suggests people might get unstuck. It captures Graeber and Wengrow’s sense that there is no natural progression from leaderless bands to sophisticated hierarchies.

So, again, how did states take over? What’s exasperating about The Dawn of Everything is that it never really answers the question; at most, it offers quick hints and hypotheses. The loss of physical mobility seems important—people’s inability to leave societies they dislike. So does the tendency of bureaucracies to become impersonal and uncarng. Still, blaming durable hierarchies, as Graeber and Wengrow do, on “a confluence of violence and maths” does not settle the issue.

Perhaps the two were leaving this for a later volume, but it’s not clear that they want to give an answer. To do so would be to offer a grand historical narrative, to explain—as Diamond and Harari do—how humanity moved permanently from one thing to another. Yet Graeber and Wengrow seem almost allergic to the idea that there’s any natural sequence in social arrangements. There’s “simply no reason,” they write, to believe that societies require more leadership or bureaucracy as they grow.

The effects of that contention on their narrative are profound. Once you’ve thrown out the notion that there’s some law or pattern governing the development of societies, it becomes hard to tell any overarching story. The Dawn of Everything is thus less a biography of the species than a scrapbook, filled with accounts of different societies doing different things. That is very much on purpose; for Graeber and Wengrow, early history doesn’t march from A to B but instead wanders like a Ouija pointer all over the alphabet.

So are our wandering days over? Not according to Graeber and Wengrow: They believe we can still wriggle free from states. There’s something embarrassing, they acknowledge, in the thought that we could have been living differently this whole time, and thus that “enslavement, genocide, prison camps, even patriarchy or regimes of wage labour never had to happen.” Yet their upbeat conclusion is that “even now, the possibilities for human intervention are far greater than we’re inclined to think.” This is anarchism’s heady promise: Break people out of their stupor, show them the alternatives, and they’ll take the hint. You occupy the park not to push for policies (what was their one demand?) but as proof of concept, to demonstrate what a society free of domination looks like.

Similarly, an anarchist history, at least in Graeber and Wengrow’s hands, isn’t the story of change over time but a high-spirited tour of political diversity. It’s a chance to lay out the options, with little sense that population growth or new technologies have pushed any of them permanently off the table. Humans lived without states before, thus they can do so again. Because, ultimately, the point isn’t what happened, but rather all the possibilities that remain.
What role did white women play in the story of Donald Trump? In the months after his election, pink-pussyhat-clad white women positioned themselves as the paradigmatic victims of a misogynistic president, even as commentators pointed out that 47 percent of them (or, I should say, 47 percent of us) voted for him. By the end of his term, news-making “Karens” showed that white women not only voted for Trump in large numbers but were often active participants in the racist state violence he championed. Pink pussyhats recalled the moment when Trump was caught on tape bragging about his ability to assault women with impunity; now white women were caught on video, bragging about their ability to deploy the police against people of color.

Dana Spiotta’s fifth novel, *Wayward*, is set in the early days of the Trump administration, and it focuses on a suburban liberal named Sam, whose aggrievement and complicity make her an apt representative of the vexed role that white women play in contemporary politics. In the weeks after Trump’s election, Sam feels that “the world had moved against her.” In response, she attends a feminist meeting hosted by a Cornell professor at her “beautifully restored stone farmhouse” in a “wooded and wealthy” enclave. There, a young queer couple challenges the crowd to account for the number of older white women who voted Republican. Sam shares the younger women’s disgust at her own demographic but also resents their ageism. After the meeting, she scours Facebook for feminist groups—like the “Hardcore Hags, Harridans, and Harpies”—that eschew the bourgeois pretensions of the Cornell professor without necessarily achieving a more radical politics.

A couple of months after Trump’s inauguration, Sam is ready to shrug off her own middle-class milieu more permanently: She leaves her husband and buys a fixer-upper in a disinvested neighborhood of Syracuse, N.Y. The move brings her closer, geographically, to activist groups trying to “hold the local police accountable for targeting people of color.” At the same time, Sam’s lackluster support for their cause demonstrates how distant she feels from the realities of racism.

