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Ted Osius

“A brilliantly organized account of a decades-long struggle towards reconciliation.”
—Al Gore

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*Amateurs and the Holocaust*
Daniel Greene and Edward Phillips

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*How Asian American Women Became Federal Judges*
Susan Oki Mollway

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Cohen tells the story of a love that has lasted for over fifty years and recounts her quest to build gay and feminist oases in New York, including the groundbreaking women’s nightclub Sahara.

**The Audacity of a Kiss**
*Love, Art, and Liberation*
Leslie Cohen

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*Amateurism, Athlete Safety, and Academic Integrity*
Andrew Zimbalist

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—Justin Hall

The First Fifteen: How Asian American Women Became Federal Judges
Susan Oki Mollway

The Audacity of a Kiss
Leslie Cohen

Whither College Sports
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Neoburlesque
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tangled history of
capitalism and slavery.

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Ass opposition to Donald Trump began with immigration. His racist rhetoric and barbaric policies around immigrants and asylum-seekers are what first fueled outrage among liberals, as well as among people who were otherwise apolitical. Politicians, pundits, and rank-and-file Democratic voters alike rightfully decried Trump’s migrant policies, with some going as far as to compare the administration to the Nazi regime.

Now, as the Biden administration prepares to carry out the biggest mass expulsion of asylum-seekers in recent history, the liberals who demonstrated in airports to protest Trump’s Muslim ban and circulated Facebook posts about “kids in cages” are nowhere to be found. There was more outrage over Trump’s description of Haiti and other developing nations as “shithole” countries than there is over President Biden’s around-the-clock efforts to deport desperate families, using tactics directly out of the playbook of Stephen Miller, the white nationalist behind Trump’s immigration policies.

Around 14,000 Haitians will soon be expelled from the United States and flown to Haiti, a country the US itself deems unsafe. Haiti recently suffered a deadly earthquake, a tropical storm, and political instability exacerbated by the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse. Despite Biden’s promises to “undo the moral and national shame of the previous administration,” his approach to immigration has been equally aggressive.

Our Democratic-controlled Congress, too, has been unwilling to prioritize the lives of migrants. After years of failed attempts to advance even meager reforms, Democrats thought they could get protections for some immigrants through the upcoming budget reconciliation bill. But the Senate parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough, rejected their plan, and the party can’t stomach the idea of ignoring her ruling, so the bill may not happen at all.

Asked about images appearing to show horse-mounted Border Patrol agents whipping Haitians in the Texas border town of Del Rio, White House press secretary Jen Psaki was concerned only with the optics. If whips were used, “of course they should never be able to do it again,” she said. Instead of offering condemnation, she reiterated the administration’s callous message, telling asylum-seekers, “This is not the time to come.” The next day, Psaki announced an end to the “horrible and horrific” use of horses—as though it were the horses rounding people up for deportation.

The Biden administration is using the same order, known as Title 42, that the Trump administration used to expel migrants at the border without a hearing, denying their right to seek asylum in the US, in violation of domestic and international law.

Miller repeatedly tried to invoke the obscure ordinance to close the border to asylum-seekers and carry out expulsions. He looked for evidence that migrants were carrying disease to make the case that they posed a threat to public health. It wasn’t until the pandemic that the administration successfully implemented Title 42, despite objections from public health authorities.

Psaki similarly defended Biden’s mass expulsion campaign with the same racist trope that migrants bring disease into a new country, but she faced a fraction of the outrage. “We have been implementing Title 42,” she said in a press conference. “That’s not just about people in the United States; that’s also about protecting migrants who would come in—come in mass groups and be in mass groups.”

Psaki denies that the forced expulsions of Haitian migrants are “deportations,” because they “are not coming into the country through legal methods.” Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas was more aggressive: “If you come to the United States illegally, you will be returned,” he said. “Your journey will not succeed, and you will be endangering your life and your family’s lives.” But no matter how forcefully they say otherwise, seeking asylum is legal.

While Biden has reversed certain changes Trump made to the immigration system, his approach is largely a continuation of his Republican predecessor’s brutality. If he doesn’t change course, Biden could soon take his former boss’s title as “deporter in chief.”
No Offense
David Bromwich

Misplaced Regrets

The sniping emanating from Western policy elites shows how little they’ve learned from the decade in Afghanistan.

USH AND CHENEY SOLD THE WAR, OBAMA normalized it, Trump disowned it, and Biden had the courage to end it.

Cecil Rhodes once said he would annex the planets if he could, and the United States, over the past four decades, has nursed an ambition quite as otherworldly. Everyone (we believed) would choose our way of life if only they had the chance. It followed that we should try to get them there through arts and manners and commerce and, if necessary, through wars. The wars would, of course, be fought against the enemies of freedom, even if the enemies were their neighbors and compatriots.

Tony Blair put the case memorably, just three weeks after September 11, 2001: “The kaleidoscope has been shaken, the pieces are in flux, soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us reorder this world around us.” What poetry! To look on the world as a toy! That, for me, was the initial impression of Blair’s words. More peculiar, as one looks back, was the emphasis on dispatch. The reordering would be done soon and speedily, with a brave un-concern for prudential caution.

A few days earlier, Dick Cheney had spoken about the necessity of working “the dark side.” The larger context of the vice president’s September 16 appearance on Meet the Press showed the consonance of his thinking with Blair’s. “Things have changed since last Tuesday,” Cheney said. “The world shifted in some respects.” But he spoke with a dour realism about the likely duration of the conflict: “There’s not going to be an end date that we say, ‘There, it’s all over with.’” George W. Bush, for his part, issued a promise of both lasting resolve and a lucky ending: “We will not waver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail.”

The regrets now emanating from the North Atlantic policy elite suggest how little the fate of that project has changed their thinking. In an August 31 New Yorker piece deploring the US evacuation from Afghanistan, Robin Wright commented with punitive scorn: “America did tire. It did falter. And it did fail. Bold promises, over time, turned into mission abandonment. The hope of personal freedom has evaporated.” But whose hope and whose mission was she speaking for? Ellen Knickmeyer, in an August 16 Associated Press story, made a tally more matter-of-fact than Wright’s. Besides the 2,500 American dead, there were 66,000 killed among Afghan military and police, 51,000 among Taliban and other opposition fighters, 47,000 among Afghan civilians.

No metaphor of “evaporation” is needed to conclude that a large fraction of those 164,000 dead would not have died if the US had never occupied Afghanistan. For a proportionate sense of the numbers, imagine a civil war on American soil—fomented, funded, and protracted over 20 years by a foreign power—which ends up taking one and a half million American lives.

The dwindling Afghan support for the US mission was not a rejection of freedom but a last heave of disgust at the staggering burden of corruption this war spawned and nourished. As for the European criticism of our departure, it has been reported without the slightest irony regarding the relationship between defunct 19th-century empires and their successor. Britain and France showed an understandable embarrassment at having ceded to America so much authority for such a dismal result. Blair weighed in again, with a magnificent ferocity of reproach, and Bernard-Henri Lévy was grandiloquent: “The image of the liberal democracies, epitomized by the greatest among them, is tragically tarnished.” Lévy denounces only our exit. He does not say the liberal image was tarnished by anything the US did while it occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. Regrets in a lower key were uttered by Leon Panetta: “We can leave a battlefield, but we can’t leave the war on terrorism.” But Afghanistan was not only a battlefield but a proving ground for a system of bribery, bounty-hunting, and assassinations, as Cheney acknowledged early on:

A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion…. You need to have on the payroll some very unsavory characters if, in fact, you’re going to be able to learn all that needs to be learned in order to forestall these kinds of activities. It is a mean, nasty, dangerous, dirty business out there, and we have to operate in that arena.

Our interest in the dark side increased the supply of dark operators.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were debt-financed at a cost of $2 trillion. The final bill of health care for veterans of the wars, encompassing disability, burial, and related expenses, will probably come to another $2 trillion, Knickmeyer...
reports. The Senate Finance Committee questioned these costs just once over the past 20 years; the Senate Appropriations Committee queried them five times. Should that level of oversight be taken to exemplify the freedom we were bringing to people 7,000 miles away?

We think more easily of the saved than the drowned: “We saved the women. What will the Taliban do to them now?” American intervention improved the lives of some Afghan women, and many of those who hoped to leave will not be able to. It is harder to say—harder, even, to remember—that we also killed many of the innocent and tortured brothers and husbands; or that the wedding parties we slaughtered in misjudged drone strikes also contained somebody’s children.

Some years ago a friend, a Cold War liberal, surprised me by saying out of nowhere, “Americans are better than other people—don’t you think?” It was clear from the context that this was not a chauvinist remark. The sense was rather that Americans, from a combination of national temperament and luck, were more generous than other people; and if on occasion we did real harm, it came from a reckless exuberance of goodwill. I didn’t agree at the time, and don’t agree now, but I believe this is the way a good many Americans think about us. We are generous judges in our own cause.

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**Kirkpatrick Sale**

“If it’s radical and leading edge, Sale probably wrote about it sooner and better than anyone else.”—*Utne Reader*

“Kirkpatrick Sale is one of those writers whose pen will always set the imagination afloat regardless of his topic.”—*Fourth World Review*

“There is one overriding fact about government that condemns it to being forever wrong: it is a contrivance abhorrent to nature, including human nature, and cannot be formed in any such way to prevent it being so.... For the longest time that we have been humans, say for about a million-and-a-half years, we have lived without anything that could be remotely considered government.”

“If humans lived for the first two million years without a state, and most of them for the next 8,000 years without one, and the experiments with the nation-state as we know it are only a few hundred years old, there is clearly nothing eternal about it. It may have been a serviceable device for one small period of human history, but as we move out of that period it may begin to lose its value and its meaning in the daily life of the planet.”

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**NO MORE MUSHROOMS**

**THOUGHTS ABOUT LIFE WITHOUT GOVERNMENT**

*PHOTO BY SHIRLEY BRANCHINI*

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- The Battle for Thacker Pass

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**Surprise for Arizona Senators**

Though they hired the firm Cyber Ninjas Just to show that Trump votes did surmount Those of Biden, it found the reverse. But who knew that a ninja can count?
Poverty Propaganda

“Feel-good” stories of individual pluck only underscore how cruel our society is.

A STAPLE OF THE FEEL-GOOD NEWS CYCLE—ALONG with pieces about skateboarding dogs and friendships spawned by misdialed texts—is the story of human suffering overcome through community, charity, and old-fashioned pluck. There is the 14-year-old who spent his summer vacation selling homemade popsicles to help his mother pay for food, rent, and a motorized wheelchair. In Utah, a couple crowdfunded $20,000 for their Papa John’s delivery guy, an 89-year-old retiree who returned to working 30 hours a week delivering pizzas because his monthly Social Security checks don’t cut it.

Before shutting his office and retiring, an Arkansas oncologist wrote off the medical debts of some 200 cancer patients, which totaled nearly $650,000. And a group of FedEx employees raised the money to buy a car for their 60-year-old coworker, who had been walking 24 miles round-trip to and from work each day because she couldn’t afford to fix her own broken-down vehicle.

These stories, at least as written, are supposed to make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Their purblind focus on the indomitable! human! spirit! suggests we should be moved and inspired by the up-with-the-inhabitants sense of community, the charitable generosity, and the hardscrabble uplift they describe—which, of course, is not to knock community, charity, or uplift. The problem, as even a cursory read between the lines of such stirring storytelling makes clear, is that these news items are just masquerading as life-affirming narratives. In reality, they unintentionally highlight the casual cruelty, exploitation, injustice, and multisystem dysfunction we’ve been socialized to accept in every aspect of our American lives. Only in a society inured to the heart-breaking inhumanity of capitalist culture could they be passed off as stirring.

The real story is left unwritten in articles that portray societal problems as personal misfortune. When a 7-year-old sets up a lemonade stand to chip in for her own multiple brain surgeries, because even with insurance just one of the procedures would cost $10,000, that’s not precocious entrepreneurialism; it’s an indictment of a health care system that values human life in direct proportion to potential earnings growth. A former student raising $27,000 for a 77-year-old substitute teacher who had been living in his car even before his earnings were decimated by Covid school closures isn’t a touching reunion anecdote; it’s a reminder of how shamefully underpaid public school teachers are. Viral videos of individual cops dancing or playing basketball with Black kids aren’t proof the force is full of good apples; they’re examples of standard-issue copaganda—which even cops admit to creating and disseminating—intended to counter the bad PR that pervasive systemic racism in policing has rightfully earned. (It’s worth noting that both the dancing and ball-playing cops were later captured on videos that documented them beating up unarmed Black men.)

In attempting to normalize the crushing oppression of capitalism—in our health care, labor policies, education system, law enforcement—and the abysmal state of our social safety nets, these stories reveal the inventive work-arounds folks have developed to survive and aid in the survival of others. They serve as representations of just how bad things are for so many. Multiple recent studies and polls indicate most Americans live paycheck to paycheck; minimum wage earners working 40 hours a week can only afford to rent in 7 percent of US counties; and 600,000 people are unhoused. Congress’s decision not to extend pandemic unemployment benefits mean those numbers will surely rise. Meanwhile, the federal eviction moratorium is no longer in effect, and more than 3 million people who responded to a Census Bureau poll this August said they are likely to face eviction in the next two months. One-third of Americans have delayed medical procedures because they can’t afford treatment, and health insurance deductibles have risen at eight times the pace of wages over the past 13 years (yet the country’s biggest health insurance companies made $11 billion in profits just the last quarter). Desperate Americans are using GoFundMe as a stand-in for our tattered social safety nets, prompting its CEO to note earlier this year that the “platform was never meant to be a source of support for basic needs, and it can never be a replacement for robust federal Covid-19 relief that is generous and targeted to help the millions of Americans who are struggling.”
Recent studies indicate that most Americans live paycheck to paycheck and 600,000 people are unhoused.

Speaking of federal aid, Democrats are working on a bill that would help patch some of the holes in our safety nets that so many fall through. The Build Back Better Act would expand Medicare to include vision and dental coverage, make community college free for two years, fund up to 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave—the United States is the only rich country that doesn’t already provide that—lower prescription drug prices, and take critical steps to address climate change, among many other provisions. The legislation won’t cure everything that ails us, but it would start a vigorous course of treatment, paid for by increasing tax rates on the rich and on corporate behemoths. Republicans, who were supercool with the $7.8 trillion increase in federal debt under Donald Trump, are suddenly concerned about spending $3.5 trillion over 10 years on the bill, and their conservative Democrat abettors continue to be feckless obstacles to progress.

As do those who, in scaremongering about the bill, suggest that too much government compassion threatens the “respect” American culture has for the “talented, hardworking and successful,” as N. Gregory Mankiw recently wrote in The New York Times, repeating the free-market, individualist orthodoxy used to justify any horror that unfettered capitalism creates. Since 1978 the salaries of CEOs have jumped 940 percent, while workers’ earnings have risen just 12 percent—in 2020, workers’ paychecks rose a mere 1.8 percent, while CEOs saw theirs grow almost 16 percent. As of last count, the United States is home to 724 billionaires and roughly 20 million millionaires. As any smart, hardworking broke person knows, that’s not the result of the exceptional brilliance and diligence of the rich. Meanwhile, leaving that wealth untaxed means we have less money to fund our safety net, consigning the rest of us to things like shareholder-focused health care. This is all fine, these stories coo at us, in an insidious attempt to convince us that we’re all getting what we deserve. Just sit back and enjoy another episode of Undercover Boss.

There’s nothing to feel good about in stories of folks living on next to nothing in a country that constantly boasts about being the richest in the world, without admitting that this wealth is hoarded by a small few. Those few are the ones who mock what are now stock phrases—“tax the rich,” “defund the police,” “health care is a human right”—that, despite their simplicity, actually get at the core of how we could right-size this sinking capitalist ship.

And while we’re at it, let’s cut the poverty propaganda.
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The Tyranny of the 6-3 Court
This term, the Supreme Court is poised to use its power to attack women’s rights, expand gun “rights,” and rewind the clock to a darker age.

By Elie Mystal

On the first Monday in October, the Supreme Court, the most powerful government body controlled by conservatives, returns to work. Democrats have the White House and both chambers of Congress; Republicans, who have lost the popular vote in seven of the last eight presidential elections, are currently confined to the unelected, unaccountable branch of government.

However, because that one branch claims sole authority to nullify the actions of the other two, Republicans can do a lot of damage. Indeed, the ability to stop the actions of branches that Republicans cannot control without voter suppression is a big reason Senator Mitch McConnell spent so much energy stacking the Supreme Court. From stealing a seat from Barack Obama in 2016 to giving a third appointment to Donald Trump in 2020, McConnell has been playing the long game: wresting control of the one institution that is immune to the popular will. The former Senate majority leader never needed the MAGA coup to succeed. Instead, he had the court, which is now poised to do what a mob of white terrorists never could: Stop progress.

This term, we will see conservatives celebrate the achievement of two long-sought goals they could not accomplish through electoral politics. We will see broad conservative agreement that women should be treated as second-class citizens, reduced to the status of incubators with mouth parts, when the court hears the most direct challenge to abortion rights in a generation. And we will see broad conservative agreement that guns have more rights than children.

There will also be a bunch of cases that we don’t know about yet, conducted as part of the Supreme Court’s “shadow docket.” This consists of cases that are decided through an emergency process that allows the court to avoid holding full public hearings and issuing detailed opinions. No surprise, the conservatives have frequently employed it to decide the most controversial and partisan cases. The court is now fully owned by these conservatives—six justices to three—and they aren’t about to pass up this opportunity to win the culture wars they were sent to fight.

Many Supreme Court reporters spent an awful lot of energy at the end of the last term pushing the false narrative that the situation isn’t that dire—that the justices aren’t really broken along the partisan lines of the presidents who appointed them. They argue that the split is really 3-3-3, with the so-called moderates—Chief Justice John Roberts, alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh, and new justice Amy Coney Barrett—holding some center-like position. This analysis is flat wrong.

Roberts, Kavanaugh, and Barrett are in lockstep with their fellow conservatives on all the important issues. They all agree that organized labor should be disempowered, that voting should remain a largely white privilege, and that religious groups should be able to stop LGBTQ people from adopting children. That’s not theory; that’s the upshot of three decisions the conservatives hung together to make last term. The six conservatives agree on the outcomes; they disagree only on the best way to go about their awful work of reversing the gains of the civil rights and gay rights movements and dismantling the social safety net. A wolf and a leopard have different hunting methods, but they will both eat faces if they’re given the chance.

These six have already shifted the terms of the debate: With a supermajority of conservatives, the kinds of cases the court will consider has moved dramatically to the right. Court watchers who think the court is 3-3-3 are like sky watchers who live in the dark and tell you the moon is the brightest thing in the heavens.

To be clear, it’s not that every case will be decided 6-3; it’s that all the cases will be argued on conservative terms, over the issues conservatives care about, and decided based on what conservatives think they can get away with.

And apparently, elected Democrats, both in Congress and the White House, are cool with that. They have accepted conservative control of the courts. The Biden administration took the energy and passion of its base for court reform and sent it off to a commission of law professors to die. Congress, instead of mitigating the worst impulses of the courts by passing legislation to protect voting rights or reproductive rights, passes nothing because the Senate clings to the filibuster.

Conservatives have won their battle to control the federal judiciary. This term, the country will pay the consequences.
**Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization**

Date of hearing: December 1, 2021

As of this writing, I do not know how long the Supreme Court will allow Texas’s six-week abortion ban to stand. The court allowed the law to be implemented on September 1, claiming that Texas’s decision to empower private citizens to violate the constitutional rights of pregnant people somehow prevented the court from upholding 50 years of privacy precedent. But the justices have thus far declined to rule on the actual merits of the case. The Department of Justice has filed a lawsuit asking the courts to block the Texas law, but whether the Supreme Court hears that case, and when, remains an open question.

We do know that the court’s commitment to taking away reproductive rights will survive even if Texas’s bounty hunters are stopped. That’s because the Supreme Court is scheduled to hear a case about an entirely different law designed to overturn the legal standard set by Roe v. Wade. This case, Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, could allow the Supreme Court to accomplish a version of what Texas did this summer.

To understand how the Supreme Court will likely diminish—if not take away—the right to an abortion, you have to understand what the law is now, or at least was until Texas happened. There are two Supreme Court cases that define abortion rights in this country. Roe v. Wade (1973) held that the government cannot violate a woman’s right to terminate her pregnancy before a fetus becomes viable, at around 24 weeks. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey (1992) held that the government can restrict a woman’s right to choose before fetal viability but cannot place an “undue burden” on that choice.

From a certain point of view, Casey overthrew Roe. People don’t talk about it that way, because it’s easier for Republicans running for office to fundraise off Roe and the made-up specter of “abortion on demand” than to admit that their favorite bogeyman has been neutered; and it’s easier for Democrats running for office to pretend that Roe still offers robust protection of abortion rights, and so there’s nothing else they have to do to secure the bodily autonomy of women. But in reality, Casey allows Republican state legislatures to place any number of hurdles between women and their constitutional rights, and conservative courts almost always find that those hurdles are not “undue burdens” on women.

The only thing Roe really stands for anymore is the proposition that an outright ban on abortion before a fetus can survive outside the womb is unconstitutional. Now anti-abortion forces on the Supreme Court are coming for that vestigial right as well.

At issue in Dobbs is a Mississippi law that prohibits abortions after 15 weeks, nearly 10 weeks before fetal viability. The law does have an exception for the health of the mother, but it makes no exception for rape or incest. And it’s an outright ban. After 15 weeks, Mississippi can commandeer a woman’s body and force her to bring a pregnancy to term. Since many women who aren’t trying to get pregnant may not know they’re pregnant until well into their first trimester, if not longer, and since the state of Mississippi has precisely one abortion clinic (Jackson Women’s Health), the Mississippi ban isn’t just a hurdle; it’s a wall.

