How Not to Talk About RACE

The right wants to convince America that critical race theory is a sinister program of indoctrination.

PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS
Economy Hall:
The Hidden History of a Free Black Brotherhood
by Fatima Shaik
hardcover • 528 pp. • $34.95

“Shaik’s rendition of her hometown is lyrical and mysterious and always captivating.” —the New York Times

“Bearing witness to early Black American activism . . . Shaik aims to deepen our sense of Black American history.” —Library Journal

In the face of an oppressive white society, the members of the Société d’Economie et d’Assistance Mutuelle rejected racism and colorism to fight for suffrage and education for all. Built on exhaustive historical research, *Economy Hall* follows these civil rights pioneers through landmark events—from the Haitian Revolution to the birth of jazz—that shaped New Orleans and the United States.

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Seeing red: Protesters from Extinction Rebellion take part in blockading an oil-rig maintenance facility on October 6 in Invergordon, Scotland.
YOU’D THINK IT A REASONABLE ASSUMPTION THAT THE PEOPLE MOST INVESTED IN the idea of the nation-state would be the same people who lead them; that the men (and regrettably, it is mostly men) who go out of their way to run for president, weasel their way into a parliamentary post, or seize power by other means would want to maintain the facade that their borders, their anthems, and their founding myths mean something. You’d think that a figure whose rhetoric leans on national pride people and that an individual charged with shaping policy would at least feign confidence in the bylaws of his own making.

This moral consistency need not arise from genuine conviction, which is hard to come by in politics, or even strength of character, which is rarer still, but from a basic sense of self-preservation—an instinct to keep their ship more or less watertight until they can disembark. Why, then, are hundreds of politicians from almost half the world’s countries so down on their homelands that they’ve resorted to hiding their money elsewhere?

These more than 330 political scalps are the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists’ latest gift to the world: a gigantic data leak, known as the Pandora Papers, that reveals the offshore machinations of the world’s most powerful and well-connected individuals. The list includes the usual suspects, like members of Vladimir Putin’s entourage and imperial sleaze Tony Blair. But there’s also Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein. Since 1995, the king of Jordan bought 15 homes worth more than $100 million in the US and the UK, including a $33.5 million California mansion, through dozens of shell companies. If a king—the most literal type of sovereign!—won’t put his money where his monarchy is, shouldn’t we conclude that the nation-state is dead?

Fifteen years ago, it might have been tempting to explain the phenomenon of offshore wealth with clichés about “flatness” and the inevitability of globalization. Borders, as the story went, were on the verge of obsolescence, and footloose capital was following the rational ordinances of the market, which could not be constrained by a piddling national state. Just look at all these sweatshops bringing jobs to the third world. Heck, look at the European Union!

That narrative didn’t age well, except where it did. For most of us, nationalism is still kicking: With or without Covid-19, most borders are more tightly controlled than ever, and it remains difficult if not impossible for the average person to choose what country they live in. Most of us can’t put our savings in a company controlled by a trust that will never pay estate taxes. That’s because most of us live in a world of borders and nations—and the jerks who run them.

Meanwhile, the oligarchs, criminals, and UHNWIs (that’s “ultra-high-net-worth individuals,” for the pros) can manage their affairs with the insouciance of Thomas Friedman circa 2005—even if they have their own countries to run. To borrow an expression from Brooke Harrington, the Dartmouth economic sociologist who in 2016 wrote Capital Without Borders, a prescient study of wealth management, these people are “parasitic” on the nation-state system: “They need it to stay alive to use it for their own purposes,” she told me.

If we dispense with the notion that there is something sacred about the nation, we can see it for what it is: a tool for the ruling and corporate classes to divide and conquer everyone else.

For the ruling class, you see, borders are useful. Sure, you can write restrictive laws to keep migrants out; demonizing foreigners might even help you get a nice crowd at a campaign rally. But every one of these stateless nationalists, as we might call them, also knows that you need borders for another reason: to keep your money encased and concealed. The discrepancies between the laws of sovereign nations are what enables jurisdiction shopping, which is at the core of the offshore economy.

The nation-state, for these people, is therefore an indispensable fiction; if you blow up nationhood tout court, then you can no longer exploit the sovereignty of the Cayman Islands, or indeed of the US, to get an anonymous bank account and a break on capital gains. The nation-state is dead. Long live the nation-state!

Most of us can’t put our savings in a company controlled by a trust that will never pay estate taxes.