As other reviewers have suggested, *Wayward* is largely a novel about living as a middle-aged woman during the moral and political confusion created by Trump’s election. It follows Sam’s experience of menopause and her growing sense that our culture makes older women invisible. Spiotta also mines the difficulties of parenting by including several chapters written from the perspective of Sam’s teenage daughter, Ally, who is caught up in a sexual relationship with an older man assigned to mentor her at school. Through Sam and her daughter, Spiotta helps us feel the weight that patriarchy places on younger and older women alike. But in ways that Sam may not even perceive, her story is also about the police violence, gentrification, and neoliberal policies that continue to threaten marginalized and working-class communities of color—whether a Democrat or a Republican is in office. A chance encounter late in the novel brings Sam face to face with this reality and challenges her to reckon with her own privilege, although it may be too little, too late.

Spiotta’s past fiction has focused on wayward radicals and underappreciated geniuses. In *Eat the Document*, a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award, we follow the tale of Mary Whittaker, an anti–Vietnam War radical who is wanted by the FBI.
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and hiding out in suburban Washington. In Spiotta’s 2011 Stone Arabia, we meet Nik Worth, an indie musician so indie that he is his own band, critic, and fan club. He records dozens of albums under various names, while also penning pseudonymous reviews of his own work. These characters exude an eccentric or dangerous cool that Wayward’s Sam can only aspire to: “Always she liked to imagine herself as subtly different from everyone else, enjoying the tension and mystique of being ordinary on the surface but with a radical, original interior life,” Spiotta writes. Yet while Eat the Document’s Mary uses an ordinary surface to cloak a genuinely radical past, Sam tries—and largely fails—to cast off her suburban comforts and to realize a more “radical, original” vision of herself.

While charting Sam’s political journey, Spiotta satirizes some of the more bizarre aspects of contemporary American life: Facebook groups celebrating their nostalgia for traditional gender relations; a high school club for aspiring tech “disrupters”; a butter sculpture at the state fair featuring “two cops with holstered guns helping a kid milk a cow.” Sam often criticizes such displays of “willful, unapologetic American stupidity and cruelty,” but at other times, Spiotta catches her embodying these violent undercurrents. One chapter, for example, begins with Sam chastising a manplainer at the gym and ends with her angrily keying a car that has been parked a little too close to the dividing line.

The novel’s plot follows a similar trajectory. Sam’s purchase of an old house is initially presented as a feminist gesture—an effort to escape suburban conformity and her patronizing (but basically inoffensive) husband. Yet the move also makes her an early gentrifier of a disinvested neighborhood, a problem that she seems to recognize without taking it seriously.

After her move, Sam wanders into a church that is beloved by the community but will soon shut its doors due to the cost of overhead. There, she finds a meeting of “Syracuse Streets, an activist group… plan[ning] a response to the arrest of an unarmed man who’d ended up mysteriously bruised and beaten.” Although Sam reflects that “she should be supportive if she wanted to live in this neighborhood,” she soon finds herself distracted by the church’s stained glass windows—she can’t help but be taken in by the beauty of this doomed building. Spiotta further satirizes Sam’s passion for restoration by aligning her with Joe, the man sexually exploiting her daughter. Joe, we learn, is a libertarian real estate developer who uses government grants intended for historic preservation to turn vacant buildings like this church into swanky apartments.

Spiotta also satirizes the reflexive fear that Sam feels in her new neighborhood, which makes her a threat to her neighbors. As Morgan Jenkins points out in Rolling Stone, “White women have weaponized their fear and discomfort…for centuries.” This “white feminine fear,” she argues, “does not produce innocuous behavior, but a kind of harassment that often leads to racial trauma.” Spiotta turns this fear into a recurring theme: It defines Sam’s character throughout the novel, and while it is never explicitly racialized, it is often oriented around class. Sam speculates that “some of the neighborhood denizens had seen her move in and probably figured her for an easy target.” She then asks herself: “[W]hy was she afraid of poor people?”

Late in the book, Spiotta shows how this white feminine fear is weaponized through police violence. At the end of the summer of 2017, Sam becomes the only direct witness to the police murder of a Black teenager named Adi Mapunda. Up late with insomnia, she wanders the street and sees Mapunda shot by a female police officer, who then falsely claims to a male officer that she was the one in danger:

The female cop stood up and shook her head at the male cop. Sam could see her face now, red, breathing heavily.