The Mississippi law is a clear violation of the established precedent set by Roe and Casey. In fact, it’s such a clear violation that two lower courts, both helmed by conservatives, found the law unconstitutional. So Mississippi asked the Supreme Court to overrule Roe directly. The fact that the court took the case shows that there are at least four justices who are willing to consider revoking the standard set by Roe: that outright bans on abortions before fetal viability are unconstitutional. If I had to guess, I’d say that Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, and Amy Coney Barrett are the four who are prepared to thumb their noses at settled law in order to control women’s bodies. So the big question is whether there is a fifth justice—either Chief Justice John Roberts or alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh—who wants to go along for the ride.

I think both of them will. Kavanaugh has sided with anti-abortion forces at least once, when he allowed the Texas law to go forward. And while Roberts dissented from that opinion, he did it in a way that focused on the procedural peculiarities of the Texas law, not its attack on the constitutional right to choose that is embodied in the Mississippi ban.

My guess is that the court will not only uphold Mississippi’s ban but will also do it in a way that helps the Republican political agenda the most. They’ll uphold the Mississippi law under the Casey test, thereby rendering the phrase “undue burden” a cruel joke, but they won’t “overturn” Roe v. Wade. They’ll just roll it back far enough to erase the very line—pre-viability—that Roe was erected to protect. That sleight of hand will allow mainstream media pundits and Republicans like Susan Collins to say, “See, Roe is still the law!” while also allowing movement conservatives to send out letters asking for money to keep up the fight against abortion. And it will allow useless Democrats to say that Roe has been preserved and there is no reason to reform the Supreme Court or pass national legislation defending a woman’s right to choose.

But in red states, abortion rights will be seriously compromised—and in some cases, like Mississippi, they will almost cease to exist. Women with means will still travel to California or Canada to deal with unwanted pregnancies, but conservatives will move closer to their goal of turning poor women into incubators who...
cannot exercise their basic constitutional rights to their own bodies.

Conservatives have been fighting to get here for two generations. With their 6-3 stranglehold on the Supreme Court, they can now do everything they’ve always promised to do.

**New York State Rifle & Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen**

Date of hearing: November 3, 2021

It’s hard to believe that despite our national epidemic of gun violence—from school shootings to domestic terrorism to suicides to intimate partner violence—conservatives want to pump additional hot lead into our society. We are covered in the blood of our children, yet Republicans insist that allowing classrooms to be turned into shooting ranges will keep us safe.

The irony (well, one of the ironies) is that the GOP pro-gun agenda is broadly unpopular. Sure, Republicans’ violent rhetoric works well in front of a white mob, but when it’s time to count votes, the ammosexuals are in the minority nationally. Indeed, public opinion is against unfettered gun-toting, with high levels of support for universal background checks, limitations on high-capacity ammunition clips, and even an assault weapons ban.

And so Republicans turn to the courts, the institution not beholden to the popular will, to advance the cause of violence. In 2008’s *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the Supreme Court invented a right to purchase firearms for personal self-defense; ever since, Republicans have been running to the court to try to strike down the few gun restrictions that remain.

One such case, *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen*, is up for review by the court this term, and it could blow the biggest hole in gun control regulations since 2008.

At the heart of *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association* is the proposition, made by the gun lobby, that licensing requirements—the simple act of needing to get a permit before you can carry a hand cannon in public—is a violation of the Second Amendment. The case comes out of New York, which, like many other states, requires gun owners to obtain a license before they can carry their weapons outside their homes; to acquire such a license, gun owners need to show that they have “proper cause” to strut around as an angel of death. The New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, a “firearms advocacy” group, argues that the need to show cause is a violation of gun owners’ constitutional rights.

This seems like a good time to mention that the opening words of the Second Amendment are: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State...” These words literally spell out the proper cause for gun ownership. The suggestion which requires a person to get a license to do everything from drive a car to sell beer, cannot license deadly weapons is bonkers. That the Supreme Court is likely to find this argument credible—and that the very same court will probably decide that the state can tell a woman what she can do with her uterus—is perverse. But that is what happens when you let conservatives control the courts.

Given that these conservatives are operating outside the bounds of constitutional text or precedent—that they are just making up gun rights as they see fit—it’s impossible to guess the precise jargon they will use to deliver victory to the gun lobby. But I do have a good idea as to how they’ll justify it.

A group of public defenders representing predominantly Black and brown clients recently submitted an amicus brief in the case, lending their support to the ammosexual cause. Their brief argues that New York’s gun licensing requirements are racist, because the police—who are in charge of issuing gun permits—use proper cause as a pretext to deny people of color their Second Amendment rights. Then law enforcement uses the possibility of unlicensed firearm possession as an excuse to harass gun owners of color, often violently.

They’re not entirely wrong. The public defenders have made a good argument but come to the wrong conclusion. They’ve accepted the conservative idea that the Second Amendment confers an individual right to gun ownership and now ask the court to extend that right to the Black and brown citizens the white gun lobby usually ignores. Instead of demanding police reform, they demand gun permissiveness. Instead of working for civil rights, they’re working for gun rights. Yet I believe their argument will be echoed by the conservative Supreme Court justices, who don’t give a damn about Black and brown people when they want to, say, vote, but will be happy to grant us the power to kill each other.

We are the only wealthy nation that can’t keep our children safe from gun violence. The Supreme Court will rule that we stay that way.

**New York State Rifle & Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen could blow the biggest hole in gun control regulations since 2008.**

Six to three: The nine justices of the Supreme Court, which is now dominated by its conservative wing.
I

**United States v. Tsarnaev**

*Date of Hearing: October 13, 2021*

If you are going to be against the death penalty, as I am, you have to be against killing awful people who are clearly guilty of their crimes. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is one of those awful people. He and his brother, Tamerlan, carried out the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, which killed three people and injured hundreds. He was found guilty of his crime and sentenced to death. But the First Circuit Court of Appeals threw out Tsarnaev’s death sentence last year. That court ruled that the trial court should have asked jurors if they were unduly biased due to the wall-to-wall coverage of the bombing, and it ruled that, at sentencing, the trial court improperly excluded evidence about Tsarnaev’s brother, who was killed while attempting to evade capture.

Bill Barr’s Justice Department, which went on a death penalty killing spree last year, appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court. The court declined to review the case during the Trump administration but agreed to hear it after the election. Trump lost the election (a point that cannot be repeated enough), and the death sentence against Tsarnaev became Merrick Garland’s and Joe Biden’s problem.

President Biden is allegedly anti-death penalty, but his Justice Department went ahead and asked the court to reinstate the death sentence against Tsarnaev. It’s not unusual for the Justice Department to continue the procedural posture in cases started by the previous administration; it’s just wrong for Garland to continue to enforce Barr’s policies out of institutional deference (a habit he seems to have embraced these past months).

There’s no real mystery about what the court is going to do. The conservative justices are all “pro-life” when that stance involves fetuses—and allows them to control women’s bodies—but pro-death from pretty much the moment a baby is born. Amy Coney Barrett has a particularly hypocritical stance here: She argued in a law review article that Catholic judges should recuse themselves from cases involving capital punishment because of the church’s stance against the death penalty. Yet during her 2017 nomination hearings, she indicated she would not recuse herself from capital cases, and she has thus far offered no indication that she will recuse herself from this live death penalty issue on her desk or that she will rule in favor of life.

As for Barrett’s conservative colleagues, they don’t even pretend to be conflicted when it comes to state-sponsored bloodlust. These justices rejected death penalty appeals in an increasingly cruel fashion last fall and winter as Barr and Trump tried to speed up the rate of killings.

Conservatives on the court want people on death row dead. We know they will use all their legal power to see them dead. I don’t know if Tsarnaev is irredeemable, but I know this court is.

**Mississippi v. Tennessee**

*Date of Hearing: October 4, 2021*

There are no huge environmental cases on the court’s docket, in part because centrist Democrats have spent more time criticizing the Green New Deal than coming up with any legislation of their own to address our myriad environmental crises. Aggressive climate legislation would almost certainly trigger immediate Supreme Court review, because entrenched oil and gas interests view the conservatives on the court as a “get out of corporate responsibility free” card. Without legislation, those interests don’t even have to bother appealing to the climate deniers on the high court.

But the climate is changing, whether politicians acknowledge it or not, and that is going to have legal consequences as we continue to destroy our planet.

One point where our changing environment will meet our legal system involves water rights. Our nation’s freshwater resources are dwindling, and each state government is trying to lap up as much of what’s left as it can. This way, it doesn’t have to tell its constituents politically unpopular truths about the massive need for water conservation.

The question of which state controls which water resources is at the heart of a long-running dispute between Mississippi and Tennessee. The Sparta-Memphis Aquifer is an immense groundwater resource spanning 70,000 square miles under eight states. Tennessee, which sits upstream of Mississippi, started tapping into that aquifer, drawing water for itself that would otherwise be bound for Mississippi.

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The Sparta-Memphis Aquifer is an immense groundwater resource spanning 70,000 square miles under eight states. Tennessee, which sits upstream of Mississippi, started tapping into that aquifer, drawing water for itself that would otherwise be bound for Mississippi.

Now, this is not the first time a state has taken or blocked off water from its downstream neighbors. In these situations, the Supreme Court (which hears disputes between states directly without their going through the lower federal courts) generally orders an “equitable appor-
tionment” of the disputed resource—basically, it orders the states to share, nicely.

But Tennessee’s pumping method doesn’t merely draw water from underneath its own soil. Mississippi argues that the pumping method Tennessee uses draws water that has already reached Mississippi back into Tennessee. It argues that “Tennessee is essentially drinking Mississippi’s milkshake, taking water that is not merely bound for Mississippi but is physically already there.

Therefore, according to Mississippi, equitable apportionment is not the correct solution. Mississippi should have sovereign rights over water already in its state, and Tennessee should stop pumping and pay a fee to Mississippi.

This is the first time the Supreme Court has heard a case like this involving groundwater, but it probably won’t be the last. Our rivers and reservoirs are running low, but the water demands from industrial farming and personal use continue unabated. States will increasingly dig for water, but aquifers do not respect state lines and political territories.

A smart future probably involves federalizing water rights and having the central government lease out water allotments while instituting a national water conservation program. But even typing that sentence will give the charlatans over at Fox News something to fearmonger about. I’ll probably get e-mails from MAGA people with pictures of them pouring gallons of water on their shrubs, saying, “Ain’t no liberal gonna take mah hedge-row.” Republicans will fight smart water conservation policies tooth and nail, confident that when the water’s almost all used up, people with guns or money will still be able to have a drink.

So instead of a real water conservation policy, we will likely continue on our destructive path, and unelected judges will dole out this dwindling resource on a state-by-state and case-by-case basis.

The Shadow Docket

Most Supreme Court previews, including this one, focus on cases scheduled to be argued before the nine justices in a hearing that is open to the press and the public. Most end-of-year Supreme Court analysis also focuses on the cases that are decided after robust debate and deliberation, after which the court explains its legal rulings in long written opinions.

But there is an entirely different process of adjudication that the conservative-controlled court has turned to with increasing frequency in recent years. Lawyers call this the “shadow docket,” and it consists of cases the court takes up in “emergency” fashion, outside the scope of its normal procedural order. In these instances, lawyers are allowed to submit expedited briefs to make their arguments, but they are not allowed to argue in person, in full view of the public and the press. Decisions are not made after months of deliberation among the justices, but quickly and through whatever informal conversations the justices make time for.

And the justices often don’t bother to tell the public or the litigants the reasoning or logic behind their decrees, issuing instead a few sentences giving an order. Indeed, when operating in this shadow zone, the justices often lack the courage even to sign their names to their own rulings.

The Supreme Court’s use of the shadow docket appears to depend on who the president is. When Trump was in charge, the court used the shadow docket to authorize many of his most controversial policies, with Trump winning a “wide majority” of the cases his administration brought through emergency procedures, according to a Reuters analysis. The Biden administration has already experienced early defeats on the shadow docket.

But whether it has sided with or against the sitting president, this court has used the shadow docket approach to issue some of its most partisan and controversial decisions. Nearly all of its Covid-related rulings have come from the shadow docket; specifically, both of its rulings on the CDC eviction moratorium came through this process. And the court’s shocking August ruling, in which it ordered Biden to reinstate Trump’s “Remain in Mexico” program—despite the fact that the court has no authority over treaties with foreign governments—was also transmitted in a one-paragraph, unsigned opinion that gave no insight into the court’s logic for upending the constitutional separation of powers.

The Texas abortion ban was also authorized through the shadow docket.

I can speculate why the conservatives on the court prefer this process (they’re operating in bad faith and thus can’t be bothered to make up legal reasons for their partisan hackery), but their reasons don’t matter. The result is that, under the guise of “emergency” rulings, the court now makes up policy in real time, and the policies it concocts almost always comport with the Republican political agenda. As long as Republican lawyers can convince at least five conservative justices to rule in their favor, and to rule quickly, the GOP can advance its agenda despite being in the minority in all elected branches of government. And the court shields these debates from public view.

Because of this, the scope of power now wielded by unelected conservative justices is often overlooked by those who only follow the cases argued in public hearings. Any law passed by Congress, any executive order signed by the president, can be undone by the Supreme Court in the dead of night, and it doesn’t even have to tell us why. The refusal of Democrats to reform the court means they have given six conservative judges veto power over their entire political agenda.

It’s a veto the court has already used and will continue to use. Democrats may have won the last round of elections, but conservatives are still very much in charge. This term, the Supreme Court will prove it.
Can philanthropy ever be decolonized?

The color of money: The Gates Foundation’s trustees have exclusively been white billionaires: Melinda and Bill, pictured here, and Warren Buffett, who resigned in June.
Only if wealthy donors reckon with the difference between giving away money and actually sharing power.

BY TIM SCHWAB

Over the last year, Doctors Without Borders has faced a major scandal, as more than 1,000 current and former employees signed on to a letter accusing the Nobel Peace Prize–winning humanitarian organization of institutional racism, citing a colonial mentality in how the group’s European managers view the developing world.

Such an allegation would be serious in any field, but it deserves another level of scrutiny in the context of global health and humanitarianism, two fields built on a paternalistic premise: rich white people from wealthy nations setting themselves up as saviors of poor people of color. The assumptions embedded in this model have provoked increasingly popular calls to “decolonize” the sector, and many organizations have responded by invoking social justice rhetoric, claiming, for instance, that their work intersects with the Black Lives Matter movement.

While it remains to be seen how Doctors Without Borders responds to the charges, the unfolding conflict brings into focus the colonialist premises that underpin the work of many leading institutions, including the most powerful—and perhaps the least diverse—actor in global health and philanthropy: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The foundation promotes itself as “fighting poverty, disease, and inequity,” but it does so from an extremely narrow point of view. It’s governed by two people, Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates, who continue to cochair the foundation following their divorce. Until recently, there was a third member of the board of trustees—another white multibillionaire, Warren Buffett.

The blind spots of this leadership became fatally apparent during the pandemic, when the Gates Foundation positioned itself at the center of the global effort to deliver Covid vaccines to poor nations. That project failed spectacularly, as the foundation partnered closely with pharmaceutical companies even as Big Pharma prioritized delivering vaccines to the most lucrative markets.

Even today, many poor nations have no access to Covid vaccines—a situation that has been described as “vaccine apartheid.”

But that’s a criticism the Gates Foundation is unlikely to hear. Its decision to partner with Big Pharma during the pandemic speaks to how the charity has long depended on the rich and the powerful. Though its website is adorned with pictures of poor Black and brown people from the Global South, the foundation overwhelmingly directs its dollars to institutions based in the Global North.

Though its website is adorned with pictures of poor Black and brown people, the foundation overwhelmingly directs its dollars to wealthy, white-dominated institutions.

The Nation examined 30,000 charitable grants the foundation has awarded over the past two decades and found that more than 88 percent of the donations—$63 billion—have gone to recipients in the wealthiest, whitest nations, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and European countries.

These findings are not new. In 2014, the advocacy group GRAIN found that the vast majority of the foundation’s agricultural funding, though heavily focused on improving African farming, actually goes to universities, institutes, and NGOs based outside of Africa—mostly in North America and Europe. GRAIN issued a follow-up report this summer that found the funding trend had not changed.

As far back as 2009, a study in The Lancet highlighted the same problem in the Gates Foundation’s work in global health: It funds the rich to help the poor.

“They really epitomize a form of charity which is disempowering to the people that they claim to seek to benefit,” says David McCoy, the lead author of the Lancet study.

“It comes back to this issue of power,” McCoy continues. “At the end of the day, a really good metric…to look at is: Has power been redistributed over the last 20 years since the Gates Foundation has been on the scene? And I think the evidence shows it hasn’t. If anything, inequality—in terms of power—[has] actually gotten worse. There’s been an even greater concentration of power and wealth in a few hands, even if lives have been saved during that time. By continuing to not address the more fundamental problems of structural inequality, and the injustice of that, they are able to maintain this position of being charitable and benevolent, which they are then able to translate, to turn into social power.”

Yadurshini Raveendran says that when she embarked on her graduate degree at Duke University, her coursework in global health partook of a troubling “us versus them” framework: capable, competent experts and institutions from the Global North rescuing the helpless, unwashed masses from the Global South.

Raveendran realized that others in the class shared her discomfort, which led to the formation of the Duke Decolonizing Global Health Working Group, one of a growing number of campus activist groups pushing back on the colonialist mentality they see embedded in university curricula.

A paradox in this activism, Raveendran notes, was that her studies at Duke were partially funded by a scholarship from the Gates Foundation, which enabled her to move from Sri Lanka to study in the United States.

“I’m grateful that I had that scholarship, because otherwise I would not have been able to come here and do my work,” Raveendran says, before adding...
“I had to take a handout from a white organization, when it was a white organization—the British Empire—that colonized my land.”

—Yadurshini Raveendran

they don’t know what they know about themselves. That what you think you know, to flatten the Global South into a series of numbers. The IHME describes the IHME as a monopoly and a model of “data imperialism”—an effort accuracy, and ethics of its health estimates have drawn widespread criticism. Schol

It creates an illusion of knowledge. It tells people in a lot of [poor nations] that they don’t know what they know about themselves. That what you think you know, you don’t know,” Abimbola says. “That is the colonial experience.”

Shades of this criticism color virtually all of the foundation’s work. In July, Scientific America published an op-ed titled “Bill Gates Should Stop Telling Africans What Kind of Agriculture Africans Need.” One of the coauthors, Million Belay, a coordinator at the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, noted in an interview that the foundation’s charitable work on African agriculture bears all the hallmarks of colonial power: seeking to modernize and civilize Africa while also advancing commercial interests, like pushing farmers to buy genetically modified seeds, chemicals, and other technology from multinational companies headquartered outside of Africa.

“When our agriculture is considered backward, and the only solution proffered is technology, then there is a civilization agenda,” Belay says. “And that civilization agenda is not to civilize us but to bind us to the vagaries of this technology.”

Even the Gates Foundation’s work at home, in K-12 education, has been described as “a colonizing, neutralizing, and supervising force in Black schools and communities.”

That’s from Alison Ragland’s PhD dissertation, which examines the foundation’s aggressive efforts to remake schools in low-income districts through educational standards, testing, and technology. Ragland, a consultant and former teacher, describes the foundation as part of an educational reform movement that overwhelmingly focuses on “access,” steering Black students into white corridors of power in ways that can disempower them from thinking critically about the root causes of inequality. “I focus on teaching about systems of oppression so that people can understand where they come from, where they fit into that system of oppression, so that when they see unequal power dynamics they can more easily recognize it, call it out, and do something about [it],” Ragland says. “In the absence of a critique of the entire system of oppression...we’re going to be stuck on only making spaces steeped in white supremacy more accessible to people who have been excluded from those spaces.”

By distracting students from serious, critical thinking about inequality, Ragland argues, the Gates Foundation also distracts them from scrutinizing its own immense wealth and power—thereby preventing them from challenging its undemocratic role in shaping US education.

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” she says, quoting the writer Audre Lorde.

White saviors: Bill Gates (right) and Melinda French Gates during their visit to a village in the Patna district of India’s Bihar state in 2011.
Edgar Villanueva says that in the world of philanthropy, conferences and meetings are increasingly dominated by discussions of “DEI” (diversity, equity, and inclusion), an effort to persuade private foundations to bring more people of color into leadership positions, provide charitable dollars directly to affected communities, and align their endowments with their charitable mission.

Villanueva has become a leading voice in this movement since the publication of his 2018 book *Decolonizing Wealth*, which interrogates the “colonizer virus” embedded in philanthropy—a field he defines as “mostly white saviors and white experts versus poor, needy, urban, disadvantaged, marginalized, at-risk people.”

“The process starts with asking the question ‘Where does the money come from?’” Villanueva says. “If you think about it through the place of truth and reconciliation, it begins with looking back and asking what harm has been done. I think for a lot of foundations...the work is very much looking forward, like ‘What do we do in the future?’, without taking into account what happened in the past.”

For his part, Bill Gates says he sees nothing to apologize for in the source of his wealth; he considers his work at Microsoft to be a greater achievement than any humanitarian work he has undertaken through the foundation.

This self-appraisal ignores a long legacy of deconstructive behavior that has been uncovered by investigations into Microsoft’s anti-competitive business practices, tax avoidance, gender discrimination, and exploitation of low-paid migrant workers. Recently, the company has been criticized for its investments in Israeli surveillance and military technologies.

As these business practices boost Microsoft’s bottom line and expand the personal wealth of Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates, they also contribute to a growing political debate about the problems with capitalism, which increasingly is a debate about equity and social justice.

French Gates, when asked to address such issues on CNBC in 2019, responded with a laugh: “When I go to places like Malawi or Tanzania or Senegal, they say they all want to live in America. We are lucky to live here. They want to live in these types of capitalist societies.”

It’s a stunning statement that misconstrues the role that capitalism has played in the history of these “unlucky” African nations, from the slave trade to European colonization to today’s cash-crop economies. For the Gates Foundation, these struggling economies appear as a blank slate onto which it can write its own ambitions.

In Tanzania, for example, the foundation funds a raft of projects by American and European companies, consultants, think tanks, universities, and NGOs—Elanco, Land O’Lakes International Development, Exosect, TechnoServe, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, Purdue University, World Resources Institute—which act to strengthen the country’s property rights, change diets, introduce pesticides, industrialize agriculture, and reorient health policies.

The Gates Foundation didn’t issue a DEI statement until May of this year, when it offered a perfunctory commitment to “a future that is more diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all.”

That statement follows other belated and shallow reflections that the foundation has expressed over the years about its outsized privilege.

“It’s not fair that we have so much wealth when billions of others have so little,” the Gateses wrote in an annual open letter from the Gates Foundation in 2018. “And it’s not fair that our wealth opens doors that are closed to most people. World leaders tend to take our phone calls and seriously consider what we have to say. Cash-strapped school districts are more likely to divert money and talent toward ideas they think we will fund. But there is nothing secret about our objectives as a foundation. We are committed to being open about what we fund and what the results have been.”

It’s an odd logic, arguing that the lack of secrets at the foundation somehow justifies its undemocratic power. And it’s built on a patently false premise: the idea the Gates Foundation is transparent. The foundation’s CEO, Mark Suzman, has stated that its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion depends on “transparency and accountability,” yet neither he nor the foundation responded to multiple inquiries from *The Nation*, including basic queries about the racial composition of the groups it funds or its staff, or requests to discuss its work on race and equity.

The Gates Foundation is testing the limits of its power by refusing to engage with the rapidly expanding conversation around decolonization. Scholars, writers, and activists are publishing on this topic in *Forbes*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and elsewhere, and the growing debate will continue to pressure the foundation to justify the logic of its power. To explain the collateral damage in its bullying crusade to help the poor. To reckon with the difference between giving away money and actually sharing power.

“Will global health survive its decolonisation?” asked a recent article in *The Lancet* cowritten by Seye Abimbola. “Perhaps. But only if its practitioners commit to its true transformation. A crucial first step is recognising that ours is a discipline that holds within itself a deep contradiction—global health was birthed in supremacy, but its mission is to reduce or eliminate inequities globally. To transcend its origins, global health must become actively anti-supremacist, and also anti-oppressionist and anti-racist. Equity and justice involve flipping every axis of supremacy on its head.”

—Edgar Villanueva
In late July, Portland, Ore., held a grand reopening of its downtown. Hollowed out by the pandemic, which banished office workers and tourists, the neighborhood became the site of massive demonstrations against police brutality after the murder of George Floyd. Throughout the summer of 2020, protesters faced off against local and federal law enforcement in nightly clashes that inevitably ended in tear gas, flash-bang grenades, and arrests. Even after direct actions became small and sporadic, many storefronts remained boarded up—a detail often mentioned in a barrage of media coverage characterizing the Rose City as dangerous, trashed, even dying.

Resurrecting downtown Portland, and the city’s image, has been a major focus for Mayor Ted Wheeler and other city leaders this year. By the reopening event, much of the plywood had come down; the band Pink Martini led a sing-along for a crowd in Pioneer Courthouse Square, and city commissioners Carmen Rubio, Mingus Mapps, and Jo Ann Hardesty cut a red ribbon to mark the opening of a new pod of food carts, several of which had been displaced from their previous location a few blocks north by the construction of a 35-story tower that will house 138 luxury condos and a Ritz-Carlton hotel.

“Today is the beginning of a new Portland,” Mapps told the crowd.

What this new Portland should look like—and whom it should serve—remains a matter of fierce debate. To many Portlanders, the months of sustained protest that followed Floyd’s murder were historic, electrifying, and potentially transformational for a city with a deep history of racial exclusion and police violence. Portland’s Black
Some city residents “would like to pretend that the last 15 months didn’t happen.”
—City Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty

residents, who make up 6 percent of the city’s population, have for decades endured harassment from police officers. The city has one of the worst racial disparities in arrests in the United States, and for nearly a decade the Portland Police Bureau has been under the supervision of the Department of Justice because of a pattern of using excessive force against people with mental illness. Though efforts to reform the bureau began decades before last year’s uprising, never before had so many white residents been attuned to the issue. Longtime activists sensed a remarkable opportunity. “Ain’t nobody scared of police no more,” Kent Ford, who founded the Portland chapter of the Black Panther Party in 1969, said recently. “If I don’t see nothing else, I’ve seen how it came together here.”

After two weeks of demonstrations, the police chief stepped down. The City Council redirected $15 million from policing to communities of color and to Portland Street Response, a non-police pilot program intended to assist people in mental health crises, and dissolved a handful of controversial police units. In November, 80 percent of Portland voters approved a new independent police oversight board, which will have the power to discipline and fire officers for misconduct. It was understood that all of this would be only a start toward making the whitest major city in America more equitable. Black-led organizations developed a sweeping agenda to dismantle systemic racism not only in policing but also in housing, transportation, education, economic development, and health care across the state.

But some Portlanders came to see the demonstrations as a threat to the city’s appeal to tourists and investors. “Lenders and purchasers have for all intents and purposes blacklisted Portland,” said John Russell, a longtime Portland real estate developer. Dramatic clashes between protesters and law enforcement provided the opportunity for right-wing politicians and media to depict the city as besieged by violent anarchists and, as Donald Trump claimed, “ablaze all the time.” Commenters linked Portland’s protest movement to homelessness and rising gun violence, marshaling it all as evidence of a city in precipitous decline.

Now, with civic leaders focused on economic recovery, advocates are concerned that efforts to rehabilitate Portland’s brand may eclipse the tentative steps taken toward reform. The pandemic, the protests, and a series of climate-related crises exposed major fault lines in Portland, from public safety and racial inequity to gentrification and homelessness. Wheeler, who is regularly accosted when he goes out in public, is facing a recall campaign. Business leaders have pressed city officials to be more aggressive in their treatment of protesters and in clearing homeless encampments. Gun violence has fueled calls for reinvestment in Portland’s police force and the reinstatement of some of the disbanded units. During the weekend of the downtown reopening, FBI agents and members of a new police unit coordinated to provide a “high-visibility presence”—a potent illustration of how the winds have shifted.

“We really are a tale of two cities,”
said Hardesty, who has led police reform efforts on the City Council. “One is a city that would like to flip a switch and pretend that the last 15 months didn’t happen—like, ‘Let’s just clean up the graffiti, get the trash up, and move all the houseless people so we can look like everything’s back to normal.’ And then you have another city that understands we have to fundamentally, radically change a lot of our systems.”

LIKE MANY PORTLAND RESIDENTS, I HAVE FIELDED A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS about how safe the city is from friends living elsewhere. My immediate reaction has been exasperation: Even at the height of the protests, when federal agents were firing impact munitions at moms in bike helmets, violence was evident only around the plazas downtown. During the day, I sometimes ran along the waterfront and through downtown. The streets were quiet, the stores shuttered—but downtown had felt empty long before Floyd was murdered, since the pandemic cleared out the office workers and tourists who made up the bulk of its foot traffic. Yes, there was more graffiti. But I never felt unsafe.

And yet it wasn’t accurate to tell friends that everything in Portland was fine. Far-right groups had turned the city into a culture war battleground. Activists and some journalists had been brutalized. Business owners were struggling with pandemic restrictions, which were stricter in Oregon than in many other states. Shootings were rising, and in June, dozens of people died during an unprecedented heat wave. The fact that some 4,000 people lacked housing became impossible to ignore as the city paused its regular sweeps of homeless encampments and tents became more visible. The weakness of the state’s mental health care system became starker, too: There were few sources of help that residents could call during encounters with people in the midst of a crisis.

Many of these challenges are not unique to Portland. But the media attention magnified them and often situated them within a longstanding narrative about local Democratic leadership collapsing into anarchy. This story line took hold during the early years of the Trump administration, as far-right groups repeatedly chose Portland as a staging ground for media spectacles like the Trump Free Speech Rally organized by Patriot Prayer, a pro-Trump group, in 2017, just days after a white supremacist murdered two people on Portland’s light rail. Clashes between these far-right activists and local antifascists led to obsessive coverage from conservative outlets like National Review, which devoted a cover story in 2018 to the left-wing “goons and thugs” who ostensibly controlled Portland.

The immense Black Lives Matter demonstrations here in the summer of 2020 and Trump’s decision to send federal forces into the city made Portland a mainstream media story. Much of the coverage fixated on vandalism committed by the most extreme of Portland’s activists. In an article in Forbes in January, a consultant who lives in a wealthy suburb likened Portland to Pompeii, contending that “violence and vandalism” were pushing the city toward “death.” A local news anchor (who also lives outside the city) wrote that it “has become the city of trash and filth.” New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who is considering a run for Oregon governor, decried a lack of “law and order” in the city.

In May, The Oregonian published the results of a poll of metro area residents and their views on downtown Portland. “Destroyed,” “trashed,” “riots,” and “homelessness” were some of the words frequently used, according to the main story. Yet 45 percent of the respondents hadn’t been downtown at all since the onset of the pandemic, suggesting that what was driving many of these opinions was not experience but media coverage. “I just have no sympathy for people who speak with visceral disgust about the city. It’s human people who are really struggling, and you haven’t even actually seen them,” said Lisa Bates, associate professor of urban studies at Portland State University, which is located downtown. Of polls like The Oregonian’s, Bates said, “You’ve basically tested your own coverage. Your sensational coverage has caused people to think that it’s a wasteland and yet has done very little to drive the alleviation of real suffering.” Notably, 83 percent of respondents in that poll said they felt safe in their own neighborhoods.

Relentless media scrutiny led to fingerpointing, and politicians and business leaders found a convenient scapegoat for Portland’s struggles in the relatively small group of activists who continued to protest this spring, often destroying property. In April, after several buildings, including a church, the Oregon Historical Society, and the home of the Blazers Boys & Girls Club, were vandalized and a police union hall was set on fire, Wheeler called on citizens to “take the city back” from “anarchists” who “want to burn, they want to bash, they want to intimidate, they want to assault.”
The following month, four city power brokers, including the real estate mogul and philanthropist Jordan Schnitzer, met with Multnomah County District Attorney Mike Schmidt at a private club downtown and pressed him to prosecute protest-related crimes more aggressively. Schmidt, who campaigned as a criminal justice reformer and won more than 75 percent of the vote, had declined to file charges for some low-level offenses like disorderly prosecutions. “I don’t want to be arrogant and talk on behalf of 2½ million people in the metro area,” Schnitzer told The Oregonian, “but I can’t imagine anyone not being concerned about how long the protests have gone on.”

There has been genuine debate among Black organizers and community leaders about protest tactics and the extent to which activists with an antiestablishment agenda and a penchant for property destruction undermined a more focused racial justice movement. At the same time, focusing attention on a small group of activists helped elected officials and police leadership avoid questions about their own commitment to addressing the racial injustices that gave rise to the demonstrations in the first place. Policing has long been a visible expression of inequity in Portland, but it’s hardly the only one. Oregon was founded as a whites-only state, and in the early 1900s Ku Klux Klan members were prevalent in the state legislature. Redlining forced Black residents into neighborhoods in Northeast and North Portland that were heavily policed and later damaged by “urban renewal” projects. Today, white families in Portland make more than twice what Black families do, while the school district suspends and expels Black students four to five times more often than white students. “Once you start peeling back the realities,” said Donovan Smith, a vice chair of the Portland chapter of the NAACP, “this has been a state that has been so hostile towards Black people, and there should be anger from a lot of people.”

Efforts to reimagine public safety in Portland have been made more complicated by an increase in gun-related crimes, a trend that predates the city’s modest steps toward police reform. As of August 9, there had been 717 shooting incidents since the beginning of the year, leaving more than 50 people dead and putting Portland alongside dozens of other cities nationwide that have experienced an uptick in gun violence. Records obtained by Willamette Week show that Black Portlanders have been killed and injured in shootings at a rate 12 times that of white residents.

One of the most alarming shootings occurred in July at a collection of food carts downtown, when six people were injured and a teenager named Makayla Maree Harris was killed. Hours later, Wheeler and Chuck Lovell, the chief of police, spoke with reporters by video conference. Last year, in explaining his support for modest cuts to the Portland Police Bureau’s budget—$15 million out of $248.3 million—Wheeler spoke of his “duty to evolve” as a leader and to “fundamentally rethink what safety means in this community.” But in recent months, he has called for directing more money to the bureau, citing the shootings and complaints about low staffing, high workload, and burnout. “I will fight for additional resources for the police bureau, I will fight for more police officers, and I will fight for more tools and whatever other support the police bureau needs to be able to get its job done,” he said during the press conference. Lovell has asked for a 40 to 50 percent staffing increase. (The Portland Police Bureau declined to comment. Wheeler was not available for an interview.)

Earlier this year, Wheeler essentially reinstated the disbanded Gun Violence Reduction Team, which had stopped Black drivers disproportionately and had shown little evidence of effectiveness, under two new names: the Enhanced Community Safety Team, a unit of 21 officers assigned to investigate gun crimes after the fact, and the Focused Intervention Team, a group of 12 tasked with “proactive enforcement.” Wheeler has insisted that the FIT is different from previous iterations of the gun violence unit because it will work with a “community oversight group” responsible for analyzing its impact on communities of color. But after a shooting in May, Wheeler sent a text to Lovell “authorizing [him] to deploy the focused intervention team without the community oversight panel.” The text, as reported by Oregon Public Broadcasting, continued, “Do so ASAP. I am prepared to take the political heat internally including resignation. Deploy the team.”

“It’s insulting in a lot of ways,” said Smith of the NAACP, which opposed the new units. “It’s a mind trip to have this person on the podium saying they’re listening when we have [heard] so much of the city say, ‘Do not put more money into the cops in that way.’”

There is no consensus about what’s driving the increase in shootings across the country. That’s partly because the research is in the early stages and data is lacking, said Jonathan Jay, an assistant professor at the Boston University School of Public Health. But Jay and other experts suspect that the economic, social, and psychological disruptions caused by Covid-19 are significant factors. “We know that the pandemic created changes in all of the social determinants of violence. There were spikes in poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, all of those drivers of stress at the community level,” he said. “They hit particularly hard in the places and the communities that have been most disinvested from and therefore were more vulnerable to gun violence incidents.”

While downtown Portland has received most of the recent media attention, it’s not where most of the shootings are occurring. Portland is bisected by Burnside Street,
Before the pandemic, there were about six large encampments of homeless people in Portland. By June there were more than 100.

Whose protest? Groups of far-right activists, including the Proud Boys, pictured here, regularly descended on Portland to clash with antifascists.

The brutality of the Portland Police Bureau and its lack of accountability became particularly apparent during the nightly protests last year and their aftermath. The city’s police oversight board, the Independent Police Review, received nearly 4,000 complaints about police conduct since the beginning of the protests, during which the police documented some 6,000 uses of force, including firing impact munitions and deploying tear gas. In February, the Justice Department rebuked officers for using force indiscriminately. The terms agreed to in the 2014 settlement required the bureau to conduct an assessment of its handling of the protests. In May, the Justice Department slammed the bureau’s self-assessment as “an advocacy piece to justify what PPB did, blame shortcomings on other entities and circumstances beyond PPB’s control, and seek additional funds for new equipment, training, and personnel.”

A number of protest-related lawsuits have been filed against the city, including by a nurse who was allegedly tackled while he worked as a medic; a resident who was allegedly beaten...
“I have no sympathy for people who speak with disgust about the city. It’s human people who are really struggling.”

—Lisa Bates, Portland State University

PORTLAND POLICE OFFICERS HAVE KILLED TWO PEOPLE SO FAR THIS YEAR, BOTH of whom were in a mental health crisis. (Grand juries declined to file charges against the officers in both cases.) These kinds of incidents are what motivated the creation of Portland Street Response (PSR), which rolled out its pilot program in February in the Lents neighborhood, an underserved area with a high volume of 911 and nuisance calls. The team consists of a firefighter EMT, a licensed mental-health-crisis therapist, and two community health workers who are embedded in the fire department. The goal is to create an alternative emergency response for incidents involving mental health crises or homelessness, which currently consume a sizable chunk of police resources. Half of the arrests made by Portland police in 2017 were of people experiencing homeless-
ness. Oregon has notoriously poor mental health care services, ranking 48th in prevalence of mental illness and access to care, according to one study.

But the pilot’s scope is limited. Currently PSR operates only in Lents, and the team is permitted to independently handle only incidents that do not involve a suicide risk or a weapon and that occur in “publicly accessible spaces” such as stores or lobbies. Because of these limitations, call volume has been lower than expected. In May, three of the city’s five commissioners voted against Hardesty’s proposal to allocate $3.6 million to expand the program into other neighborhoods next spring. Wheeler said he supported the pilot but wanted to see “outcomes” before expanding it; more recently, he said he was working with Hardesty on an expansion. In June, PSR asked the city for permission to respond to calls from private spaces such as homes, hotels, and shelters. The Portland Police Association, which has bargaining rights over PSR expansions, denied the request.

The pilot is one of the few concrete steps Portland has taken to reimagine public safety since George Floyd’s death, though it was in the works years earlier. That, combined with the ongoing political wrangling, has put a tremendous amount of pressure on the program’s small team of first responders. “It’s been really, really stressful,” said Britt Urban, the team’s crisis therapist. “I love the work. I love what we’re doing when we’re out meeting with people…. But then on top of that you have all this chatter and media scrutiny.” While the program is often described in the media as an opposing force to the police, its staff works closely with the bureau, and many of the emergency dispatchers who assign calls to PSR are members of the union. Robyn Burek, a program manager, described this collaboration as helpful. Given the union’s veto power, it is also a necessity. Now that the team has been blocked from independently responding to homes and other private spaces, for instance, PSR can maintain its limited mission, or try to “co-respond” more frequently with officers.

One of chief drivers of the backlash against police reform is concern about homelessness and related public safety issues, a debate that Portland Street Response is also wrapped up in. Some who request the team’s services want it to clear homeless encampments, which is not part of its mission. “There tends to be these two communities,” said Burek. “One community wants this alternative to police response, and another community, largely [people] who live in residences near homeless camps, wants more of an enforcement.”

Homelessness is one of Portland’s most divisive, complex issues. It’s often chalked up to the city offering “generous” services to houseless individuals. However, research indicates that housing unaffordability is a more significant driver of homelessness. Between 2012 and 2017, rents in Portland rose faster than income, while home prices jumped citywide by over $88,000 between 2014 and 2019. Today, 46 percent of renters in the greater Portland region spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent.

According to city officials, there were about six large encampments in Portland before the pandemic; as of June, they numbered more than 100. Tents and other structures dot sidewalks, green spaces, and the shoulders of exit ramps throughout the city. During the past year, the Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program was receiving a record 1,700 complaints about encampments each week, according to The Washington Post. “People typically assume because homelessness is more visible, rates of homelessness have gone up,”
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said Greg Townley, research director at Portland State University’s Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative. Such a rise may be looming as eviction moratoriums end, Townley noted, but the visibility of the thousands of people living without housing mostly reflects the fact that Portland paused what had amounted to dozens of weekly sweeps of encampments after the CDC recommended that people be allowed to shelter in place.

Portland has resumed some sweeps, which the city calls “clean-ups.” Some residents feel that removals aren’t happening fast enough, while others argue that they are an inhumane measure that prioritizes aesthetics over the well-being of unhoused people, who often lose their belongings in the process. “Sweeps are not [an approach] that has been shown to effectively address the issue that we’re facing in terms of housing shortages,” Townley said. “All it is is moving people along.”

Some other new initiatives offer medium- and long-term solutions. County and city officials have united around a plan to create six “safe rest villages,” designated parking or camping sites that will offer hygiene services and case management. These may provide some immediate safe shelter, but they don’t solve the underlying issue of housing affordability. Last year, voters approved a quarter-billion-dollar measure to fund permanent supportive housing, and the City Council enacted a significant zoning reform that will permit multi-unit homes in residential lots, a plan that housing experts believe may eventually help lower housing costs across the city.

Portland’s racial justice protests were driven by the fraught history of racism and policing in the city and its deeply rooted tradition of radical activism. But they also emerged in the context of Portland’s recent transformation from an under-the-radar, affordable city into a national tourist and business destination with snarls of traffic and block-long lines for famous ice cream, where the cost of rent was for a time rising faster than almost anywhere else in the country. This transformation is neatly expressed in the new Ritz-Carlton under construction downtown. Its lower facade is now in place, a skeleton of pale, asymmetric blocks stacked like bones. Invitations sent out recently to potential investors described the tower as a “response to the rapid proliferation of commerce and affluence in Portland.”

Ultimately, the protests became a lightning rod for more expansive anxieties about the trajectory of the city and who wields power here. Before the pandemic, the city government was taking tentative steps to address equity in its planning decisions and to stop the displacement of vulnerable residents in gentrifying neighborhoods. Lisa Bates, of Portland State, believes that some of the backlash from the business community to the protests is really a “very explicit rebuke of the idea of placing equitable development at the core of decision-making.”

“The conversation about the city’s major issues is, in my view, reprehensibly putting the blame on poor people, Black people, and allies of Black civil rights for essentially every ill that’s happening in the city right now,” Bates continued. The result is a narrative that insists “the only way we can save us is more cops; get out of the way of my development; juice at the top so high-income tourists come back.” To acknowledge that Portland’s greatest challenges have little to do with anarchists would mean having a more difficult conversation about the city’s future. It would mean asking, “Who is this city for?”
Sally Rooney’s fiction for end-times

By Tony Tulathimutte

Art isn’t meant to be one-size-fits-all, and a book’s popularity is always less about its worthiness than its marketing budget. We all know this. But the problem—particularly for Sally Rooney, whose two novels and two TV deals have sent critics scrambling to theorize her success—is that hype is easily mistaken for claims to pre-eminence or universality. Which leads people to blame the hyped novelist, rather than the hype itself, for not living up to their highly personal tastes or expectations.

Like all popular books, Rooney’s novels have been critiqued through the lens of their author’s various...
public identities. She has been called both “representatively millennial” and “not really engaging with any of the social issues that might make her truly relevant to the millennial moment.” Her works are “an essentially confessional account of female consciousness,” but she is also “hardly that feminist writer we can rally around.” She’s been lauded for understanding “a kind of enduring, hard-bitten Irishness,” a nationality that supposedly “insulates her from the social and cultural conversation going on in [America],” even though Rooney, who has a master’s degree in American literature and an Internet connection, says she doesn’t “really have a sense of Irishness, or what that means.” The Guardian suggests that the Marxism of Rooney’s characters is there to signal their elite background. The Atlantic calls the novel’s politics “ambient rather than explicit,” while Slate considers them not only explicit but satirical. (Rooney herself has said, “I don’t know what it means to write a Marxist novel.”)