“Why did you fire?” he said, his voice loud and shaken.

She looked back down. “He was charging us; he had a weapon.”

At first, the shooting allows Sam to distance herself from the cop’s racism and to redeem her own presence in the neighborhood. Sam had been “slumming-it ‘poor,’” Spiotta writes. “But now she understood her obligation. The obligation of history, of her wealth, of her position.” Sam soon realizes, however, that this is not her moment to correct all the wrongs of history. The Citizen Review Board seems unlikely to act on her report, and when she reaches out to Syracuse Streets, offering to speak at a rally, no one responds, perhaps because—as Spiotta pointedly tells us—her attendance at their meetings has been spotty. As the friend Sam calls for help after witnessing the murder tells her, “Your problem… is that you think you can redeem yourself from all your shit, all this shit. And by saving yourself, you’re saving the world. Or maybe it’s the other way around.”

Yet while Sam can bring no punishment for the police and no comfort to Adi Mapunda’s family, the event shifts her relationship to her own fear. After the shooting, Sam reflects on her daughter’s relative security: “Ally was protected… What a luxury, what an advantage…. Or, maybe… it was not a luxury at all, but the basic thing every person should have. Which was not the case, not now, not in this moment.” Throughout the novel, fear characterizes not only Sam’s view of her neighbors but also her relationships with her own family. Ally bristles at Sam’s overprotective parenting, and Sam’s mother, Lily, hides her cancer diagnosis to prevent Sam’s frantic WebMDing. But by the novel’s end, Sam’s anxiety is tempered if not transcended. When she sees Ally with her older boyfriend, for example, she decides it is up to her daughter to “weather this asshole” on her own.

By connecting Sam’s overprotective parenting to the murder she witnesses, Spiotta points to the ways that white women’s imagined or professed fears are used to justify police violence. This subject is worthwhile to explore on its own, but it is also unsettling that Sam’s epiphany about Ally’s relative security is achieved through the death of another teenager. What could Sam’s re-
alization possibly mean for Adi Mapunda and his family?

Sam recognizes that there is something “monstrous” about the way that Mapunda’s death enables her transformation. As she reflects on whether she should call her mother, Spiotta describes her thinking: “Contacting her would give Sam something (what, exactly? a purpose, a place, for what she had seen), but at what cost to this woman? Just back the fuck up. Monstrous, to think she had a purpose here. Was the boy who’d been killed a part of her purpose? Her penance?” Yet if Spiotta easily diagnoses and interrogates these disturbing tendencies in her protagonist, readers cannot evade another question haunting the novel: Is there also something monstrous about Spiotta’s decision to make this murder a turning point in her book?

Scholars, activists, and other commentators have repeatedly pointed out that images of Black people being murdered by the police are traumatizing for many Black viewers—especially when, as Kia Gregory writes in *The New Republic*, “these videos showing violent black death are treated by the media as death porn or perverse entertainment.” Of course, Spiotta’s novel provides a brief description of the event, not a graphic video. Yet it is still unclear why Sam needs to witness Black death directly in order to reckon with what was, by 2017, all around her: Any leftist or liberal closely following the news at the time would have already been made aware—many times over—of the racist violence perpetrated by police.

It is also unclear what the reader is meant to take away from this scene of violence. When Spiotta writes that the safety Ally enjoys is something “every person should have,” she says something true about racism and white privilege but does not lead us to any new understanding. Other parts of the book succeed in revealing the quotidian forms that white women’s complicity takes. It is revealing how Sam’s anger moves between righteous fury at the patriarchy and entitled complaint; it is revealing that her passion for restoring old buildings is shared by a real estate developer who is preying on her daughter. But the violence on display in the book does not in itself tell us any-

thing that Americans of color, particularly Black Americans, don’t already know. What it fails to tell us is also glaring: Mapunda’s murder reveals very little about his own life or about the systems that led to his death. One can easily imagine a less gratuitous way that Spiotta could arrange for Sam to encounter the violent realities of racism in the United States. But by displacing Sam’s everyday complicity onto the violence of the officer who kills Mapunda, Spiotta lets her character and her readers off the hook; they are not forced to confront the larger system of violence in which that act had taken place.