Worst of all, Rooney has suffered the misfortune of being dubbed “the First Great Millennial Author” in The New York Times, a title that’s not only impossible to live up to but invites invidious scrutiny, making the author accountable for the bluster of critics and publicists. It’s fine to argue about how Marxist, feminist, Irish, millennial, or “great” a book is, but when most of the writing about it consists of squabbling over how much and what sort of relevant subject matter it contains, we are doing hype criticism, not book criticism.

With all of this in mind, Rooney’s third novel, Beautiful World, Where Are You, feels at times like an attempt to reassert the author’s authority. The basic setup will be familiar to readers of Normal People and Conversations With Friends. Set in the summer of 2019 and onward, the book follows two twentysomething literary Irish women, Alice and Eileen, who share an intimate but unequal friendship, date unreliable men, and deliver mini-lectures in the understated tones of millennial miserablist. Though the women are physically separated for most of the novel, their stories run parallel: Alice convalesces from a nervous breakdown after the success of her second novel; Eileen, an editorial assistant at a literary magazine, is on the rebound from a breakup. On Tinder, Alice meets the roguish Felix, a warehouse worker who likes to neg her, and Eileen pursues her childhood crush, Simon, an earnestly Catholic left-wing policy adviser with a girlfriend. The chapters alternate between Alice and Eileen’s letters to each other and their dealings with men, and they provide the same mix of hot-and-cold romantic and intellectual shadowboxing as do Rooney’s first two novels.

But what’s new in Beautiful World, Where Are You is a heightened self-awareness, conveyed mainly through Alice and Eileen’s correspondence. Having thoroughly metabolized the likely reception of a Sally Rooney novel, Beautiful World seems eager to sucker-punch its critics by clarifying its own viewpoints beyond all doubt. Through her characters, Rooney strides into the arena in full debate-champ regalia, penning mini-essays about identity politics, extractive capitalism, Catholicism, climate change, theories of sexuality, Manet’s portraits of Berthe Morisot, and Late Bronze Age collapse.

Both protagonists also deliver bleak takes on the contemporary novel and publishing world. The depressive Alice maligns her own popular books, considering them “morally and politically worthless,” even though writing is “the only thing I want to do.” The equally depressive Eileen, who feels overshadowed by Alice’s success, argues that “the contemporary novel is (with very few exceptions) irrelevant.” Nonetheless, Alice tells Eileen—and anyone else who might happen to be listening—that readers who project authors onto their books or characters are “quite literally insane”: “what do the books gain by being attached to me, my face, my mannerisms, in all their demoralising specificity? Nothing.”

Rooney’s strategy of autofiction-baiting is counterintuitive—pulling aside the curtain only to insist we pay no attention to the author behind it. But the point is well taken. It’s wrong to base criticism on fragments of an author’s public persona; books should be judged by the terms they set for themselves.

So what are the terms of Beautiful World, Where Are You? Rooney has called her first novel “conventional in its structure, even though its prose style and the themes it explores and the politics that underpin it, maybe, are on the experimental side.” But this book’s themes and politics turn out to be surprisingly trad-cath, as its characters indulge in a nostalgia that is sheepish but heartfelt. The title, borrowed from a 1788 Friedrich Schiller poem, gestures at the underlying theme of beauty’s scarcity in the modern world, and the book’s implicit answer to this question is: in the bygone past.

“My theory is that human beings lost the instinct for beauty in 1976, when plastics became the most widespread material in existence,” Eileen laments, while Alice believes the beauty instinct died out “when the Berlin Wall came down.” They long for the reassuring stability of some halcyon age before capitalism. As Eileen writes:

It is hard in these circumstances not to feel that modern living compares poorly with the old ways of life, which have come to represent something more substantial, more connected to the essence of the human condition. This nostalgic impulse is of course extremely powerful, and has recently been harnessed to great effect by reactionary and fascist political movements, but I’m not convinced that this means the impulse itself is intrinsically fascist. I think it makes sense that people are looking back wistfully to a time before the natural world started dying, before our shared cultural forms degraded into mass marketing and before our cities and towns became anonymous employment hubs.

Even with the caveat that “we have good reason to be skeptical of aesthetic nostalgia,” the protagonists’ desire to embrace tradition is tempered only slightly by the awareness that this position is at odds with their politics. But their avowed atheism doesn’t stop them from making doe eyes at God hypothetically: “If I believed in

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God,” Eileen writes, “I wouldn’t want to prostrate myself before him and ask for forgiveness. I would just want to thank him every day, for everything.” And Alice: “When it comes to putting something at the center of life, God strikes me as a good option—better at least than making up stories about people who don’t exist.”

Just as it flirts with nostalgia, Beautiful World also reserves ductfuls of bile for what it considers to be signs of present-day degeneracy. The two protagonists agree that “civilization is presently in its decadent declining phase, and that lurid ugliness is the predominant visual feature of modern life”—and that’s not just the plastics. Eileen denounces the beauty industry as “responsible for some of the worst ugliness we see around us in our visual environment, and the worst, most false aesthetic ideal, which is the ideal of consumerism,” and she considers vulgar the desire to look attractive: “to confuse these basically auto-erotic or status-driven impulses with real aesthetic experience seems to me an extremely serious mistake for anyone who cares about culture.” Never mind Eileen’s casual banishment of God. “When it comes to putting something at the center of life, God strikes me as a good option—better at least than making up stories about people who don’t exist.”

Meanwhile Alice, a “widely despised celebrity novelist” by her own reckoning, feels that—spoilers incoming—this book is straightforwardly rearguard, not just in structure but in worldview: avers to pop, bibliophilic, Old Left, and proudly dowdy, placing at its emotional center the virtues of family, monogamy, and just a tiny bit of God. Any critic keen to describe Rooney’s appeal as a function of her youth is in for a shock of the old.

His dwelling on the past comes in spite of the fact that—spoilers incoming—the book’s ending gets as close to the present as a novel can get. Its final section, set during the Covid-19 lockdown, finds the protagonists contentedly partnered and well-off. Alice, still a dour millionaire, has downgraded her atheism to agnosticism and is working on her next novel, despite her earlier doubts about the worth of writing. Eileen is happily pregnant and “financially secure,” with “a supportive partner who loves me”; her main concern now is weighing the merits of “buying a house and having children with a boy I grew up with.”

The pandemic might have been the ideal occasion for Rooney to show how her characters’ abstract ideals are tested when history comes knocking, but it turns out to be only a worrisome augur of things to come, not something that affects them severely. “The difference between lockdown and normal life is (depressingly?) minimal,” Alice writes, before a page-long rant about her fame and publicity. You could say that the book ever obviates this problem by not subverting its confines at all, being complacent in literal confinement.

Intentional or not, I think it’s a missed opportunity. Rather than grapple with the tension between their reactionary aesthetics and revolutionary politics, the characters cop out, drop out, and opt to cultivate their own gardens, literally: Felix gets into gardening. It’s not that seeing these privileged characters weather Covid peacefully is implausible or unsatisfying, though it does feel somewhat unearned, given that the book’s plot consists of a few minor rough patches in their various relationships. The real issue is that it’s framed, chillingly, as a happy ending. (We know this because at the end Eileen writes, “I’m very happy,” while Alice feels “wonderfully and almost frighteningly lucky.”) “The problem with the contemporary Euro-American novel,” Alice contends earlier in the book, “is that it relies for its structural integrity on suppressing the lived realities of most human beings on earth.” Yet Beautiful World doesn’t resist or challenge this notion but rather capitulates to it, offering the comforts of a more beautiful age that it knows never existed.
spellbinding and new”; they identified “something on the craft level, the line level, that turns these boilerplate romantic stories into compelling works of art.” Most praised her style’s simplicity and precision (“concise,” “lucid and exacting,” “even-toned,” “muted”) or the way it embodied a tech-savvy zeitgeist. Rooney “captures meticulously the way a generation raised on social data thinks and talks,” wrote one reviewer, while others detected a “ring of native digital literacy,” with paragraphs “built for the Instagram age.”

I also used to think Rooney’s prose was clean and errorless; it turns out I didn’t read closely enough. When you slow down to study the sentences, the first thing you’ll notice everywhere are intensifiers and down-toners: those kludgy modifiers used to compensate for inexact word choice. Not that bean-counting alone is any way to evaluate literature, but just to convey the extent of the problem here, the words “very” and “really” appear a combined 238 times over 353 pages, while “kind of,” “a little,” “a bit,” and “almost” show up a combined 292 times. Sometimes they appear twice in the same sentence (“I dread to imagine what kind of faces I was making, in my efforts to seem like the kind of person who regularly interacts with others”), or in consecutive sentences:

You left kind of abruptly, he said. I was looking for you.
You couldn’t have been looking for very long, she said. It’s an extremely small house.

He gave a kind of puzzled smile.
No, well, you hadn’t been gone for very long, he said.

Note how “kind of” appears in both the dialogue and the distant narration; the same habits crop up in Alice and Eileen’s letters, which means that the tic belongs to the author as much as any particular character.

Then there’s the abuse of stock gestures, those little tells meant to indicate how a character is feeling. Everyone is constantly described as looking at or looking away from each other, pausing or saying nothing, usually for a moment or a few seconds. Laughs and smiles appear 253 times, accompanied by generic adjectives like “wry,” “shy,” “sheepish,” “conspiratorial.” Of the 63 instances in which we are told someone nods, 27 of them helpfully specify that the character nodded her head. Entire passages are stitched together from these gestures: “She lowered her gaze then. Maybe that’s because you don’t know me very well, she said. He gave an offhanded laugh. She said nothing. He went on watching her back for a few seconds longer.”

Many of these lapses are side effects of the distant narration. Unlike Rooney’s two earlier novels, the narrator in Beautiful World has no direct access to the characters’ thoughts and perceptions. This opacity is fine for writers with the theatrical talent of conveying their characters’ moods through dialogue and action alone; for Rooney, whose earlier novels tended to articulate feelings and opinions directly, it’s a liability. The narrator is forced to cheat by guessing at what’s going through the characters’ heads, making the tone not just generic but wishy-washy: “He appeared to give this some thought, or perhaps made a show of doing so.”

These and other blunders become predictable to the point of accidental comedy, such as when the word “very” appears four times in the epigraph. You could argue that in real life, people do laugh or fall silent or begin sentences with “Well,” but I’d say plausibility is a low bar for fiction, and definitely not worth the monotonous repetition.

Based on how often the characters look at their shoes, phones, or mirrors, it’d be easy to take some cheap shot at the putative narcissism, social withdrawal, or tech addiction of millennials. My point is simply that this book shouldn’t contain all of the following lines:

She dropped her gaze into her lap
She dropped her gaze to the ground
Simon dropped his gaze down to his feet
Alice looked at Felix, who was gazing down at his feet
She lowered her gaze
she lowered her eyes
he smiled and lowered his eyes
she said nothing, and stared down at her feet
Alice stared down at her lap
Alice stared across the table

Eileen stared at the screen for a while
For a few seconds Eileen stared down at the screen of her phone
she glanced up and smiled politely before returning her attention to the screen
she glanced at him once more
He glanced over his shoulder once more at the exit
She glanced back once over her shoulder
Felix glanced at her over his shoulder
Alice looked struck by this, and glanced back over her shoulder
He glanced at himself in the mirror
he glanced at his own reflection in the mirror
Felix glanced at them in the rear-view mirror
Felix glanced at her in the mirror
[she] glanced quickly in the dim, blotchy mirror
She was staring wanily into the mirror
His eyes travelling over the slim figure
in the mirror
Simon met his eyes in the mirror
Eileen met Felix’s eyes in the mirror
Their eyes met in the mirror
Their eyes met their eyes met
their eyes met

Exhausting, though not exhaustive—a full catalog of every time someone glances or looks or falls silent would be, no joke, at least 10 times longer.

I still grant that some readers might not mind the muddled politics or stylistic infelicities; as I said, I overlooked the latter myself in the first two books. The New Yorker once defended Rooney’s prose by arguing that the “quality of thought eliminates the need for pen-twirling rhetorical flourishses.” And it’s true that Rooney’s arguments are often thoughtful and her characters sturdy, even when the craft isn’t.

Maybe if you believe it’s too late for politics and unconscionable to spend too much time worrying about style on a dying planet, old-fashioned love stories with insightful protagonists and happy endings are good enough. But for a novel that condemns the dearth of beauty and taste in modern culture with such magisterial insightful protagonists and happy endings
politics and unconscionable to spend too much time worrying about style on a dying planet, old-fashioned love stories with insightful protagonists and happy endings are good enough. But for a novel that condemns the dearth of beauty and taste in modern culture with such magisterial insightful protagonists and happy endings...
The Politician-Scholar

Eric Williams and the tangled history of capitalism and slavery

BY GERALD HORNE

BEFORE HE BECAME A CELEBRATED AUTHOR AND THE FOUNDING father and first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Eustace Williams was an adroit footballer. At his high school, Queen’s Royal College, he was a fierce competitor, which likely led to an injury that left him deaf in his right ear. Yet as Williams’s profile as a scholar and national leader rose, so did the attempts by his critics to turn his athleticism against him. An “expert dribbler” known for prancing downfield with the ball kissing one foot, then the other, Williams was now accused by his political detractors of not being a team player. Driven by his desire to play to the gallery—or so it was said—he proved to be uninterested in whether his team (or his nation, not to mention the erstwhile British Commonwealth) was victorious.

What his critics described as a weakness, though, was also a strength: His willingness to go it alone on the field probably contributed to his willingness to break from the historiographic pack during his tenure at Oxford University, and it also led him to chart his own political course. Williams, after all, often had good reason not to trust his political teammates, particularly those with close ties to London. Moreover, he was convinced that a good politician should play to the gallery: Ultimately, he was a public representative. And this single-minded determination to score even if it meant circumventing his teammates, instilled in him a critical mindset, one that helped define both his scholarship—in particular his groundbreaking Capitalism and Slavery—and his work as a politician and an intellectual, though admittedly this trait proved to be more effective at Oxford and Howard University than during his political career, which coincided with the bruising battles of the Cold War.

A new edition of Capitalism and Slavery, published by the University of North Carolina Press with a foreword by the economist William Darity, reminds us in particular of Williams’s independent political and intellectual spirit and how his scholarship upended the historiographical consensus on slavery and abolition. Above all else, in this relatively slender volume, Williams asserted the primacy of the enslaved themselves in breaking the chains that bound them, putting their experiences at the center of his research. Controversially, he also placed slavery at the heart of the rise of capitalism and the British Empire, which carried profound implications for its successor, the United States. The same holds true for his devaluation of the humanitarianism of white abolitionists and their allies as a spur for ending slavery. In many ways, the book augured his determination as a political actor as well: Williams the academic striker sped downfield far ahead of the rest and scored an impressive goal for the oppressed while irking opponents and would-be teammates alike. But his subsequent career as a politician also came as a surprise: Despite his own radical commitments as a historian, as a politician Williams broke in significant ways from many of his anti-colonial peers. For both reasons of his own making and reasons related to leading a small island nation in the United States’ self-proclaimed backyard, Williams as prime minister was hardly seen as an avatar of radicalism.

ERIC WILLIAMS was born in 1911 in Port-of-Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, then a financially depressed British colony. His father was far from wealthy, receiving only a primary education before becoming a civil service
clerk at the tender age of 17. In his affecting autobiography, Williams describes his mother’s “contribution to the family budget” by baking “bread and cakes” for sale. She was a descendant of an old French Creole family, with the lighter skin hue to prove it.

Despite his humble origins, the studious and disciplined Williams won a prized academic scholarship at the age of 11, putting him on track to become a “coloured Englishman,” he noted ruefully. His arrival at Oxford in 1931—again on a scholarship—seemingly confirmed this future. There he mingled in a progressive milieu that included the founder of modern Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, and the self-exiled African American socialist Paul Robeson. It was at Oxford that Williams wrote “The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery,” which was later transformed into the book at hand. In both works, but in the book more decisively, Williams punctured the then-reigning notion that abolitionism had been driven by humanitarianism—an idea that conveniently kept Europeans and Euro-Americans at the core of this epochal development. Instead Williams stressed African agency and resistance, which in turn drove London’s financial calculations. He accomplished this monumental task in less than 200 pages of text, making the response that followed even more noteworthy. Extraordinarily, entire volumes have been devoted to weighing his conclusions in this one book.

It would not be an exaggeration, then, to say that when Williams published *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944, it ignited a firestorm of applause and fury alike. His late biographer, Colin Palmer, observed that “reviewers of African descent uniformly praised the work, while those who claimed European heritage were much less enthusiastic and more divided in their reception.” One well-known scholar of the latter persuasion assailed the “Negro nationalism” that Williams espoused in it. Nonetheless, *Capitalism and Slavery* has become arguably the most academically influential work on slavery written to date. It has sold tens of thousands of copies—with no end in sight—and has been translated into numerous European languages as well as Japanese and Korean. The book continues to inform debates on the extent to which capitalism was shaped by the enslavement of Africans, not to mention the extent to which these enslaved workers struck the first—and most decisive—blow against their inhumane bondage.

Proceeding chronologically from 1492 to the eve of the US Civil War, Williams grounded his narrative in parliamentary debates, merchants’ papers, documents from Whitehall, memoirs, and abolitionist renderings, recording the actions of the oppressed as they were reflected in these primary sources. The book has three central theses that have captured the attention of generations of readers and historians. The first was Williams’s almost offhand assertion that slavery had produced racism, not vice versa: “Slavery was not born of racism,” he contended, but “rather, racism was the consequence of slavery.” To begin with, “unfree labor in the New World was brown, white, black and yellow; Catholic, Protestant and pagan,” with various circumstances combining to promote the use of enslaved African labor. For example, “escape was easy for the white servant; less easy for the Negro,” who was “conspicuous by his color and features”—and, Williams added, “the Negro slave was cheaper.” But it was in North America most dramatically that slavery became encoded with “race” and thus, through its contorted rationalizations, ended up producing a new culture of racism.

This thesis was provocative for several reasons, but perhaps most of all because it implied that once the material roots of slavery had been ripped up, the modern world would finally witness the progressive erosion of anti-Black politics and culture. This optimistic view was echoed by the late Howard University classicist Frank Snowden in his trailblazing book *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*. Of course, sterner critics could well contend that such optimism was misplaced, that it misjudged the extent to which many post-slavery societies had been poisoned at the root. But this sunnier view of post-slavery societies was spawned in part by the proliferation of anti-colonial and anti-Jim Crow activism in the 1940s and ’50s.

Williams’s second thesis hasn’t stirred as much controversy, but it also exerted an enormous influence on the scholarship to come: He insisted that slavery fueled British industrial development, and therefore that slavery was the foundation not only of British capitalism but of capitalism as a whole. To prove this claim, Williams cited the many British mercantilists who themselves knew that slavery and the slave trade (not to mention the transportation of settlers) relied on a complex economic system, one that included shipbuilding and shackles to restrain the enslaved, along with firearms, textiles, and rum—manufacturing, in short. Sugar and tobacco, then cotton, were ferociously profitable, adding mightily to London’s coffers, which meant more ships and firearms, in a circle devoid of virtue. Assuredly, the immense wealth generated by slavery and the slave trade—the latter, at times, bringing a 1,700 percent profit—provided rocket fuel to boost the takeoff of capitalism itself.

If Williams’s first thesis has been critiqued by subsequent historians and scholars, who have found its apparent optimism about the ability to uproot racism misguided, his second has been largely embraced and bolstered by subsequent scholars, including Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and Joseph Inikori in *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*.

The latter, in fact, goes farther than Williams does. Inikori argues that before the advent of the slave trade, England’s West Yorkshire, the West Midlands, and South Lancashire were poorer regions; but buoyed by slavery’s economic stimulus, they became wealthy and industrialized. Similarly, in the period from 1650 to 1850, the Americas were effectively an extension of Africa itself in terms of exports, buoying the former to the detriment of the latter. More polemically, Rodney portrays Africa and Europe on a veritable seesaw, with one declining as the other rises, the two processes intrinsically united in a manner that echoes Williams.

The scholarship that followed Williams’s book also pointed to something that Williams missed in his account of the entwined nature of capitalism and slavery: The intense feudal religiosity that characterized Spain, Protestant England’s in—

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quisitorial Catholic foe, began to yield in favor of a similarly intense racism—albeit shaped and formed by religion, just as racial slavery shaped and formed capitalism. As the historian Donald Matthews suggested in his book At the Altar of Lynching, this ultimate Jim Crow expression of hate—often featuring the immolation of the cross, if not of the victimized himself—was also a kind of religious sacrament as well as a holdover from a previous epoch in England's history, in which Queen Mary I (also known as “Bloody Mary”) burned Protestant foes at the stake during her tumultuous and brief 16th-century reign. In the bumpy transition from feudalism to capitalism, there is a perverse devolutionary logic embedded in the shift from torching presumed heretics to torching actual Africans.

Nonetheless, Williams’s most disputed thesis was his downgrading of the heroic role of the British abolitionists. In his telling of their story, he argued that naked economic self-interest, more than morality or humanitarianism, drove England’s retreat from the slave trade in 1807 and its barring of slavery in 1833. Like The New York Times’ 1619 Project, this part of Williams’s argument pricked a sensitive nerve in the nation’s self-conception. In 2007, on the 200th anniversary of the official banning of human trafficking from Africa, the British prime minister and the monarch presided over a commemoration of settler hero Ethan Allen was implicated. Despite the convincing evidence that Williams deploys to make his case, this particular thesis is still routinely ignored by many contemporary historians, who argue that the abolitionist movement was ignited instead by the rebellion of 1776 and its purportedly liberatory message, often citing Vermont’s abolition decree in 1777. But as the unjustly neglected historian Harvey Amani Whitfield observes in The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont, the language of this measure was sufficiently porous that even the family of settler hero Ethan Allen was implicated in the odiousness of enslavement. (More to the point, the decree could easily be seen as a cynically opportunist last-ditch attempt to appeal to Africans who were already defecting to the Union Jack.)