Describing the fabled “Great American Novel,” in a 2008 book review, Tim Adams observes that “there comes a time in the mid-life of every male American writer when he feels compelled to make his big statement about the state of the union.” Kasia Boddy has described Spiotta as part of a generation of novelists who seek to re-imagine the “GAN” for female American writers, too. If *Wayward* is Spiotta’s attempt to make her “big statement about the state of the union,” one can understand why she chose a white woman—abused by the patriarchy but also adorned with her own privilege—to represent the contradictions of the current moment.

By exploring Sam’s specific experience as a middle-aged liberal gentrifier, Spiotta does succeed in illuminating one corner of American life—no small feat for any novel. Yet in trying to encompass the larger political moment, she proves less deft—perhaps demonstrating the dangers of the GAN’s sweeping ambitions. In addressing racism, *Wayward* emphasizes the dehumanizing violence that ends Adi Mapunda’s life over a real engagement with his humanity or a full reckoning with Sam’s complicity. If fiction is to successfully confront racism and violence in the United States, it must go beyond a simple restaging of them. Novels like Spiotta’s should help us to see through and behind that violence—to the less spectacular, more quotidian harms that underpin it and, most importantly, to the lives and experiences it threatens to erase.

**D**
The Other Cold War
Russia’s battle against the climate
BY JENNIFER WILSON

The Cold War was also a war on the cold. The United States and the Soviet Union considered the ability to successfully mine the resource-rich lands of their respective Arctic regions nearly as important as the ability to send a man (or a dog) into space. One would assume that the Russians had a natural advantage there, having decisively wielded the cold against prior foes. When the unusually early Russian winter of 1941 forced German soldiers to retreat, it was said that Hitler had not learned Napoleon’s “lesson.” In the winter of 1812, tens of thousands of French soldiers died of hypothermia or starvation as the Grande Armée withdrew from Moscow. In the midst of the Crimean War, Nicholas I would say that Russia could always depend on “Generals January and February.” But we all have our limits.

As the leaders of the Russian Empire looked to expand into Siberia, they would encounter manifestations of the cold that terrorized and confounded them. Neither force of will nor national character could master a terrain so stubbornly frozen that it seemed permanently so.

During the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in the 1880s, builders would lay down a track only to feel a rumble, then watch as a geyser of water gushed from the earth and immediately froze, encasing the fruits of their labor in a block of ice. It turned out that the impenetrable slices of frozen soil beneath them left thawing groundwater trickling in from elsewhere no outlet but up. That was just one of the seemingly endless problems this unique geological formation—some form of dirt that did not appear to melt even in the summer—would pose for an empire eager to break all kinds of ground.

Over the years this frozen mass underneath the Siberian topsoil took on a name: permafrost. Its technical definition is soil that maintains a temperature of 32 degrees Fahrenheit for at least two years (the significance of two years being that it does not thaw even after the change of seasons). This tricky soil is not confined to Siberia. It can also be found in the polar regions of North America and in Greenland and Antarctica. But nowhere does it occupy as much territory, or as much space in the political imagination, as it does in Russia. “By geographical accident,” the historian Pey-Yi Chu writes, “a continental empire
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in Northern Asia encompassed ten million square kilometers of territory underlain by perennially frozen earth.”

In *The Life of Permafrost*, Chu describes the process by which permafrost became, during the push for industrialization, a kind of internal enemy for the Soviets, an inanimate traitor that could undo the promise of a bright socialist future with greater force and efficiency than any spy or satellite. Soviet fiction, film, and even children’s books presented the icy regions of the north and the taiga, where permafrost abounds, as adversaries to be conquered. Chu tracks down a newspaper article circa 1932 that promised “Bolshevik might and will [volia], in combination with the power of technical thought, will vanquish the taiga.” Indeed, one of the leading Soviet experts on the subject suggested it might be possible to burn permafrost, estimating that the problem of frozen earth could be solved with the aid of 1.5 trillion tons of coal.

What concerns scientists today about permafrost is that it is filled with the remains of plants and animals that have been frozen for millennia. Should the permafrost thaw, carbon will be released through the decomposition process in the form of carbon dioxide and methane, raising—potentially quite quickly and dramatically—the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere that caused the thaw to begin with.

This prospect, Chu observes, “has led commentators to call permafrost a ‘wild card’ and, still more vividly, a ‘time bomb.’” Chu certainly recognizes the dangers in a thawed permafrost and acknowledges the temptation to frame the crisis this way: “To the extent that it encourages society to lower emissions of greenhouse gases and pursue alternative sources of energy, the idea of a permafrost as time bomb has usefulness.” But as a historian, she cannot help but hear in these terrifying sound bites echoes of Cold War rhetoric and the language of conquest. As permafrost beoms fixed in the public consciousness as the surface. This posed problems for the Russians in Siberia looking for animal pelts. Without easy access to water (for drinking and agriculture), even small settlements were unsustainable.

Foreign explorers in the region had no better luck. In 1676, the English captain John Wood was shipwrecked in Novaya Zemlya, an archipelago in the Russian Arctic by the Barents Sea. When he and his crew attempted to dig an underground cave for shelter from the cold, they hit a hard layer of permafrost two feet deep that prevented them from going further. He would describe Novaya Zemlya with its unwieldy soil as the “most miserable Country that lyeth on the Foundation of the Earth.”

This mythic image of Siberia’s unmanageable and unlivable terrain persisted into the 18th and 19th centuries, even though Indigenous peoples, like the ones in the Sakha Republic in northeastern Siberia, had been living in the region for over 200 years. The Sakha had learned to use the craters formed by disturbances in permafrost to store melted ice.

Left out of Western Europe’s land grabs in Africa and the New World, the Russians felt they could not afford to be deterred. Catherine the Great once proclaimed that Siberia “could be our India, Mexico, or Peru.” The need to capitalize on its immense land mass and the resources within it was paramount. The construction of roads for trade routes and of military outposts to manage the empire’s commercial interests was a priority that permafrost threatened to undermine.

In the late 19th century, it was determined that a railroad must be built to connect the various new towns and trading centers. “Until there is a railroad across all of Siberia,” one official wrote, “it will be estranged from the general system and the political life of the state.” In 1882, Tsar Alexander III approved the construction of a “Great Siberian Machine,” but the navigation of permafrost still proved challenging, at times seemingly impossible. Fifty years later, well into the Soviet era, trains that stopped for too long occasionally froze onto the tracks.

Because of the extraordinary difficulties engineers and settlers experienced in furthering the Russian state’s imperial and industrial aspirations, “the tsarist and communist governments sponsored systematic study of frozen earth,” Chu writes. Indeed, the United States would later find itself furiously racing to catch up, bringing in Russian-speaking scientists and researchers to translate a century’s worth of tsarist and Soviet materials on permafrost. In the USSR, the question of who would lead the country’s research on frozen earth became a source of some contention, with two figures emerging in a kind of Soviet replay of Westinghouse versus Edison, albeit a war not of currents but of soil.

During the Soviet era, permafrost ceased to be an annoyance and rose to the rank of enemy of the state. One person understood this shift thoroughly. Born in 1873, Mikhail Sumgin was a man who ran in the direction of trouble, which suited him well to the task of eventually leading the country’s research on frozen earth became a source of some contention, with two figures emerging in a kind of Soviet replay of Westinghouse versus Edison, albeit a war not of currents but of soil.

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Conceive

Take, get, catch—
catch the lining of
soft tissue, catch it
and grow. Gives us:

think it up, imagine.
Gives us: you get

what you get. Take
it again, receive—

seize, grab hold,
welcome, draw into
the fold, the hold.
Offer it up, recover

what was stolen. Re-
ceiver is what you
are now, recipient.
Here it comes again:

what if she wonders
why you didn’t come?

When her hair caught
the brush you stood

over her, untangled it
strand by strand, held

one hand at the root
so it wouldn’t hurt.

B.K. FISCHER

monitored by tsarist authorities. For his repeated involvement, Sumgin was exiled, not once but twice, to Siberia, where he became involved in peasant organizing.