In Capitalism and Slavery, Williams also stressed the agency of the enslaved and their role in abolishing slavery—the most dynamic and powerful force, he argued, and one that has been “studiously ignored.” Early on, Williams demonstrated, the enslaved sought to abolish slavery through insurrection, murder, poisonings, arson—“indolence, sabotage and revolt” was his descriptor of these actions—and he charts how these acts of militant resistance made their way back to London as well, where many took note and realized that lives and, more importantly, investments could be jeopardized. “Every white slave owner in Jamaica, Cuba or Texas,” Williams wrote, “lived in dread of another Toussaint L’Ouverture,” the true founder of revolutionary Haiti and the grandest abolitionist of all. Rather than accede to this “emancipation from below,” the British government, prodded by British abolitionists, opted for “emancipation from above.”

Williams’s masterwork is so rich with ideas and historical insights that it still speaks to today’s historiography, but in ways that have seemingly eluded many contemporary practitioners. For example, in his focus on England’s so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688—which unleashed a devastating era of “free trade in Africans,” as merchants descended on the beleaguered continent with the manic energy of crazed bees, manacling Africans and shipping them in breathtaking numbers to a cruel fate—Williams anticipated the illuminating contribution of the British historian William Pettigrew in his insightful Freedom’s Debt.

Part of the problem is that today’s historians are so siloed, narrowly focused on an era, such as 1750-83 or 1850-65, that they remain oblivious to preceding events—even ones as momentous as 1688, 1776’s true precursor. These scholars mimic the uncomprehending jury in the 1992 trial of the Los Angeles police officers whose vicious beating of Rodney King was captured on tape. Instead of allowing the tape to unfold seamlessly from beginning to end, sly defense attorneys exposed the jury to mere fragments and convinced its members that the disconnected episodes hardly amounted to a crime.

Indeed, just as slavery drove 1688, it assuredly compelled Texas’s secession from Mexico in 1836 and then—finally—the failure of 1861. And yes, along with the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which sought to restrain real estate speculators (including George

Offering a close study of capitalism, Williams also emphasized the enslaved’s agency.
Washington) from moving westward to seize Indigenous land, forcing London to expend blood and treasure, slavery was at the heart of 1776. As with many earthshaking events, the lust for land and enslaved labor drove the founding of the republic.

Williams also anticipated one of the more important scholarly interventions of recent decades: He offered an early account of the “construction of whiteness,” a subject written about in the enlightening work of David Roediger and Nell Irvin Painter, among others. The slave trade, Williams argued, “had become necessary to almost every nation in Europe.” As a result, a new identity politics of “whiteness”—militarized and monetized—had to emerge in order to justify the subjugation of continents and peoples and the gargantuan transfer of wealth to London, Paris, Copenhagen, Lisbon, Madrid, Amsterdam, and Washington. No insult to Brussels intended, but the formation of the United States was little more than a bloodier precursor of the European Union, manifested on an alien continent with a more coercive regime.

Inevitably, this cash machine of enslavement and the way it racialized humanity did not disappear when slavery itself was finally abolished. The legacy of racism persisted in Jim Crow, then in outrageously disparate health outcomes and the carceral system. There is no more illustrative example than the hellhole that is Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, which ineluctably carries the name of the region in Africa that produced a disproportionate share of the US enslaved—and thus today’s imprisoned.

Unfortunately, all of the jousting that Williams had to do with the mainstream of British and US historiography, which tended to downplay slave resistance while failing to think critically about capitalism as a system, prevented him from forging a larger political framework in the book that would have strengthened its historical insights. Encountering his discussion of the still-astonishing influx of enslaved Africans into Brazil in the 1840s, the uncareful reader could easily conclude that British nationals were largely responsible—and not US citizens. Perhaps understandably, Williams, who languished under the British Empire’s lash for decades, directed his ire toward London more than any other place—much in the way that James, his fellow countryman, focused intently on London’s malign role in subjugating revolutionary Haiti and hardly engaged with Washington’s.

Ironically, when he finally entered politics, Williams—who had so successfully broken from the pack on the soccer field and in his scholarship—managed to achieve only lesser results. Although Karl Marx, in Chapter 31 of the first volume of Capital, prefigured him in treating slavery in the Americas as essential to the rise of British industry, Williams was no Marxist—even if many of his peers in the Pan-African movement were decidedly of the socialist persuasion. This was true not only of James but of another Trinidadian, Claudia Jones, a former US Communist Party leader who was deported to London and became a stalwart of Black Britain (though she is better known today as a foremother of intersectionality). Jones was part of a circle that included Nelson Mandella and his successor, Thabo Mbeki, both of whom had been leading members of the South African Communist Party, as well as the similarly oriented founding fathers of postcolonial Africa: Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah; Angola’s Agostinho Neto; Mozambique’s Samora Machel; Guinea-Bissau’s Amilcar Cabral. All of these leaders were more than willing to receive aid from Moscow in order to combat their North Atlantic foes. Nonetheless, both Williams and those to his left still tended to see 1776 as the start of an “incomplete” revolution.

On this, there is much to dispute, and one might start by comparing the outcome of 1776 to the 1948 implantation of apartheid in another USA: the then Union of South Africa. Apartheid was founded with the central goal of uplifting the Afrikaner poor (akin to the “American dream”) while grinding Africans into neo-slavery (they objected strenuously, as did their counterparts in 1776). Decades earlier, the Afrikaners, who were the descendants of Dutch immigrants, had fought a putatively anti-colonial war against London, then sought to gobble up the land of their sprawling neighbor, today’s Namibia, not far from the size territorially of California and Texas combined, just as the Cherokee Nation was expropriated by Washington. Thus, as with 1776, the launch of apartheid South Africa could be deemed an “incomplete” revolution that somehow forgot to include the African majority—or was this exclusion and exploitation central to such a draconian intervention?

For his part, Williams the politician was forced to reckon with many of these knotty matters, in particular as they pertained to the purposefully incomplete process of decolonization and the rise of new forms of empire. As prime minister, in order to court the United States’ favor, he was derelict in extending solidarity to its antagonists in Cuba and neighboring Guyana, where Cheddi Jagan would be joined by Jamaica’s Michael Manley in seeking to pursue a noncapitalist path to independence.

Williams’s tenure as prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago extended for nearly two decades, from 1962 to 1981. But the presence of oil on the archipelago attracted the most vulturous wing of capital, further limiting his aspirations. As in Guyana, tensions between the various sectors of the working class—one with roots in Africa, the other in British India—were not conducive to anti-imperialist unity, hampering Williams’s ability to forge a sturdy base. Incongruously, though he did as much as any individual to assert the primacy of enslaved Africans in modern history, he ran afoul of the Black Power movement in his homeland, which—not altogether inaccurately—found him too compliant in dealing with the intrusive imperial presence in Trinidad. Yet despite being harpered by a divided working class and a proliferating Black Power movement that often regarded him with contempt, Williams was able to hang on to office, though he lacked the political strength to solve the persistent problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

The scholar whose X-ray vision detected the role of enslaved people in the innards of capitalism and empire was seemingly felled by both when the moment to confront their toxic legacy arrived. Even so, the failings of Williams the politico should not be used to vitiate the insights of Williams the scholar. As slavery-infused capitalism continues to run amok, we must, like an expert diagnostician, finally develop an adequate history that can drive a comprehensive prescription for our ills.
Very Recent History

The sprawling stories of Anthony Veasna So

BY LARISSA PHAM

EAR THE END OF “THREE WOMEN OF CHUCK’S DONUTS,” the first story in Anthony Veasna So’s posthumous collection Afterparties, something unexpectedly violent happens at a doughnut shop. It’s not a murder, exactly, but there is blood. “Help me clean this up,” Sothy, the shop owner, instructs her two daughters, who are helping run the store through the late-night shift. “Customers can’t see blood so close to the donuts.”

Before the blood in the doughnut shop, “dissolving into pink suds of soap” as the women mop it up, we encounter the remembered bloodshed of millions: Sothy, the mother in “Chuck’s Donuts,” survived the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s. Her two daughters, Tevy and Kayley, were born in the United States. Separated by a generation from their mother’s traumas, Tevy and Kayley nonetheless retain a painful awareness of their family’s displacement, which is coupled with an uneasy understanding of their own place in the world. Tevy, a high school student who is enrolled in a class at the local community college, is writing a paper called “On Whether Being Khmer Means You Understand Khmer People.” Her motivation to seek an academic understanding of her cultural identity speaks to the kind of mobility that’s available to her generation—it’s inextricably tied to her background even as it takes her away from it. Tevy’s reasoning is that taking a college course will look good on college applications. “Maybe it would even win her a fancy scholarship, allow her to escape this depressed city,” she thinks.

The themes of Khmer shared culture and belonging, articulated or not, are central to the book. So integrates Cambodian culture into his stories with a nonchalant verve, leaving transliterated Khmer unitalicized, unconcerned with decoding the honorifics of various family members for an English-speaking audience. Complex family and social dynamics play across the page in zippy dialogue and chatty, indirect speech. In one story, which follows an ill-fated wedding and reception, the characters have stereotyped names like “Fun Cousin” and “Privileged Failure”—the joy of it, of course, is that the characters escape their types.

So’s characters are refugees and the children of refugees, scraping together an existence in central California. They’re not particularly noble; instead, they just want what they want. In “The Monks,” a young deadbeat hoping to honor his father’s death goes to stay at the wat—the local Buddhist temple—but all he really wants is to have sex with his hot girlfriend, whose bikini photo he’s smuggled in with him. In “Superking Son Scores Again,” a badminton superstar turned grocery store owner attempts to defend his legacy when he’s challenged to a match by an upstart teen. The result, narrated in the first person plural by an audience of neighborhood boys, is both comedic and tragic. Superking Son’s prowess is upheld in a series of “incredible smashes,” but his life’s tragic smallness is also brought to light. “What we remember was this: the shock of witnessing Superking Son’s inflated ego spurring all over the gym. Our bodies settling into pity.”
Afterparties’ stories are sprawling, at times bewildering for their many narrative digressions, and consistently very funny, shot through with the kind of black humor that’s also saturated with grief. There’s a constant whiplash that happens in the text, the characters’ attention drawn repeatedly to the knowledge of what they, or their parents, have survived. Of Superking Son, the badminton star, we are told: “He could smash a birdie so hard, make it fly so fast, we swore that when the birdie zipped by it shattered the force field suffocating us, the one composed of our parents’ unreasonable expectations, their paranoia that our world could crumble at a moment’s notice and send us back to where we started, starving and poor and subject to a genocidal dictator.” It’s the parents’ paranoia, but it becomes the sons’, too—they live under its auspices.

But then, with an adolescent’s attention span, the narrative whips around again. So continues: “Word has it that when Superking Son was young, he was an even better player, with a full head of hair.” It’s recent history, but it’s still history. The survivors are now balding and have kids and auto shops. Alternately depressed and spooked by the claustrophobia of their parents’ generation, So’s second-generation narrators crave freedom, casual sex, and college, leveling up in the world and out of their hometowns. They don’t struggle with their otherness in the way of an after-school special; their cultural trauma hovers at the edge of every page, but their problems are those of any young adult.

In “The Shop,” So introduces us to a recent college grad, back home and helping out in his dad’s auto repair shop. The shop is floundering, mostly because his dad keeps hiring his Cambodian friends. When the college grad isn’t working at the shop, he hangs out with Paul, a half-Italian, half-Mexican guy who was cool when they were both younger. Now Paul works at AT&T and is closeted and cheating on his Filipina girlfriend, Meryl.

As the romance develops, we track its different elements—part utilitarian, part clandestine, part genuine—in moments between hook-ups, made intimate by their strangeness: “His nose was huge but well proportioned,” So’s college grad recalls. “Sometimes I closed my eyes and used his nose to apply pressure to my closed eye sockets. It was weird but satisfying, like my eyeballs were getting massaged. If Paul wasn’t into it, he never said anything to stop me.” Moments like these—crystalline, pitch-perfect, odd—make So’s stories feel alive and present. They’re meandering, too, just the way life is. In “The Shop,” a car gets lost, Paul considers coming out, the monks come to bless the shop with good vibes, and the narrator has a poignant realization about the nature of his parents’ sacrifice for him. His new awareness might be what connects the story to a lineage of other immigrant stories, but in the end, the shop’s fate is still uncertain. There’s no neat resolution. Instead, we’re left haunted by the shape left open by sacrifice. “But what will we do after?” the narrator wonders. What happens to a people after survival? How do you keep going on when suddenly the worst possible scenario is past? The questions linger.

The stories of Afterparties have frequently been described as new. In a recent posthumous profile of So in New York magazine, his editor, Helen Atsma, said: “I sadly had not read fiction set in a Cambodian American community before.” She continued, “As an editor, what’s always exciting is feeling like you’re reading something new and alive and invigorating.” New voices, new writers, new stories—it sounds like the same marketing that accompanies every fêté debut, and often about a world that’s not so much new as previously ignored by white, mainstream literary publishing.

But So’s project of depicting the Cambodian American community, certainly new in that context, also feels new in another way. Because So is writing about a very recent history, he’s telling stories about a history that has not completely come to an end. If anything, it’s just beginning. The Khmer Rouge genocide began in 1975, largely targeting ethnic minorities, and continued for nearly four bloody years. Hundreds of thousands of Cham Muslims and Chinese or Vietnam-ese Cambodians were killed or otherwise disappeared: The genocide’s nearly 2 million victims also included those who weren’t directly killed but died of illness, exhaustion, or starvation. In the decade following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, the United States admitted nearly 150,000 Cambodian refugees. As is common among refugees, families joined other families where they were settled; communities became bigger communities. One such community arose in Stockton, Calif. Now, just 42 years after the end of the genocide, its aftereffects are still being played out, in lives and in the stories about them.

And you can walk into a bookstore—any bookstore—and pick up a collection of stories by a Cambodian American, born stateside, whose parents survived the genocide. Considering how raw and painful this history is, it is no simple task to depict it sensitively and honestly and with the pain and loss at the center of it and while living among many who were its immediate survivors.

There’s also another sense in which Afterparties feels like part of an ongoing, unfinished story. So, who died last year at the age of 28, would have been at the vanguard of a generation of Southeast Asian American writers who are just now coming of age and developing their own body of literature. What this body of literature looks like—what it is flourishing into—is developing in real time as the children of immigrants and refugees grapple with topics different from the ones that preoccupied their parents. It’s a new genre of writing, evolving with every text. For years, for example, English-language literature about Vietnam was really just literature about the Vietnam War, which in turn was a genre largely dominated by white men. More recently, writers like Ocean Vuong have redefined what a Vietnamese diasporic literature can look like. It’s not that it didn’t exist—it has, bolstered by writers like Lan Cao and Monique Truong—but the diaspora itself is still so young. So’s story collection signals the beginning of a new wave of literature. His portrait of a

Afterparties
Stories
By Anthony Veasna So
Ecco.
272 pp. $27.99

Larissa Pham is an artist, a writer, and the author of the essay collection Pop Song.
Cambodian American community is one of the first.

Is it enough to be the first? It’s enough to be true.

Reading Afterparties, I’m struck by how dense it is, how steeped its pages are in Southeast Asian culture, which permeates the text the way incense scents every room in a house—not just the altar room, where the ancestors are supposed to live. “Maly, Maly, Maly” and “Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly” are two stories that deal with the concept of dead family members reincarnating as living ones and explores how the desire for reincarnation—more than reincarnation itself, ever impossible to prove—forms a bond between generations. It represents filial duty, literalized as physical care. Nurse Serey dedicates her work to helping dementia patients, including a distant relative who claims to recognize her as someone else. Maly resents but is also drawn to her second cousin’s daughter, said to be the reincarnation of Maly’s mother, who died by suicide. The burden carried by the living, inherent in a family, bequeathed to a mother or daughter, goes on even after death. In So’s world, you’re always holding on to someone else’s failures, their rage and their grief, not only because they belonged to your parents or grandparents but because they are also yours. That’s what it means to be in a family and, in many ways, to be part of a community.

When someone dies young, we think of their potential as limitless. Their life is like some models of the universe: cone-shaped, endlessly expanding. In an essay published posthumously in n+1, So wrote poignantly of grief both personal and, one might think, cultural: “How do you escape? Perhaps by spinning so hard into the truth that you collapse.” Afterparties is one manifestation of that truth; a portrait of a community, a mood, a feeling, an interconnected chorus of refugee experience. That community is getting older and younger at the same time—older as its elders age; younger as new voices come to join them. Anthony So has already captured something essential about the Cambodian American experience, which is by necessity a youthful one. That will inevitably change. It is literature’s loss to have been deprived of a voice—bitterly funny, exuberantly sad—who would have loved to tell us about it.
We have named the era of runaway climate change the “Anthropocene,” which tells you everything you need to know about how we understand our tragic nature. Human beings are apparently insatiable consuming machines; we are eating our way right through the biosphere. The term seems to suggest that the relentless expansion of the world economy, which the extraction and burning of fossil fuels has made possible, is hard-wired into our DNA. Seen from this perspective, attempting to reverse course on global warming is likely to be a fool’s errand. But is unending economic growth really a defining feature of what it means to be human?

For the longest part of our history, humans lived as hunter-gatherers on diets consisting of fruits, vegetables, nuts, insects, fish, and game. Ever since Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, it has largely been taken for granted that staying alive was an all-consuming activity for our ancestors, as well as for the remaining hunter-gatherers who still lived as they did. Latter-day foragers appeared to have been “permanently on the edge of starvation,” Suzman explains, and “plagued by constant hunger.”
This disparaging perspective on the life of the hunter-gatherer found ample support in Western travel narratives and then in ethnographic studies. Explorers treated contemporary foraging peoples as if they were living fossils, artifacts of an earlier era. In reality, these foragers were living in time, not out of it, and trying to survive as best they could under adverse historical conditions. Expanding communities of agriculturalists, like both colonial empires and post-colonial states, had violently pushed most foragers out of their ancestral homelands and into more marginal areas. Western reportage has made it seem as if these dispossessed refugees were living as their ancestors had since time immemorial, when in fact their lives were typically much more difficult.

A countercurrent of thinkers has provided a consistent alternative to this largely contemptuous mainstream perspective. The 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, took the forager to be an unrealizable ideal for modern humans rather than our embarrassing origin story. In the 20th century, anthropologists Franz Boas and Claude Levi-Strauss continued this tradition: They countered racist, stage-based theories of human evolution by showing that foraging peoples possessed complex and intelligent cultures. These thinkers form important precursors to Suzman’s perspective, but, in Work, he sets them aside.

Instead, Suzman focuses on the comparatively recent “Man the Hunter” conference, co-organized by the American anthropologist Richard Lee. That 1966 gathering marked a decisive shift in how anthropologists thought about foragers as economic actors, and this is the point that Suzman wants to emphasize. Lee had been conducting research among the !Kung Bushmen of southern Africa, a people related to the Ju/’hoansi. Lee showed that the !Kung acquired their food through only “a modest effort,” leaving them with more “free time” than people in the advanced industrial societies of the West. The same was likely true, he suggested, of human beings over the largest part of their history.

One implication of this finding is that economists since Adam Smith have been consistently wrong about what Lee’s colleague Marshall Sahlins called “stone age economics.” Using modern research methods, social scientists have confirmed that Lee and Sahlins were largely right (although they may have underestimated foragers’ average work hours). The chemical analysis of bones has demonstrated conclusively that early humans were not constantly teetering on the brink of starvation. On the contrary, they are well despite having at their disposal only a few stone and wooden implements. What afforded these early humans existences of relative ease and comfort? According to Suzman, the turning point in the history of early hominids came with their capacity to control fire, which gave them access to a “near-limitless supply of energy” and thereby lightened their toils.

Fire predigests food. When you roast the flesh of a woolly mammoth—or, for that matter, a bunch of carrots—the process yields significantly more calories than if the food was left uncooked. The capacity to access those additional calories gave humans an evolutionary advantage over other primates. Whereas chimpanzees spend almost all of their waking hours foraging, early humans got the calories they needed with just a few hours of foraging per day.

Mastering fire thus made for a radical increase in humanity’s free time. Suzman contends that it was this free time that subsequently shaped our species’s cultural evolution. Leisure afforded long periods of hanging around with others, which led to the development of language, storytelling, and the arts. Human beings also gained the capacity to care for those who were “too old to feed themselves,” a trait we share with few other species.

The use of fire helped us become more social creatures in other ways as well. Recently unearthed evidence has demonstrated that early humans did not live in small bands for the whole of their existence, as anthropologists and archaeologists had long supposed. Where food was less abundant, people spread out, keeping enough distance from one another to ensure an ease of acquisition. By contrast, where food was abundant, early humans gathered into larger, albeit temporary social formations. At Göbekli Tepe in southeastern Turkey, archaeologists uncovered a major complex of “chambers and megaliths” that had been periodically built up and reburied from around 10,000 years ago—long before the advent of settled agricultural societies.

These findings support a surprising thesis, one that reverses everything we used to believe about the deep history of humanity. It was not the hunter-gatherers who “suffered from systematic dietary deficiencies,” working themselves to the point of exhaustion yet attaining no lasting security. On the contrary, their descendants among the farming peoples were the ones who lived like that. In contrast to the hunter, the peasant eked out an existence that truly was, in Thomas Hobbes’s famous phrase, “nasty, brutish, and short.” As Suzman explains, this shift in how we understand the relative fortunes of hunter-gatherers and early agriculturalists makes the three major transitions that followed fire—for Suzman, agriculture, the city, and the factory—much harder to explain. Their advent cannot be told as a progressive story of humanity’s climb out of economic deprivation.

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from other people's ability to meet their own needs. Why the wealthy few are able to satisfy so many of their whims before the world's poor achieve basic levels of economic security has always been an uncomfortable question for the economic profession. But economists assure us that, in any case, the only long-term solution to global poverty is more economic growth.

That is why economists speak of our history primarily as one long story of economic expansion, as if our task as humans always has been and always will be to struggle out of penury and acquire more things. Seeing the world that way has enormous consequences for how we think about climate change, among the many other ecological threats to human well-being, such as deforestation and overfishing. If confronting these threats means making do with less, such a limitation can only appear, in the economist's eyes, as a regression against which human nature will rebel.

The account of human nature underlying this standard economic perspective is precisely what Suzman's anthropological evidence allows him to reject. In reality, the scarcity postulate applies only to a limited period of humanity's existence. For the vast majority of our history, humans have thought of their material needs as limited. Families divided up the work required to meet those needs, and when the work was done, they called it a day.

When people have found themselves in possession of an abundance of goods, they have generally seen those goods not as resources to be deployed in the service of economic expansion, but rather as so many excuses to throw gigantic parties, like the ones that presumably took place at Göbekli Tepe or, for that matter, at Stonehenge. In many cultures, giving away or even ritualistically destroying one's possessions at festivals has been a common way to show one's worth. In fact, a long history of technological progress has made it possible to fulfill everyone's needs in ever more resplendent ways with ever fewer hours of work. Keynes predicted that by his grandchildren's generation, we would have at our disposal such an immense quantity of buildings, machines, and skills as to overcome any real scarcity of resources with respect to meeting our needs (including new ones like the 21st-century need for a smartphone).

Of course, many of our wants might remain unfulfilled. But in Keynes's view, wants mostly evince desires for status rather than possessions. Giving everyone Gucci loafers and an Ivy League education. We cannot all be upper class, just as we cannot all be above average. Unlike desires based in social status, which can be infinite, absolute needs are limited.

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Of course, many of our wants might remain unfulfilled. But in Keynes's view, wants mostly evince desires for status rather than possessions. Giving everyone Gucci loafers won't help, since they're worthless as status symbols once everybody has a pair. Only reducing levels of inequality would relieve society-wide status anxieties, since each individual's relative position would then matter much less. With enhanced production capacities and absolute needs met, Keynes argued, people would stop feeling so frustrated and striving so hard. Instead, they would “devote their further energies” to a variety of “non-economic purposes.” Keynes went on to suggest that in a future post-scarcity society, people would probably work just 15 hours a week, and then mostly for the pleasure of it.

For Suzman, Keynes's remark on the length of the future work week is serendipitous. When Keynes “first described his economic utopia,” Suzman points out, “the study of hunter-gatherer societies was barely more than a sideshow in the newly emerging discipline of social anthropology.” It was only in the 1960s, two decades after Keynes's death, that we began to understand that for most of our history, humans did in fact work about 15 hours a week, as hunter-gatherers. Keynes's vision of a post-scarcity future was as much a recovery of our species's pre-scarcity past. Humanity's “fundamental economic problem” is not scarcity at all, but rather satiety.

If you attempt to interrogate people's preferences to figure out why they want what they want, most neoclassical economists would laugh you out of the room. As Suzman points out, Keynes was not so hasty. His insights into the nature of human wants were anthropologically astute. He described desires as coming in two types, which he called “absolute” needs and “relative” wants. For a city dweller, for instance, absolute needs might include things like clean water, an apartment, running clothes, and an annual bus pass. Relative wants, by contrast, refer to things that connote social status, like Gucci loafers and an Ivy League education. We cannot all be upper class, just as we cannot all be above average. Unlike desires based in social status, which can be infinite, absolute needs are limited.

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What can we learn from the working lives of our hunter-gatherer ancestors?

Hat can we learn from our hunter-gatherer ancestors about how to organize our lives once the daily grind of work no longer needs to be so central to our identities? That was the motivating question of Suzman's first book, Affluence Without Abundance, published in 2017.

Work, the sequel, concerns itself mostly with the opposite question: Why do we continue to cling so hard to our work-based identities, in spite of an inner nature that tells us not to work so much? Long after Keynes's own metaphorical grandchildren (since he had no direct descendants) have grown up, grown old, and had children of their own, we continue to work long hours, consuming ever more and posing an ever-greater threat to the biosphere. “Humankind,” Suzman writes, is apparently “not yet ready to claim its collective pension.” So why haven't we traded rising incomes for more free time?

John Kenneth Galbraith provided one plausible answer in The Affluent Society, his 1958 study of the postwar American economy. In it, he suggested that Keynes had underestimated the degree to which we can be manipulated into seeing our relative wants as absolute needs. Through advertising, companies like De Beers create desires in us that we didn't have before. Then they tell
“Levine’s insightful, engaging account of the modern university’s origins tells a compelling story of the university’s key role as a bridge between state and society...a powerful and prescient warning from the past about the possibilities of the present.” —Cynthia Miller-Idriss, author of *Hate in the Homeland*

“A harrowing and richly detailed account of U.S. tire manufacturer Firestone’s exploitation of Liberian workers in the 20th century ... A devastating expose of the tensions between ‘the interests of white capital and the desire for Black self-determination.’” —Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“A warm and insightful memoir of Black life in Appalachia’s coal camps that offers a bounty of correctives to the persistent myth that all mountain people are white and all poverty is self-made.” —Elizabeth Catte, author of *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*
us that in order to fulfill those desires, we have to buy their products. Since we purchase big-ticket items like diamonds largely to maintain or increase our status in society (in the then-popular phrase, to “keep up with the Joneses”), these goods lose their mystique once too many people have acquired them. New, harder-to-acquire gems must then take the place of the old stones that have lost their luster.

For Galbraith, writing in the 1950s, the reason we opt for this irrational, limitless politics of production was clear: The point is not really to meet people’s needs (most of which are manufactured wants in any case) but to keep workers employed and wages growing. In other words, expanding production serves as a distraction from the fraught issue of economic redistribution. As long as everyone’s income is growing, we don’t worry so much about who has more than whom.

But in an era of stagnant real wages and rising inequality, Galbraith’s explanation no longer holds much water. As Suzman explains, beginning in the mid-1980s, we began to see a “Great Decoupling”: The incomes of the rich increased at an accelerating pace, while the growth in everyone else’s earnings slowed dramatically. Rising inequality should have called into question the politics of endless growth in wealthy countries. Yet the average work week has not shrunk—in fact, in the United States, it has lengthened.

Suzman draws on the work of a fellow anthropologist, the late David Graeber, to supplement Galbraith’s account. In Bullshit Jobs, Graeber detailed the immense amount of pointless work that suffuses the economy. Button pushers, box tickers, and assorted yes-men add no real value to the economy; yet instead of weeding out this sort of work, Graeber argued, the economy seems to sow it in every corner. Graeber hypothesized that the expansion of bullshit jobs has been an indirect consequence of the financialization of the economy. As the economy becomes more focused on extracting rents than on new production, society has come to look more neo-feudal than capitalist, even as elites employ gigantic entourages of useless underlings as a way to display their wealth.

Suzman has his own answer for why irrational forms of make-work have proliferated across the economy, but he approaches this question from an odd direction. He says that since the agricultural revolution, we have continued to work even when we don’t have to because the physical laws of the universe compel us to do so. The answer is strange because it explains a recent trend in human societies in terms of the background conditions of life itself. Suzman essentially argues that nature has programmed us, just as it has every other creature, to deal with surpluses of energy by working those surpluses out of our systems. With lots of available energy but little to do, we make work to release the tensions building up inside of us.

Suzman appears to have reached this conclusion through the following argument: Since it is our nature as human beings not to work more than we need to and instead to spend our time in pursuits that make us happy—hanging around with friends, cooking and eating, singing and sleeping—then if we aren’t doing that today, there must be some deeper mechanism at work within us, pushing us to labor until our hearts give out rather than directing our surplus energy toward play.
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One could do worse than look to Keynes himself for answers. Keynes was far from seeing the 15-hour work week as a natural evolutionary outcome of capitalist development. After writing his essay on the possibilities for his grandchildren’s generation, he devoted much of the rest of his life to explaining the forces that stood in the way of humanity’s arrival at a post-scarcity future.

Keynes argued that mature capitalist societies no longer grow quickly enough to maintain a high demand for labor without government intervention, a phenomenon that his disciple Alvin Hansen termed “secular stagnation.” Long before we produce enough structures, machines, and equipment to meet the needs of all humanity, Keynes said, the rate of return on investment in these fixed assets will fall below the level required to balance out the risks for private investors. In other words, long before we reach post-scarcity, the engine of capitalist prosperity will give way. The result is not a reduced work week for all but rather underemployment for many and overwork for the rest.

When one considers the long decline in economic growth rates since the 1970s, it is easy to see why more economists are now saying that Keynes was right. With so much productive capacity already in place, the return on purchases of new plant and equipment has fallen to low levels. Private investors have become increasingly reluctant to invest in the expansion of the economy, so economic growth rates have fallen and average unemployment rates have risen.

Governments have faced enormous pressure to get our stagnant economies back on track. In order to revive economic growth rates, one country after another has tried to entice private investors to invest more by spending in excess of tax receipts, deregulating the economy, reducing taxes, and beating back the strength of organized labor. That has encouraged an increase in the number of poor-quality jobs and caused inequality to rise, but it has done little to revive the economic growth engine.

Keynes was hardly unique in thinking that stagnation would mark the end point of capitalist development. What differentiated him from other practitioners of the dismal science was that, like John Stuart Mill, Keynes saw stagnation as an opportunity rather than a tragedy. Writing in the 1840s, Mill looked forward to the end of economic growth: “Hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day’s toil of any human being,” he observed. Once the flows of private investment had been reduced to a trickle—a condition Mill called the “stationary state”—society might finally begin to use its riches to improve the lot of average people. That would require an increase in public investment: to raise workers’ education levels, to lessen the burden of their labor, and to transform ownership structures to create a cooperative economy.

Keynes has been misrepresented as saying that the capitalist economy could be revived under conditions of stagnation through the government’s stimulation of private demand. On the contrary, as the economist James Crotty has shown, Keynes styled himself in the tradition of Mill as a “liberal socialist”: What he imagined might come after the onset of economic stagnation was a barrage of public investment, which would displace private investment as the primary engine of economic stability. This public investment would be deployed not to make private investment more attractive, but rather to improve our societies directly through the provision of public goods.

Will more automation bring a better future or create its own problems?

Suzman also criticizes Keynes for thinking that economic elites would lead us to the “promised land,” yet in his own account, the power of “ambitious CEOs and money-men” mostly fades into the background. Suzman has written a magisterial book that seeks to cover the entire tapestry of humanity’s economic life, yet one of Work’s major oversights is its lack of interest in how the “haves” have gained and maintained power over the “have-nots.”

Until recently, historians and anthropologists assumed that economic classes emerged in tandem with a specific technological breakthrough, such as the advent of agriculture or urban life. Suzman cites the archaeological evidence that proved this thesis incorrect. Many early agrarian and even urban societies remained “assertively egalitarian,” he writes, including the “oldest almost-urban settlement discovered so far, Çatalhöyük in Turkey.”

However, after dispensing with these explanations, Suzman goes on to argue that the emergence of an economic elite was the simple “by-product” of another technology: “the invention of writing.” As the division of labor became more complex, he suggests, scribes and merchants gained power as a result of the increasing importance of their trades.

The anthropologist James C. Scott has already explained why such writing-based accounts of the economic elite’s origin are unsatisfying. The development of written scripts could not have given birth to domination, since writing was one of domination’s main products. Conquerors developed writing systems 5,000 years ago to tally and tax the possessions of the peoples they conquered. Those taxes in turn served as the funds that allowed conquerors to free themselves from manual labor and become mini-emperors. The earliest state-lets of the Fertile Crescent were fragile and prone to collapse, but over time, empires grew and conquered the globe.

Suzman lists fire, agriculture, cities, and factories as the key events in human history. But the emergence of the state is an epochal transition equal in importance to the other four. From a deep historical perspective, the capacity of the “haves” to determine the rules of state politics, and to prevent the “have-nots” from seizing the reins of power even in representative democracies, would have to be counted among the most important forces slowing our progress toward a post-scarcity future. Lacking a theory of politics, Work ends up almost entirely sidestepping the question
of how we might achieve that transition.

In the book’s final pages, Suzman gestures toward “proposals like granting a universal basic income,” “shifting the focus on taxation from income to wealth,” and “extending the fundamental rights we give to people and companies to ecosystems, rivers, and crucial habitats.” But he provides no argument for where constituencies supporting these policies might be found or how coalitions working toward them might be constructed. The absence of a politics in Work clearly connects to the way the book deals with another crucial technological transformation—not the emergence of writing or the development of the state, but the automation of production. For Suzman, automation is the key both for explaining humanity’s present-day economic troubles and for unlocking the entrance to a post-scarcity future.

At the core of Work is the theory that automation and AI have unleashed massive quantities of excess energy that need to find an outlet. In Suzman’s view, the expansion of the service sector—which employs more than 90 percent of the workforce in countries like the United States—has been “a result of the fact that wherever and whenever there has been a large, sustained energy surplus, people (and other organisms) have found creative ways to put it to work.”

Suzman thinks that automation explains why inequality began to worsen starting in the 1980s: At that time, “technological expansion” was already “cannibalizing the workforce and concentrating wealth in fewer hands.” Citing a famous study by Carl Frey and Michael Osborne, Suzman claims that “47 percent of all current jobs” will be “automated out of existence by as early as 2030.”

If what Suzman is saying were true, getting to post-scarcity would require not so much a policy change as a cultural revolution. That is likely why, instead of focusing on concrete policy prescriptions, Suzman simply expresses the hope that “catalysts” like a “rapidly changing climate” and increasing popular anger, “ignited by systematic inequalities” as much as by a “viral pandemic,” will shake people to their senses.

But Suzman is wrong about automation. He fails to take heed of the limitations of Frey and Osborne’s study, which its own authors have openly acknowledged. The
A compelling inquiry into our relationship with humanity’s latest and greatest calamity: the climate crisis

“Timely and relevant, this offers plenty to think about.” — Publishers Weekly

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study does not distinguish between jobs that will be partially automated and those that will be fully automated, and it does not specify a time interval for when the jobs will be lost (assuming they will be lost at all). Follow-up studies have suggested that only 14 percent of jobs are likely to be automated out of existence in the coming decades—fewer than were fully automated in decades past.

Entropy turns out to be an equally poor explanation for the expansion of jobs in the service sector. Employment in hospitals and schools expands steadily, not as a way to work off our excess energy, but rather because these occupations have seen so little automation over time. The more health care we want to provide, the more doctors, nurses, and home health aides we will need to employ.

Given how much work remains to be done, humanity can’t simply wake up to the end of work. Getting to post-scarcity will require instead that we reorganize work so that it is more satisfying for workers and better able to meet our needs. That reorganization will necessarily be a complex political process requiring new institutions that both build trust in specialists and subject their recommendations to democratic deliberation. We aren’t going to get to post-scarcity with the push of a button on an automated control panel. Instead, we will have to coordinate across a detailed division of labor. What we can learn from our earliest ancestors in that regard is unfortunately limited.

Suzman is one of a growing number of anthropologists—including Scott, Graeber, and Graeber’s co-author, David Wengrow—who have mustered the available evidence to demonstrate that human nature is far different from what economists have long led us to believe. We humans are capable of “moderating our personal material aspirations,” but only, as Suzman suggests, if we address currently unsustainable levels of economic and social inequality. Yet looking for inspiring examples from humanity’s rich pre-scarcity past, as Suzman does, may leave one feeling more despondent than optimistic about our chances for achieving a post-scarcity future.

After all, the foragers at the heart of Suzman’s investigations maintain their affluent lifestyle by taking what Sahlins called the “Zen road to affluence”: They limit their material possessions to what they can carry. Anything too large to keep on one’s person during a long trek across the desert is not worth having at all. Meanwhile, to maintain equality on those travels, foragers engage in “demand sharing”: Each person has the right to demand the possessions of any other and generally tries to make reasonable requests. There is simply no chance that we will return to such a nomadic way of life, nor that we will accept such intense scrutiny of our personal possessions.

Most consequentially of all, the foraging groups Suzman looks to in Work organize their lives around so-called “immediate-return” economies and do not plan for the next day, let alone the next year. (The more complex “delayed-return” foraging societies that Graeber and Wengrow describe might have more to offer by way of example but are less egalitarian.) By contrast, producing the goods we feel are essential to our flourishing, including heating, electricity, and transportation for billions of people—and doing so sustainably—will require lots of planning. If the pre-scarcity forms of life that anthropologists have documented hold the key to post-scarcity living, then it would seem likely that we are doomed. The existing tradition of post-scarcity economics similarly falls short in its efforts to model a viable future society.

The 20th century saw a number of attempts to constrain or even replace the private, profitability-based engine of economic growth with public alternatives: Think of midcentury Keynesian welfare states and Khrushchev-era Soviet socialism. Both ended up mired in secular stagnation and its attendant social crises.

Technocratic elites on either side of the Iron Curtain tried to run their increasingly complex economies from central stations, as if by remote control. Doing so made the achievement of post-scarcity impossible, as it allowed unresolved tensions to build and masses of people to become disaffected. Technocrats collected information and offered incentives to produce that powerful social actors manipulated or ignored. Without much say in how their lives were governed, large numbers of people disengaged from work and society or revolted. In the West, the result was inflation and strikes; in the East, shortages and widespread discontent.

Instead of trying to recover a long-lost past or aligning ourselves with the latest views on human nature, we will have to create novel institutions to facilitate our journey to new, 21st-century destinations. We should set the course not to Mars, for vacationing with Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, but rather to a post-scarcity planet Earth on which their wealth has been confiscated and put to better ends. Getting there will require that we overcome the endemic insecurity that continues to plague nine-tenths of humanity, while also reducing and transforming the work we do.

Achieving those ends will in turn require that we transform the investment function, as Keynes suggested, but in ways that make investment not only public but also democratically controlled. Freed from the constraints of “scarcity economics,” we will then serve the “trickster god” entropy in new ways, expending excess energy not only in the hunt for efficiency gains or in making whatever Acheulean hand-axes our engineers dream up next, but also in the service of a variety of other ends, such as justice and sustainability, science and culture—and throwing parties, too.
True Colors
Was Jimmy Carter an outlier?
B Y  R I C K  P E R L S T E I N

Jimmy Carter’s favorite word when he was president was “sacrifice.” Using UC Santa Barbara’s American Presidency Project database, I calculate that he uttered it 479 times in speeches and statements during his four-year term. According to the same database, John F. Kennedy, who famously advised Americans to “Ask what you can do for your country,” used it only 60 times in his own public pronouncements.

Surely the willingness to sacrifice is an admirable value, for individuals as much as for nations. But Carter made it a fetish. Armed with Benjamin Franklin-like adages (“Today’s sacrifice will bring tomorrow’s security”), he compulsively told Americans, who were facing 10 percent inflation and 20 percent interest rates, that doing without was something to cherish. At swearing-in ceremonies for agency appointees, he would boast that the gent standing beside him was choosing to serve the public “at some considerable sacrifice to himself, financially.” At state dinners, he would praise the various host nations’ ennobled citizenry for their stoic endurance of famines, upheavals, or war. At a time when the unemployment rate for African Americans was 14.6 percent, he perversely importuned economic sacrifice in speeches before Black organizations. “We’ve never acquired an additional element of fairness or equity or freedom or justice without sacrifice,” he told the National Urban League in one of the opening speeches of his 1980 campaign. Throughout his presidency, he frequently launched into passionate fits of nostalgia for World War II, when “the challenge of fighting Nazism drew us together.” In one of his most famous speeches, given in April 1977, he deployed the word “sacrifice” 10 times to enlist Americans against an “energy crisis” that he called...
the “moral equivalent of war”; in an even more famous one, 14 days into his term, he implored Americans to set their thermostats to 65 degrees during the day and 55 degrees at night as he sat in a sweater before a roaring White House fire. (First lady Rosalynn Carter complained that the typists in her East Wing office had to warm their hands with gloves.)

The striking thing was that, when he gave that last speech, the United States was not really in an energy crisis. The country had been, for several months following the 1973 Arab oil boycott, and would be again. But in the interim, the price of gas at the pump had held steady. It seemed as if Carter were seeking excuses to demand that Americans make do with less. And when oil supplies finally did contract following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, he sounded almost giddily: “I don’t look on conservation or saving energy as a burden or an unpleasant sacrifice. It can be an inspirational thing. It can be an enjoyable thing. It can bring families together. It can bring communities together. It can make us proud of ourselves.”

Yet there was one time during Carter’s career when he didn’t call for sacrifice: when he ran for president in 1976. In campaign position papers and interviews with journalists, he averred that while inflation “must not be ignored,” America’s “major economic problem” was “unacceptably high unemployment,” so “we must pursue an expansionary fiscal and monetary program in the near future, with some budget deficits if necessary.” He campaigned, in other words, as a Keynesian. Later in the campaign, he explained that the wave of inflation that the United States had suffered in 1974 and ’75 had been the “transient” consequence of “the big jump in oil and food prices”—explicitly rejecting the regnant theory that it was caused by excessive government spending. He also promised to enlist the Federal Reserve to lower interest rates and said that incoming presidents should get to appoint a new Fed chair who would be more aligned with the administration’s policies. But once in office, Carter changed his tune. When inflation again surged, he lectured that the cause was excessive government spending, to which the only appropriate response was... sacrifice. He quoted, over and over again, something Walter Lippman said in 1940: “You took the good things for granted. Now you must earn them again.... [Y]ou will have to sacrifice your comfort and ease.” As president, Carter successfully gutted a bill that he had run on: to create a federal guarantee of full employment. He also answered the clamor from Wall Street to choose an “inflation hawk” to chair the Federal Reserve. His appointee, Paul Volcker, then instituted—with Carter’s approval—a program of radical shock therapy intended to grind economic growth to a halt. Carter spoke of the necessity of “pain” so often during these years that the humorist Art Buchwald wondered whether Americans hadn’t voted in a sadomasochist. When inflation refused to budge, Carter replaced his original budget proposal for the fiscal year 1981, which he had previously boast-ed was “lean and austere,” with one that was $18 billion leaner, including a reduction of $1 billion in welfare spending. He also unveiled changes in bank rules to make it harder to use credit cards. (Volcker considered this a squeeze too far; Carter talked him into it.) Many complained, and reasonably so. But Carter’s response was to insist that those criticizing him were, as he told the National Urban League, “creating disunity among those who are on the cutting edge of progress and compassion and love.”