Though he lacked the necessary formal training, Chu writes, “Sumgin’s experiences primed him to study frozen earth from a specifically practical viewpoint.” His work with the peasants and local government “nurtured a commitment to putting knowledge to work for social good.” He was a radical first, a scientist second, one might say; and indeed, he reframed the issue of frozen earth in terms of the Marxist dialectic, defining permafrost as the product of a “struggle” between frozen earth and water.

Another scientist, however, a geologist named Sergei Parkhomenko, disputed some of Sumgin’s claims. He found Sumgin’s conception of permafrost as an independent substance separate from its environment unscientific and unhelpful. He insisted that to understand it one had to situate it within a system that would factor in “radiation from the sun,” the “minerals in the earth,” and “pressure and humidity in the atmosphere.” He also argued that the term “permafrost”—in Russian, vechnaia merzlota (eternally frozen soil)—was a misnomer; two years was not, after all, eternity. Sumgin and his defenders pushed back on this, using communist rhetoric about accessibility. “Bolshevik culture promoted mass enlightenment of the public about science,” writes Chu, and thus the simplified moniker “could be seen as a ‘people’s word.’”

Sumgin’s view won out, not least because his insistence that permafrost be seen as a discrete substance made it easier to render frozen earth as a clear enemy in the public imagination. Soviet scientists, Chu explains, “drew upon the theme of the struggle with nature that featured prominently in socialist realism, the state-sponsored artistic movement.” Across an array of art forms, from movies to newsreels to adventure novels, nature was presented as “an opponent to be fought and overcome,” Chu notes.

Lenin had loved the tales of Jack London and the way they showed human beings surviving and mastering the elements, particularly snow and ice. His wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, wrote about one London story, “Love of Life,” that particularly enraptured him. It is about a man stranded in an icy wilderness who kills an attacking wolf with his bare hands. “Half-clad, half-demented,
he reaches his goal,” Krupskaya quipped, adding, “The tale greatly pleased Ilyich.”

Under Stalin’s Five-Year Plan, the demands of industrialization meant that Soviet citizens, including children, were taught to view nature as an obstacle to building socialism, an obstacle that would, however, ultimately succumb to Soviet ingenuity and strength of character. In a children’s book, *Commotion: A Winter Tale*, the season was presented not as a wonderland ripe for sleigh-riding but rather as a scourge that closes schools and causes streetlights to go out. The enlightenment of the new Soviet subject was halted, both literally and figuratively, until the power grid was triumphantly restored by the local government.

So how did the Soviets conquer permafrost? They didn’t, thankfully. Rather, they learned—as the Sakha had—to work with it, not against it. Buildings produced heat, which melted the soil, causing heave, so Soviet engineers erected structures that maintained space between the earth and the ground floor so that any warmth generated would not affect the permafrost. To deal with the water bursts, they employed the permafrost: They froze earth on purpose, creating “frozen earth belts” to route potential overflows away from construction sites and other critical infrastructure. In essence, the Soviets decided to preserve permafrost instead of destroying it—to harness its might and intransigence.

“Although Soviet propaganda described this learning process in dualistic terms as a struggle between humans and nature,” Chu observes, “from an outsider’s perspective it could also be seen as a process of learning to adapt.”

In the Sakha Republic lies a nature reserve run by a father-son team of scientists, Sergey and Nikita Zimov, known as Pleistocene Park. The Zimovs are trying to re-create the ecosystem of the last glacial period, known as the Pleistocene, by repopulating their reserve with large herbivores (Yakutian horses, kalmykian cows, reindeer). Their theory is that the restoration of this habitat will slow the thawing of permafrost. The animals, they say, will break apart snow with their heavy hooves, thereby exposing the ground below to the cold winter air.

Would the Zimovs’ experiment, a kind of environmentalist Jurassic Park, count as an example of what Chu has in mind, an approach to permafrost that moves away from the “time bomb” narrative toward something less reactive and more adaptive? It certainly feels more gentle, grounded less in fear than in a kind of intimate and creative relationship with the natural world. But for a more effective, and certainly tested, way of reprogramming our relationship to the chaotic and frightening effects of climate change, we might look to Australia. As the country is increasingly ravaged by wildfires, some politicians are beginning to think differently about fire itself, that it might be possible to fight it with... well, fire. Drawing on an Indigenous method of containment, called cool-burning, that predates the European settlement of the continent, scientists there are now recommending small, controlled burns to encourage biodiversity and manage the landscape to prevent large-scale bushfires.