Politicians say things to get elected and then, once in office, do otherwise; that’s politics. But Carter demanded that we grade him on a curve. His signature campaign promise was “I’ll never tell a lie. I’ll never make a misleading statement. I’ll never betray your trust or avoid a controversial issue. If I ever do any of these things, then I don’t deserve your support.” And yet it was all a con.

Kai Bird’s massive new biography of Carter, The Outlier, never quotes him on the subject of sacrifice. Nor does it address the 39th president’s obsession with it, and it offers not a word on the essential bait-and-switch between his campaign and his presidency. These elisions make sense, in part, because of the book’s thesis: that Carter was not an austerity president who augured the coming of a new neoliberal age but rather a populist whose “instincts were always liberal.” Carter was also neither a mediocr nor a failed president, we are told by Bird, but a near-great one. He was not an entrepôt between political eras but rather a profoundly consequential leader whose “un-bending backbone” advanced all manner of liberal goals as far as they could possibly go in a lowdown, dirty age. A foreign policy prophet who “refused to take us to war” or fall prey to what he called “our inordinate fear of Communism,” Carter birthed a human rights revolution in US foreign policy that “none of his successors” could “walk back.” Bird acknowledges the possibility that Carter ever indulged political expediency only once in the Oval Office—stopping to observe that, while he occasionally did so as governor, the presidency “unleashed Carter’s natural instinct to ‘do the right thing’ regardless of political consequences.”

There is a lot to disagree with, in whole or in part, in The Outlier’s depiction of Carter, but one of the reasons it is worth reading is that Bird, an accomplished and highly respected biographer who won a Pulitzer Prize for his cowritten life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, fair-mindedly sets down many of the counterarguments to his own case that Carter was a good president. That is why, reading The Outlier, this reader came away with a wealth of new reasons to confirm why he was, at least as president, often so bad.

Jimmy Carter was born in 1924 in tiny Plains, Ga.—population less than 700, then and now. His father, Earl Carter, was a local agricultural baron. Earl died in 1953, and Jimmy abandoned a promising Navy career to take over his peanut warehousing business. While his father had been a conventionally parochial and racist figure in local politics, Carter’s mother was an astonishing woman about whom not a single thing was conventional. Lillian Carter was the only white woman for...
miles around who would go into a Black person’s home. She was a profoundly self-confident and inner-directed individual who in 1966, at the age of 67, volunteered to join the Peace Corps and be sent basically anywhere her nursing skills were needed. That was the year her youngest son, now a back-bencher in Georgia’s weak state senate, decided to run for governor—a decision surpassed in its ambitiousness only when, in 1972, with less than two years as governor under his belt after his second, successful run, Carter began laying plans to run for president of the United States.

People driven to become the most powerful person in the world are not normal people. Think Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy (as well as Bobby and Ted), Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama: All had mothers who inculcated in them the conviction that they were so special that they could accomplish anything and should ignore what anyone else said on the matter. And also fathers who were either emotionally or literally absent, stern figures who haunted their sons with the nagging feeling that no matter how much they accomplished, it would never be enough to win them over. Jimmy Carter was no different. He once even wrote a poem about it: “And even now I feel inside / The hunger for his outstretched hand, / A man’s embrace to take me in, / The need for just a word of praise.”

A childhood like this is a pitilessly efficient machine for producing a preternatural drive for accomplishment: the sort of drive it takes, for instance, to run for president as a free-spending Keynesian and then to govern as a penny-pinching austrian, all while claiming utter honesty as your political calling card—and performing the claim so unflinchingly that much of the world still buys it.

Bird certainly does; it’s what, in his view, makes Carter the “ outlier” of his title. Consider that crucial policy issue of what causes inflation and how to solve it. Bird summarizes Carter’s conclusion (at least his conclusion as president) as follows: “The right response was to prioritize the fight against inflation by cutting the federal budget deficit.” For the next several hundred pages, Bird gives the reader no reason to question that conclusion, let alone why Carter should have or why he had in the past. He does, however, report much later in the book that others did—and that they, in fact, told Carter he should as well: “In the spring of 1977, Labor Secretary [Ray] Marshall flatly told Carter, ‘Budget deficits do not cause inflation.’ Marshall pointed out that the fiscal deficit in 1974 was only $5 billion and yet the inflation rate was 9 percent. Two years later, the deficit had spiked to $66 billion and the inflation rate had fallen to only 5 percent.”

That Carter was presented with this data and then ignored it is an astonishing piece of information. He should have known better. Carter was famous—and sometimes infamous—for the ruthless, evidence-based analytical detachment with which he reached his policy conclusions. One observer compared this tendency to the way his early mentor, Adm. Hyman Rickover, approached matters relating to the Navy’s nuclear submarine corps: “[He] has to know how every single engine or pump works.” But when it came to inflation, Carter was anything but cool and empirical. He believed that stopping inflation required sacrifice, no matter what the evidence or data suggested.

This conviction would prove fateful in the decades to come: The next two Democratic presidents would sacrifice federal spending, especially on social programs, upon this same altar. All this sacrifice was great for the investor class, who kept getting richer, but terrible for the working class, whose stagnating wages could have used some augmenting by more aggressive social spending. The class-biased nature of the “deficits kill economies” cult was rendered explicit in Bill Clinton’s reaction to Federal Reserve chair Alan Greenspan’s advice to abandon the economic stimulus program he had promised on the campaign trail. Such spending, Greenspan claimed, would stoke inflation and spook the investor class, and the economy would spiral into the toilet. “You mean to tell me that the success of the economic program and my reelection hinges on the Federal Reserve and a bunch of fucking bond traders?” Clinton responded.

That claim was proved false beyond a shadow of a doubt in the Clinton years and again in the Obama years: Both presidents inherited massive deficits from their Republican predecessors, but inflation kept declining nonetheless. Yet the die had been cast: Carter’s economic policies on inflation and deregulation would set the standard for the Democratic Party. In
his catalog of reasons why he considers Carter’s presidency so consequential, Bird notes that, thanks to a deregulatory measure that Carter championed, “Craft beer became ubiquitous.” What was most consequential—economic policies that turned the Democrats away from deficit spending and expansive social programs and toward neoliberal budgetary austerity and friendliness to Wall Street—goes unanswered.

On the subject of what was perhaps Carter’s greatest achievement, however, Bird is outstanding. His freshly researched and detailed account of Carter’s brokering of the landmark peace deal between Israel and Egypt is nearly worth the price of the book alone. In it, Bird masterfully conveys how exquisitely intricate Carter’s long-term game planning was for those famous 13 days at Camp David—and how adroitly he improvised on the fly when those plans went awry. We also see Carter’s gift for reading fellow politicians and cutting to the quick of their psychological drives. When Israel’s intransigent prime minister, Menachem Begin, was on the verge of scuttling the negotiations altogether, Carter handed him pictures of the summit, individually inscribed to each of his grandchildren, and said he hoped to meet them someday and say, “This is when your grandfather and I brought peace to the Middle East.” Begin teared up and remained.

It’s remarkable to watch Carter knowing just when to risk a scathing remark and when to say nothing at all; when to horse-trade and when to hold fast, ever reassessing the balance between the visionary and the pragmatic; when to salve a tender ego and when to provoke; when to make an end run and when a direct charge. You realize, in other words, what a skillful politician Jimmy Carter could be.

But this display of political skill just makes it all the more excruciating to observe him, in almost every other project, refusing to do politics at all. The pattern is familiar to any student of Carter’s presidency. He would announce the most sweeping policy proposal imaginable—such as his original energy program, with each of its 113 interlocking provisions affecting some constituency somewhere in a different way, devised in secret over 90 days with his “energy czar,” James Schlesinger, a Republican. Every single member of Congress, including the leaders of his own party, learned about it at the same time as the American people did, and in the same way: on TV. Carter then expected them to pass it unchanged—accusing them of selfishness, a lack of patriotism, or stupidity, often publicly, whenever they balked. By the time he came up for reelection, Carter had pulled this sort of stunt so often, and had so adamantly held himself aloof from any process of negotiation, that he had barely any political friends left at all.

This is my Jimmy Carter—a kinder, gentler unitary executive, with solar panels; our first “I alone can fix it” president. The signs were there long before Carter won the nomination. He had a favorite formulation in the early months of the 1976 primary season, before he apparently banned the word “sacrifice” from his campaigning vocabulary: “There is only one person in this country who can speak with a clear voice to the American people, who can set a standard of morals, decency, and openness, who can spell out comprehensive policies and coordinate the efforts of different departments of government, who can call on the American people for sacrifices and explain the purpose of that sacrifice and the consequences of it. That person is the president.”

I see Carter’s self-regard as overwhelming: Bird sees things in quite nearly the opposite way. That comes across most strikingly in a chapter called “Troubles With a Speechwriter.” In it, Bird reviews a tense moment in the spring of 1979, when Carter’s approval rating was dipping down to 40 percent and an extraordinary cover article appeared in The Atlantic by his former speechwriter, James Fallows, then 28 years old, which explained why he had quit in disillusionment—a disillusionment that by then had become widespread.

What were the reasons, Fallows asked, for “the contrast between the promise and popularity of [Carter’s] first months in office and the disappointment so widely felt later on”? He came to a striking conclusion: that Carter was driven not so much to do good things as to be seen as a good person. Articulating his own goodness in contrast with the implicit deficiencies of everyone else—for instance, their reluctance to sacrifice—is something he seemed actively to seek opportunities to do.

Consider an example from the time when the endless lines to buy gas began snaking through Southern California’s streets. To grasp why Carter’s response was so odd, one must first understand a paradox of the 1979 energy crisis: The actual supply deficit was rather small. The reason the gas lines were many times longer than usual, even though supplies were never down more than a fraction, was psychological: Panicked drivers responded to news that gas was growing scarcer by keeping their tanks “topped off” at all times—which only produced more scarcity, much like what happened with toilet paper at the beginning of the Covid crisis. The most effectual response a leader can generally offer at times like this is to dial down the panic.

Carter could have implored people to stop topping off their tanks. But in a statement to Southern Californians, he mentioned that practical solution only briefly at the end of a very long lecture that began by exacerbating the panic by noting that the problem could be “maybe worse next year.” (In fact, it went away within months.) Carter then reminded Americans that he had warned them this fuel shortage would happen, though they had refused to listen, and that it likely wouldn’t have occurred at all if Congress had been willing “to vote for steps that may be a little unpopular.” (This is unlikely.) Then he dilated, in numbered points, upon the history that had brought us to this situation; they included: “My decision that priority in a time of shortage must be given to heat for homes, hospitals, etc., and to food production.”

I love that detail: While his constituents were greedily guzzling gas, Carter wanted to make sure they knew he was busy providing for the sick, the cold, and the hungry. It was a sacrifice sermon, at the expense of doing his job; instead of using the presidential bully pulpit to solve
a discrete problem, he was preening. As Fallows put it, “Jimmy Carter tells us that he is a good man. His positions are correct, his values sound. Like Marshal Petain after the fall of France, he has offered his person to the nation.” (Oh, and about those solar panels: Carter’s energy policies were far more about economic nationalism than conservation; much more important than promoting renewable energy was promoting American coal to replace imported oil.)

Bird sees Fallows’s article differently than I do, and also differently than another Carter speechwriter, Hendrik Hertzberg, who called it “very, very accurate” and “very, very good.” For Bird, it was a series of cheap shots from a disgruntled employee and did more to tank Carter’s presidency than the behavior it describes. Bird, after all, sees Jimmy Carter as Carter saw himself: If the things he didn’t work, the problem was everyone else.

That perspective emerges in repeated tell-tale tropes throughout the biography. Carter is always seeking to “do the right thing,” in contrast with every other elected official at the time. (“Once again, he was astonished at the pettiness of the key senators sitting on the fence. Carter just wanted them to do what they knew was the right thing.”) He is described in terms of his “instincts”—“liberal,” “populist,” and erring toward “boldness”—instead of his actions. We are told about his noble internal state at times when Carter does things that are not liberal, populist, or bold—such as when he praised the shah of Iran as an admirable leader, unceremoniously fired a feminist aide for perceived disloyalty, or ordered the CIA to prop up the anti-communist dictator of Nicaragua. His awful decisions happen “inexplicably”—the noble ones, on the other hand, are Carter “showing his true colors”—even when what’s described as “inexplicable” conforms to a pattern, and the “true colors” betray a far more muddled hue.

Bird’s claims of Carter behaving inexplicably are most pronounced when he writes about foreign policy, a subject that poses a conundrum for the sympathetic liberal biographer. Carter began his presidency announcing that human rights would be the new benchmark for US foreign policy—to replace, as he put it in a glorious speech that first, hopeful spring of 1977, an “inordinate fear of Communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in our fear.” As his secretary of state, Carter appointed Cyrus Vance, a diplomat who enthusiastically supported this vision. But as national security adviser, he appointed Zhngiew Brzezinski, who despised it.

There’s really no way to simplify the complexity of the foreign policy that resulted, which included many remarkable and courageous breaks with Cold War orthodoxy but also some abject surrenders to it. Yet Bird manages to find a handy device: When it comes to the bad stuff, the buck stops with Zbig. This implacable Svengali repeatedly advised bloodthirsty and reckless solutions that Carter, with his “natural instincts,” tried to ward off, until finally Brzezinski—who somehow managed to snooker the president into meeting with him more than any other adviser, and certainly far more than his diplomacy-minded secretary of state—ended up “wearing him down.”

That comes in May 1979, as the Islamists were rising up against the Soviet-aligned government of Afghanistan and Brzezinski persuaded Carter “to authorize a covert CIA program to fund this rebellion and to supply nonlethal aid to these conservative Muslim tribesmen.” Bird repeats that word—“nonlethal”—when discussing Carter’s signing of a second authorization of this aid in July. Yet Carter himself proved to be considerably more revealing about the aid than his biographer in a note in the book version of his White House diary, published in 2010: He explains how the CIA scoured international arms markets for weapons of Soviet manufacture, which were then routed to Pakistan to pass on to the mujahideen. Yet even here, Carter was not so frank as to reveal why this subterfuge was undertaken: The Symington Amendment, signed by President Gerald Ford in 1976, had banned arms sales to countries involved in nuclear proliferation, as Pakistan was ruled to be by Carter himself.

Brzezinski, Bird duly notes, was also pretty clear with Carter about his hope that the aid might spur a decision by the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan. Despite knowing this, Carter expressed shock when the invasion took place. Then, in a State of the Union address that stated that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan “could pose the most serious threat to world peace since the Second World War,” he announced that the United States was prepared to go to war to protect Persian Gulf oil two countries away if it was ever threatened by the Soviets (something they had no intention of doing).

This promise to defend the Persian Gulf militarily became known as the Carter Doctrine. Bird says it “would have been more accurate to call it the ‘Brzezinski Doctrine’”—since these words were in the speech because Vance “had lost another skirmish in his bureaucratic warfare with Brzezinski.” A president’s poor judgment is apparently excusable if he is simply reading whatever words are set down in front of him on the podium. One should also not forget the timing of this State of the Union address. Carter was heading into a reelection race against an increasingly hawkish Republican Party, for which he replaced his 1976 campaign promise to cut the military budget with a promise to increase it. None of this is inexplicable; Carter had just made a similar decision with regard to Nicaragua and, a year earlier, had made noises about sending the CIA to intervene against the Cuban forces in Angola. He was stopped by a 1975 law specifically preventing that, which The New York Times reported he’d been lobbying senators to repeal.

Bird is also confident about the nobility of Carter’s inner being when it comes to the subject of race. Yet here, too, Carter appears to be less noble than Bird allows. It’s true that, first in the Navy, then as a businessman in Plains, Carter often showed extraordinary courage when it came to the subject of racial equality, sometimes at great personal cost. Things grew muddy, however, when he made his second bid for governor in 1970. In his first try, he’d been defeated by the segregationist Lester Maddox. In his second run, he decided on a campaign strategy that included winning over Maddox’s segregationist base. The most notorious example was a leaflet that his campaign put out with a photograph of his opponent, Carl Sanders, celebrating a victory with Black members of the Atlanta Hawks basketball team, of which
Sabotage the presidential nomination of a bloc of Southern delegates seeking to throw their support to a campaign surrogate—as well as two Mississippi senators, John Stennis and James Eastland, who were campaigning for their party’s presidential nominee for the first time in 20 years. Carter said it was a “great honor for me to be campaigning” with two “statesmen” who were “committed to absolute integrity,” only to see the two put their integrity on display in a different way: They wouldn’t let Carter lie about their records. When a reporter pointed out that he had just claimed that the two senators had accepted the “complete and total integration of the South” with “courage” but then noted that Stennis and Eastland had opposed every civil rights bill, Carter responded, “I doubt that that’s correct.” Stennis and Eastland, however, were quick to set the record straight: “I never voted for a civil rights bill in my life,” Stennis said. Eastland added, “Neither did I.”

Jimmy Carter asked Americans to sacrifice, but he rarely did so himself.

hat’s politics, where true colors are hard to find. Yet Carter had some, I think. You can discern them in Bird’s most remarkable archival find: Kirbo’s memos to Carter from the 1960s all through his presidency, from which we learn, among other things, that Carter’s best friend was an abject racist. Nonetheless, Carter never seemed to have considered separating from him. Loyalty to those who were loyal to him was one of his true colors—a trait that could shade into something almost like cronyism.

About Brzezinski, we learn that “Carter did his best to resist [his] hawkish views, but he never considered firing him,” because “the personal chemistry was right.” Nor, until it was almost too late, did he distance himself from his second-best friend, a Georgia banker named Bert Lance, whom he appointed director of the Office of Management and Budget. Lance was so certain of his friend’s confidence that he expected him to end up as the Federal Reserve chair—even though his only relevant experience was managing small Georgia banks, so corruptly, in fact, that he finally had to resign (but not before Carter stood by his side at a press conference after much of the relevant evidence was already on the record and intoned, “Bert, I’m proud of you”).

Or take another close Georgia friend, his louche White House science adviser Dr. Peter Bourne, who dispensed semilegal drug prescriptions to White House staff. Bird strangely says that Bourne was among Carter’s most “mature” aides, a judgment made easier by the fact that Bird neglects to mention the time Bourne snorted cocaine—which he called in a 1976 article “probably the most benign of illicit drugs currently in use”—at a Christmas party crowded with journalists and politicians. Carter was finally forced to push him out, too—but not Hamilton Jordan, another Georgia crony (there really is no more suitable word), despite his habit of missing meetings, insulting congressional leaders to their face, and never returning phone calls. Jordan’s top deputy described him as “a child.” At the nadir of his presidential popularity, Carter elevated Jordan to chief of staff.

There are many more such examples. In fact, one of The Outlier’s considerable strengths is that, as a result of Bird’s comprehensiveness and fair-mindedness, we are presented with so many counterexamples that disprove the idea that Carter was an outlier. Reading the book, we get to see arrayed in one place how many close advisers Carter kept around him mainly because of how comfortable they made him feel—many because, in Fallows’s shrewd assessment, they owed “their first loyalty to the welfare and advance of Jimmy Carter.”

The banality of Carter—who, like most politicians, preferred aides who sucked up to him—helps explain a finding I made during the hours I spent plowing through the 39th president’s panegyrics to sacrifice. When asked whether it was hard to be president, Carter would often reply, “It’s not a sacrifice to serve as president. It’s gratifying.” Indeed, separating himself from incompetent advisers whose presence made him feel good; accepting the normal give-and-take of politics as part of his duty to his country and his party; not scolding everyday Americans for being less noble than he—any of those things would have been hard. Ironically, the only person from whom Jimmy Carter rarely asked a sacrifice was himself.
Some 20 years ago, in Beyond the Shadow of Camptown, a book about Korean military brides in the United States, the historian Ji-Yeon Yuh devoted considerable attention to food. The women brought stateside in the first decades after the Korean War found themselves in “the proverbial land of plenty,” she wrote, yet they wasted away, complaining that “here, there was nothing to eat.” They “not only longed for Korean food, they also searched for it, invented ways to replicate it, and gave it an emotional loyalty they never developed for the American food they ate out of necessity.”

The stories Yuh collected—of brides who transformed stale bread into ersatz gochujang and were forced by their American husbands to hide their kimchi—echo throughout Tastes Like War, a new book by the sociology professor and pastry chef Grace M. Cho. Tastes Like War is a food memoir of sorts, a catalog of what she and her family cooked and ate and refused to eat. Food is a clock by which Cho measures her mother’s life, from a youth dismantled by the Korean War to her stint as a waitress and a sex worker at a bar that catered to US servicemen; from her marriage to Cho’s father to her emigration to small-town Washington state to and her long decline as a result of schizophrenia. “In my lifetime I’ve had at least three mothers,” Cho writes: healthy, sick, and sicker still.

In its attempt to recover an unnamed mother, Tastes Like War is a sequel to Cho’s first book, an academic study called Haunting the Korean Diaspora. There, Cho investigated the yanggongju, a word that translates literally as “Western princess” and was cruelly applied to a range of Korean women who fraternized with American military men: “Bar girl. Entertainment hostess...Camptown prostitute. Military bride.” Cho wished to reclaim the yanggongju as a tragic but admirable figure and a linchpin of Korean chain migration to the United States. For some 100,000 post-war Korean military brides, Cho wrote, life in America meant being “absorbed into a story line about immigrant success and honorary whiteness, a story line that attempts to erase traumatic history and make the yanggongju as ‘Yankee whore’ disappear altogether. But when she is made to disappear, what comes to occupy the space of her departure?”

Tastes Like War, which was recently long-listed for the National Book Award in nonfiction, is a far more intimate project. Published by the Feminist Press, it collects a series of essays that explore trans-Pacific trauma and search “for the exact recipe” of schizophrenia—how one mother became a second, and then a third. The writing is casual yet retains a sociological approach, as Cho fills her late mother’s silences with historical fact. A tension thus emerges: In a biography or memoir, what are the limits of analogy? At what point does the structural threaten to obliterate the personal? As the scholar Hazel Carby has observed, “family stories and historical accounts sit uneasily side by side.”