The benefits of such an approach would seem to be what Chu wants us to learn from the Soviet story of permafrost, that nature might be something to fight for rather than fight against, to accommodate rather than dominate. Who better to teach us this, after all, than the Russians, for whom there is no bad weather, only the wrong clothes for it.
Texas Senate Bill 8 bans abortions after six weeks, when most people don’t yet know they are pregnant. The law empowers private citizens to sue anyone believed to be providing or “aiding and abetting” a procedure. Snitches, even ones living outside of Texas, can receive a $10,000 reward. Elisa Wells, a cofounder and codirector of Plan C, an informational resource for self-managed abortions, called SB 8 “abhorrent.” But she stressed that, despite the new and escalating restrictions, a safe and convenient option exists: the self-managed abortion. Patients can consult with a practitioner through online video or on the phone, receive pills through the mail, and manage their abortion in private. Plan C is working to demystify and destigmatize this medical tool. I spoke to Wells about the Texas law, misconceptions about self-managed abortions, and what the future of reproductive rights in America looks like. —Gloria Oladipo

GO: What is the current state of abortion access?

EW: In more than 20 states, you can go online, get a consultation, and have abortion pills mailed to your home for a convenient and confidential abortion. Unfortunately, that level of access—what we call modern 21st-century abortion care—is not available in many states. In states with restrictions on telemedicine care, there are other ways that people are accessing abortion pills. One of those is through an international human rights organization called Aid Access, which provides a physician-supported telehealth model. Depending on the state, the cost ranges from $105 to $150, and we know that tens of thousands of people in the United States are accessing that service every year. We also know that there are online pharmacies that ship abortion pills to the United States, and the cost of receiving the pills from these pharmacies ranges from $200 to $470. Our research on buying pills through online pharmacies shows that the sites are real and they ship real products.

GO: What are some misconceptions about self-managed abortions?

EW: One of the misconceptions that people have is that self-managed abortion is dangerous. There’s a lot of talk on social media: “Oh, with these abortion bans, if we go back to the situation of [pre–Roe v. Wade], we’re going back to dangerous abortion.” That simply is not true. We have the means, in the form of these pills, to have safe abortions. Also, it’s a huge misconception that the pills need to be tightly regulated. That is a narrative of the anti-choice movement. They use the fact that the FDA has restricted access to these pills as “proof” that they’re dangerous. But they’re not. We have decades of experience and research that show that these pills are absolutely safe and effective. They’re safer than Tylenol, safer than Viagra, and the only reason that they’re restricted is because of political motivations.

GO: What are the legal dangers for someone who obtains abortion pills in a place where that is illegal?

EW: First, no one should be criminalized for their pregnancy outcomes, although in our country people have even been criminalized for having a miscarriage. There are a few states that have laws that specifically target self-managed abortions, although lawyers tell us that those laws would be found unconstitutional if ever challenged. We don’t believe that people are doing anything wrong in obtaining pills and using them to manage their own reproductive health care, but we are not lawyers. We refer people to If/When/How’s Repro Legal Helpline. If/When/How can provide people with specific information about any potential risks in their state and at their gestation in pregnancy. It’s important for individuals to make their own decisions. Everybody’s risk tolerance is different, and it can depend on the color of your skin or your economic status or your immigration status.

GO: How can people who support reproductive rights help Plan C and the work you are doing?

EW: We’re interested in people sharing our messaging on social media. We love donations, and we have an “ambassadors of information” program if people are interested in volunteering to help spread the word. We need people to understand that we all deserve access to these modern, mainstream methods. Plan C believes that it’s time to put the power directly back in the hands of the people who need this basic health care.

“These pills are absolutely safe and effective. They’re safer than Tylenol.”
Roe v. Wade is in grave peril. The relentless war on reproductive rights is religiously motivated, as is the political campaign to take over the federal judiciary with anti-abortion Christian nationalists.

The U.S. Supreme Court majority has signaled its stunning hostility to abortion rights by refusing to block the draconian ban on early abortion in Texas, and by agreeing to review an unconstitutional ban in Mississippi.

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