Cho’s book unspools in short bursts, out of time, echoing the wilding of her mother’s mind: “American Dreams, Korea, 1961.” “Kimchi Blues, New York City, 2008.” “Schizophrenogenesis, Chehalis, Washington, 1976.” “Crust Girl, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994.” Its 15 chapters zigzag across 70 years, from southern Korea to the West and East coasts of the United States. The family’s origins are tied up with the American empire. Cho’s mother was from Gyeongsang Province, and her father was a US Merchant Marine. They met in a bar near one of the many US military bases in South Korea, bonding over their love of cheeseburgers and the hunger that marked their
childhoods. They married and, in 1972, took Cho (1½ years old) and her half-brother (age 8) from the port city of Busan to her father's hometown of Chehalis, Wash. “We were the first Asians to settle there, the first immigrants in decades,” Cho recalls. Their early years were painful in ways both typical and extraordinary for a mixed-race family in a conservative white town.

In Chehalis, Cho’s mother stepped into unforeseen obligation. Her husband worked abroad for months at a time and had a serious cardiac condition that resulted in several heart attacks, so she raised the kids mostly on her own. She found work as a house cleaner, then on the night shift at a juvenile detention facility that was later revealed to be rife with sexual abuse. Yet, “with what she had made of herself,” Cho writes, “she sponsored relatives to come to the United States and supported others in Korea.”

Though her mother had limited formal education, she was a brilliant, astute woman with a talent for cooking and hospitality. She looked after the few Korean children adopted by white families in Chehalis and mastered the American cuisine of the era to earn acceptance in the local community. At the end of Cho’s first year of school, her mother decided to host a party for the district staff “to give her children an advantage in school.” She prepared “thousands of hors d’oeuvres” adapted to the American palate: sausage-stuffed mushroom caps, bite-size Korean barbecue, flower-shaped crudités, and fruit cut into little fans. “This was perhaps the first time that she flipped the script; this was her territory, and she was now the host rather than the stranger,” Cho writes.

The mother’s involvement in food soon became more elaborate and entrepreneurial. She drew on her memory of Korea, or old habits, to find edible treasures where no one expected them to be. She picked countless wild blackberries, selling them fresh or frozen at $13 a gallon or in the form of perfectly confected pies. She studied The Mushroom Hunter’s Field Guide with scholarly devotion and sold hedgehogs, chanterelles, lobsters, and chicken of the woods to a distributor called Madame Mushroom. (Cho’s descriptions recall the foragers of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s The Mushroom at the End of the World.) “Somehow she singlehandedly supplied the whole town, and later the whole region, with wild produce,” Cho writes. “She did it for six or seven years while also keeping her night job, and maybe, at the root of it, she didn’t want to see the people around her ever be hungry again.”

It was around this time, in Cho’s adolescence, that her mother began to show signs of paranoia and schizophrenia. “We had long been the subject of gossip,” Cho explains, “but then her suspicions would grow into an elaborate pyramid of potential enemies” that included neighbors, coworkers, and government officials. She no longer showed any interest in food: The pantry was empty; blackberries rotted off the vine.

Cho was so alarmed that she consulted psychology textbooks and diagnostic manuals during lunch recess. She even met with a counselor at a local mental health clinic but was told, “Your mother is forty-five. I’m afraid it’s too late now.”

Cho describes this second iteration of her mother as “socially dead...on the couch for years on end.” There was little change in her condition as Cho went off to college at Brown and graduate school at the City University of New York, or when Cho’s father died in 1998. At one point, Cho’s brother and sister-in-law persuaded their mother to live near them, in New Jersey, but there, too, she refused to leave her home and attempted to kill herself. She gave the plural name “Oakie” to the voices she heard all day—“ethereal beings spawned by the trees on our property in Chehalis,” Cho writes.

Schizophrenia is usually considered a young man’s disease, but women get it as well, often “starting at the age of forty-five and typically coinciding with menopause,” Cho notes. She wondered about possible triggers: the drop in estrogen, her mother’s “past in the camptown” or her work at the youth prison, or the time Cho’s father beat her until her eardrums broke. “Or maybe the culprit was grief,” Cho writes. “My grandmother had died several months earlier.” Cho indexed her mother’s story to events in 20th-century South Korea. “I imagined her in every scenario that I wrote about, and wondered if that might have been the thing that pushed her over the edge,” she explains.

Cho responds to the many voids in her mother’s narrative with a composite of grim historical accounts. Her mother’s fondness for cheeseburgers leads Cho to picture her as a villager picking through a US military dumpster. Her mother’s antipathy for powdered milk—“Tastes like war,” she says—reminds Cho of the Korean civilians murdered at Nogeun-ri, South Korea’s My Lai. She imagines her mother raped by an occupying US soldier or walking in arm with another.

But why make these leaps? Why assume such superlative suffering? Jeehyun Choi, a doctoral candidate in English at the University of California, Berkeley, has noted “the predominance of melancholic historicism” in Korean-American literature—an affective spectrum of sadness, grief, and rage, informed by war and empire. Cho admits to this tendency as a product of her own trauma but insists on its structural logic: South Korea is a small country with a tightly compressed modern history. The colonial period was so regimented, and the Korean War of such a devastating scale, that most people of a certain age and class had similar experiences. (“By the time my mother reached the age of twenty, half of her family had already died,” Cho writes.) The same goes for the many communities dependent on US military camptowns. Korean emigrants—who arrived in the US en masse in the 1970s and ’80s—passed these experiences on to their children, but in abridged, perforated form. The next generation, myself included, nurtured catastrophic visions. How else to proceed, Cho suggests, when the past is, “in itself, a question”?

In Tastes Like War, Cho uses food to pry open her mother’s history. “The mother of my thirties,” Cho writes, was deeply unwell and lived with Cho’s brother in Manhattan, then with Cho and her boyfriend in Queens, then in a Princeton apartment adjoining Cho’s brother’s home. For this third, sickest
“Goodall’s infectious optimism and stirring call to action make this necessary reading for those concerned about the planet’s future... Goodall’s rousing testament will resonate widely.”

*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW*

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mother, food became the occasional portal to a happier self. She expressed cravings for old-fashioned Korean dishes like *saengtae jjigae* (pollock stew), which Cho cooked on demand, as the pitch of her disease rose and fell. For the most part, her Oikie voices instructed her not to leave her room; they did permit her a 60th-birthday feast of *galbi*, grilled chicken, kimchi, *kong-nameul*, cheeseburgers, and lemon cake.

On Cho’s last visit to her mother, before her brother would find her body, the two ate *saengtae jjigae* and lay next to each other on the couch. Her mother asked her to stay longer, to catch the next train to Manhattan, and Cho agreed. “I replayed our final moments together on a loop. I obsessed over the exact sequence of events, minor details of the weather, the sound of her voice,” Cho writes. Like so much else between them, these facts took on a heightened significance.

Her mother became the titular ghost of her first book and “began haunting me in a new way once she was actually dead,” Cho writes in *Tastes Like War*. Such specters were not new. As a girl in Chehalis, Cho had seen a “ghost-child” in the yard. “I wondered if it was an apparition that had crossed the Pacific with us,” she writes: “one of my mother’s relatives perhaps, or someone she had seen dead or dying on the side of the road.” The book is full of phantoms: an uncle and grandfather who died during the Korean War; a student in Chehalis who died by suicide; the child of a Korean immigrant in North Carolina who was killed in a tragic accident.

I recently visited Cho’s hometown and was put in mind of these shadows. Chehalis was much as Cho describes it in *Tastes Like War*: white, evangelical, old-fashioned. But it was not untouched by the times. There were several Asian restaurants and Black Lives Matter signs; a giant pride flag proclaiming “Lewis County Welcomes Everyone” covered the back of a building. I pictured Cho and her mother, walking down Main Street, and wondered what they might make of the town now. When her mother was still healthy, Cho writes, “some of her hungers were so big and beyond her reach that it was hard to translate them into words, so she asked for the nameable things she knew she could get.” *Nokdu juk, suk, saengtae jjigae*, blackberry pie, and cheeseburgers.

### Conflict Zone

*The expansive feminism of Jacqueline Rose*

**BY CORA CURRIER**

I can see, but not clearly describe, the patch of concrete, the base of the tree, the few brief seconds that the man and I struggled before my head hit the pavement. I spent the next week in bed with a concussion, forbidden the use of words: no screens, no books, no stimuli. The nonverbal blur that followed was a time that passed as a smear across my brain. It soon came to feel like a muted extension of the attack.

When Sarah Everard was murdered in England in March, I thought about my experience again. It seemed to be the very kind of random violence against women that many saw in Everard’s murder: a woman walks home alone at night; a man she doesn’t know attacks her. Countless women took to social media to talk about their fear of such attacks, the admittedly useless strategies they employed to prevent them, and their sense that, at any moment, they could be next. And yet, as Charlotte Shane wrote in *Dissent*, something about this outpouring felt off. “Specific harm should be the issue,” Shane wrote, but “potential harm and ambient anxiety become the focus.”

After my assault, many friends and colleagues wanted to see it through this more general lens of violence against women, asking me clichéd questions, even what I was wearing. In the Everard case, a cop confessed to kidnapping, raping, and murdering her, which came as somehow not much of a surprise—in the United Kingdom as in the United States, law enforcement officers are chronic offenders when it comes to domestic violence (never mind what happens to the people they interact with). But the popular outcry after Everard’s murder, Shane and others pointed out, did not focus on the role of police (at least not until cops bore down on a vigil for Everard’s death) or on the high prevalence of intimate
partner violence or violence against women of color (Everard was white and blond). Instead, op-eds and tweets and memorials spoke more of a broad fear of male violence in its “stranger danger” form. Many of the proposed responses—curfews for men, plainclothes cops in bars—were predictably punitive and generalizing: They neither addressed the specifics of Everard’s case nor offered resources to women who have suffered violence.

Discussions about violence against women are inevitably caught up in these questions of what women are, collectively, what the nature of the harm against them is, and which harms we are most inclined to amplify. The questions are often difficult to answer, since they exist at what Ann Snitow once called the crux “between the need to build the identity ‘woman’ and give it solid political meaning and the need to tear down the very category ‘woman’ and dismantle its all-too-solid history.”

That fundamental tension is present in the stirrings of backlash against the #MeToo movement, including among many self-described feminists. It is present in the fight for trans rights, in the arguments about girl bosses and “white feminism,” in the abolitionist challenge to responding to misogynistic violence with stiffer penalties and more incarceration. In her new book On Violence and On Violence Against Women, Jacqueline Rose takes up the particulars of what we mean by “women”—not so much in the sense of identity politics and the concerns about intersectionality that often animate such discussions but in the sense of examining the way in which the categorization of women as such has not only led to violence but is a form of violence itself. A thinker with an uncanny ability to write in a spirit of feminist solidarity without repressing either difference or discomfort, Rose has always been willing to investigate the darkest corners of the human psyche. Her 1991 book The Haunting of Sylvia Plath took up the mythic significance of the poet and her death, and her recent work has returned to the theme of women’s struggles with the violence both outside and within them, including Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty, about the crushing expectations placed on mothers throughout history, and Women in Dark Times, which probed the inner lives of Marilyn Monroe, Rosa Luxemburg, and others.

On Violence and On Violence Against Women expands this concern into a global theme. The collection discusses gendered violence in a wide variety of places, from university campuses to the borders of the United States and Europe to post-apartheid South Africa. In between her case studies, Rose returns again and again to literature (from Virginia Woolf to the contemporary South Korean writer Han Kang) and to psychoanalysis, her favorite tools for processing the violence done to us and for confronting the violence within us. She writes beautifully, especially considering her subject, and offers penetrating insights into the effects of violence as well as ways to find inspiration in those who are fighting the structures that enable it.

For Rose, violence’s perverse quality of attracting prurient attention, of becoming its own spectacle, is one reason she thinks that to understand it, we must not just recite horrific statistics or dwell on any given act of violence for too long. Instead, we must add context to incident, examine all the structural and psychological factors at play. We must, as the second part of her title—“On Violence Against Women”—suggests, look more closely still at what is contained in the word “women.”

This demand forces us to examine the function that women have long played as scapegoats, how they have been expected to clean up the world’s messes—and how they have been punished, Rose writes, for the very fact of their and men’s vulnerability. When we view the violence in this light, we begin to see how the oppression of women must be at the forefront of any conversation about political violence, whether speaking of brute force or economic injustice (which Rose calls, quoting Rosa Luxemburg, the “quiet conditions…the skill with which capital cloaks its crimes”). But pressing on that word “women” also allows us to see the absolute instability of the categories of man and woman, victim and perpetrator. We can, Rose argues, battle the conditions that allow harassment, abuse, and femicide with the tools we have available—with political organizing for dialogue and education, funding for social programs, even with the law—but we must also recognize the darkest innards of our conscious and unconscious minds.

The fact that our political and inner lives cannot be separated, that political and psychic struggle can and should be one and the same, is a twist on the classic feminist adage that the personal is political, and for Rose, it also derives from her psychoanalytic method. Along with Juliet Mitchell, she is one of the foremost advocates for the relevance of Freud to feminism, and On Violence and On Violence Against Women draws from many of her earlier works merging psychoanalysis and feminist critique. In Rose’s view, psychoanalysis illuminates the violence of men’s and women’s “allotted sexual roles,” which in turn shows why we cannot simply equate masculinity with violence. Taking aim at radical feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin and contemporary writers of the trans-exclusionary ilk, Rose writes that “even while calling out masculinity in its worst guise, we allow to individual men the potential gap between maleness and the infinite complexity of the human mind.” In a similar vein, she notes that “it is because trans women [pry] apart the question ‘Who is a real woman?’ with such pain…that they should be listened to.” Across several chapters, she uses psychoanalysis and writing on trans experience to show places where this “stultifying ideology” of what men and women are meant to be breaks down. Faced with the expansion and proliferation of gender categories, which some people have found threatening, Rose is exhilarated.

The spirit of Rose’s books is always capacious and generous—she lavishes praise on her peers and often discusses her admiration for young activists—but her analytical rigor is as exacting as her intellect is intimidating. (Janet Malcolm

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once said that Rose was the only interview subject who never forgot the artifice of their interaction, that they were “not two women having a friendly conversation over a cup of tea and a box of biscuits.”) In keeping with her commitment to psychoanalytic complexity, Rose offers no quick prescriptions or simple resolutions in her books, and the same is true of On Violence: She takes on #MeToo, campus harassment cases, trans-exclusionary feminism, and other subjects that have fed into the ouroboros of cancel culture discourse (which, as she dispassionately puts it, “can fairly be described as toxic”), and yet she is able to do so in a manner that is both searching and strongly inclined to side with the oppressed.

In fact, this is a crucial argument in her book. For Rose, part of the failure in how we speak about violence is that we often don’t speak of it at all. Confident in the ability of psychoanalysis and literature to lead us to a “radical understanding” of the other, and therefore to prevent violence, she insists that we need more open spaces for dialogue, for confrontation, and for reflection. To obtain those spaces necessitates political struggle and solidarity against economic injustice. Rose notes that she was drawn into involvement in South African politics by signing on to students’ demands for free education—something that she, as a white British citizen of an earlier generation, had fully enjoyed. The right to the life of the mind that Rose advocates passes through several others.

Recurring theme in On Violence and On Violence Against Women is derived from Freud. Power, Rose argues, is essentially fraudulent, and so violence often happens when that fraudulence is threatened. Women have historically provided a convenient target for “masculinity in a panic,” Rose writes, for the expression of “impotent bigness,” a term she borrows from Hannah Arendt. In The Human Condition, Arendt argued that the ancient Greek city-state confined women to the home as a prerequisite for men’s political freedom outside it. For Rose, the violence we see today is still related to the expectation that women “clean up the world” and make it possible for the powerful (men especially) not to see its more sordid corners. When women fail to reassure men of their authority, they become the targets of violence, a violence to which men in power believe they are entitled.

Nowhere is this clearer than at the border. Migrant women, Rose writes, are caricatured, despised, or dismissed in Europe and the US by liberal and conservatives alike, turned into criminals in such a way that “lays bare the pleasure in sexual hatred, alongside the increasingly violent forms of inequality for which women have always been punished.... As if they were the cause of it all.” Women, and mothers in particular, figure prominently in contemporary border debates as objects of pathos and pity (think of the image of Maria Lila Meza Castro pulling her daughter and son away from a tear-gassing by border agents in Tijuana), although their absence is often just as notable. In all of the coverage of family separation, it is generally the children the media focuses on. But more often, migrant women are the targets of virulent, often sexualized revulsion from the right. In Mothers, Rose wrote about the British tabloids’ fixation on immigrant mothers receiving government help and on “health tourists” taking advantage of the National Health Service. Likewise in the US, there is a long history of fear and hatred of migrant families, a mix of misogyny, racism, and anti-welfare ideology that firmly attached to immigration politics in the 1990s. On top of that, women in immigration custody in the US and Europe have long been subjected to sexual abuse and mistreatment.

Rose’s line “As if they were the cause of it all” came to mind regularly when I worked as a journalist covering immigration and border policy, which always treats migrants themselves as the crisis, not the ordeals to which they are subject. Family separation was intended as a form of punishment to “deter” parents from injuring with their children, and that logic continues in the condescending, paternalistic rhetoric of US policy toward the southern border region, expressed in official speeches and in social media and radio campaigns telling Central Americans, “Don’t put your kids’ lives at risk,” as if those parents were to blame for the hardening of borders bought and paid for by the United States. In the context of migration, as in other realms of criminalization, “women are either being assigned punishing forms of human agency or being deprived of human agency altogether.”

“Political freedom outside it. For to what end is all this obfuscation? The legal term for returning refugees to danger in their home countries is “refoulement,” which, Rose notes, is also the French word for the psychoanalytic concept of repression: Pushing people back to the place from which they fled is “an attempted cover-up, a way of pretending there is nothing ugly going on at either end of the journey.” This seems to me one of the best summations of what happens at the border, where state violence and inequality overlap in a fiction of fairness and law. But the key word there is “attempted.” The fact is, the cover-up is fairly easy to see through. It is hard not to see how borders are a kind of violence. Yet we often try to look away. As Rose writes, “there is a violence in the world which buries its own ruthless logic deep inside the norm.”

Moving between a psychoanalytic register and a geopolitical one can be jarring, and it occasionally makes Rose’s analysis of particular politicians or policies feel oversimplified. But for Rose, the two modes have to work in tandem: “reckoning with the violence of the heart and fighting violence in the world are inseparable.” Psychoanalysis, she argues, shows us that “in the unconscious and in their deeds, everyone is capable, even under duress, of being more flexible in their identifications, less obdurate in their hatreds, always potentially other to themselves.” Such a destabilization of the self (which, ironically, can also be the result and the cause of violence) is necessary for recognition, for the kind of empathy that forecloses future violence.

There are too few venues that allow that kind of reflection, and Rose’s examination of sexual assault on US campuses shows that institutions “can only do so much.” In the bureaucratic thicket of Title IX disputes, she finds that “sexuality collides with the law” in an unsatisfactory fashion. For her, the complexities of desire are reduced by the manner in which
ENRIQUE ALFÉREZ, born in Mexico at the dawn of the 20th century, left a lasting imprint on the Louisiana landscape. Caught up in the Mexican Revolution as a youth, he emigrated to Texas; studied in Chicago; and, in 1929, first made his way to New Orleans. Through figurative sculptures, monuments, fountains, and architectural details, this sculptor of Mexican origins shaped the look of one of the United States’ most visually interesting cities. Granted extensive access to the artist’s personal records and family collection, author Katie Bowler Young has crafted a poetic evocation of his life and work.
victims’ accounts are pitted against those they accuse, and the process—from the collection of evidence to the public way the competing claims play out—is not a substantial improvement on the court system for victims, even as advocates for the accused claim that it violates due process. Citing the feminist critics Jennifer Doyle and Sarah Ahmed, Rose notes that efforts to combat harassment often seem more about protecting the university’s institutional interests. It is rare that either side seems to feel that justice has been served, Rose argues, and most important, these efforts at legal redress have not reduced harassment on campus. What’s more, it seems to her that the focus on harassment has served, oddly, “as a diversionary tactic to help us avoid having to think about sex,” to avoid bringing “mental life, however troubled, out of its dark shameful corners and into the light.” As elsewhere, Rose expresses interest in those dark corners while holding the line that “harassment is unacceptable and must cease.” But the entire subject is frustrating to her, as the “only options available,” she writes, “seem to be too much legal intervention or not enough.”

The middle ground, where violence is held to account but not truly abominated, remains vague, though her chapters on South Africa provide the most illuminating examples of how communities may try to face violence down. In student movements like the decolonization campaign Rhodes Must Fall, which began as a demand to bring down a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Capetown, and Fees Must Fall, a protest against an increase in university fees that began in 2015, she finds “dialogue, workshop, debates” that, in her view, offer “a form of radical understanding that can be politically transformative.” Rose glimpses something similar at a 2018 gathering of survivors and perpetrators of apartheid organized by a center focused on historical trauma. The point of these encounters is not healing or reconciliation (“healing is an interminable process”) but an ongoing struggle with past and current injustice, combining introspection with “taking a political stand in the present.” It is in listening to these conversations about apartheid that she senses, contrary to her own thesis, that “thinking was not enough. Not that ‘feeling’ will do it either.” As elsewhere in the book, she finds inspiration in these moments when activism combines with vulnerability, in “political hope, grounded in brokenness.”

Violence is never over and done with, in other words. It may seem odd to insist that we think more about violence right now, when it is ever more visible in the daily conflagration of our news feeds, after a year in which Covid-19 and uprisings against police brutality laid bare structural violence. But as Rose noted in a recent interview, there is already, and always, an immense pressure to move on, to believe blindly in progress, in the vaccines, in the economic recovery, in reform bills, and not to acknowledge the ongoing violence of our time. Psychoanalysis shows us that “our minds are endlessly engaged in the business of tidying up the landscape of the heart so that, to put it at its most simple, we can feel better about ourselves.” In that process, we “make violence always the problem of somebody else.” This impulse must be resisted at the level of the individual, the community, and the nation. It is both challenging and a source of solidarity to recognize that violence belongs to us all.
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