Atossa Araxia Abrahamian is the author of The Cosmopolites: The Coming of the Global Citizen.
**COMMENT/DANIEL ELLSBERG AND NORMAN SOLOMON**

**Nuclear Hair Triggers**

*If the goal is a safer world, land-based nuclear missiles should be phased out altogether, not upgraded.*

The single best option for reducing the risk of nuclear war is hidden in plain sight. News outlets don’t mention it. Pundits ignore it. Even progressive and peace-oriented members of Congress tip-toe around it. And yet, for many years, experts have been calling for this act of sanity that could save humanity: shutting down all of the nation’s intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Four hundred ICBMs dot the rural landscapes of Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. Loaded in silos, these missiles are uniquely—and dangerously—on hair-trigger alert. Unlike the nuclear weapons on submarines or bombers, the land-based missiles are vulnerable to attack and could present the commander in chief with a sudden use-them-or-lose-them choice. “If four sensors indicate that enemy missiles are en route to the United States, the president would have to consider launching ICBMs before the enemy missiles could destroy them. Once they are launched, they cannot be recalled,” former Defense Secretary William Perry warns. “The president would have less than 30 minutes to make that terrible decision.”

The danger that a false alarm on either side—of the sort that has occurred repeatedly on both sides—would lead to a preemptive attack derives almost entirely from the existence on both sides of land-based missile forces, each vulnerable to attack by the other; each, therefore, is kept on a high state of alert, ready to launch within minutes of warning. The easiest and fastest way for the US to reduce that risk—and, indeed, the overall danger of nuclear war—is to dismantle entirely its Minuteman III missile force. Gen. James E. Cartwright, a former vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had been commander of the Strategic Command, teamed up with former Minuteman launch officer Bruce G. Blair to write in a 2016 op-ed piece: “By scrapping the vulnerable land-based missile force, any need for launching on warning disappears.”

But rather than confront the reality that ICBMs—all ICBMs—are such a grave threat to human survival, the most concerned members of Congress have opted to focus on stopping new ones from taking the place of existing ones. A year ago, the Air Force awarded Northrop Grumman a $13.3 billion “engineering and manufacturing development” contract for replacing the current Minuteman III missiles with a new generation of ICBMs named the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent. Current projections peg the overall cost over the next five decades at $364 billion. Northrop Grumman calls the GBSD “the modernization of the ground-based leg of the nuclear triad.” But if reducing the dangers of nuclear war is a goal, the top priority should be to remove the triad’s ground-based leg—not modernize it.

Many arms-control advocates, while understanding the inherent dangers of ground-based nuclear missiles, have largely stuck to opposing the GBSD. Instead of challenging ICBMs outright, a coalition of organizations has concentrated on aiming a fiscal argument at Capitol Hill, calling the GBSD program a “money pit” that would squander vast amounts of taxpayer dollars. But the powerful chair of the House Armed Services Committee, Adam Smith, executed a deft end run around that strategy in early summer when he declared that “Minuteman extension, as it is currently being explained to us, is actually more expensive than building the GBSD.”

The same Congressman Smith said less than a year earlier, “I frankly think that our [ICBM] fleet right now is driven as much by politics as it is by a policy necessity. You know, there are certain states in the union that apparently are fond of being a nuclear target. And you know, it’s part of their economy. It’s what they do.”

Senators from several of the states with major ICBM bases or development activities—Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Utah—continue to maintain an “ICBM Coalition” dedicated to thwarting any serious scrutiny of the land-based weaponry. Members of the coalition have systematically blocked efforts to reduce the number of ICBMs or study alternatives to building new ones. They’re just a few of the lawmakers captivated by ICBM mega-profiteers. In a report issued this year by the Center for International Policy, nuclear weapons expert William Hartung gives readers a detailed look “Inside the ICBM Lobby,” showing how ICBM contractors get their way while throwing millions of dollars at politicians and deploying battalions of lobbyists on Capitol Hill. As the recipient of the sole-source contract to build the proposed new ICBMs, Northrop Grumman has joined with other top contractors to block efforts to reduce spending on these dangerous and unnecessary systems—or even simply to pause their development.

When opponents of the GBSD decline to challenge the currently deployed Minuteman III missiles, the effects are counterproductive if their ultimate goal is to get rid of ICBMs. Tacit acceptance of the Minuteman missile force while attempting to block the GBSD sends a message that the ICBM status quo isn’t so bad. Such a tactical path might seem eminently pragmatic and realistic. But sooner or later, the extraordinary dangers of keeping any ICBMs in place must be faced, explained to the public—and directly challenged.

Getting trapped in an argument about the cheapest way to keep ICBMs operational in their silos is ultimately no-win. The history of nuclear weapons in this country tells us that people will spare no expense if they believe that spending the
money will really make them and their loved ones safer—we must show them that ICBMs actually do the opposite. Unless arms-control and disarmament groups, along with allied members of Congress, change course and get serious about addressing the fundamentals of why ICBMs should be eliminated, they’ll end up implicitly reinforcing the land-based part of the triad.

“First and foremost,” former Defense Secretary Perry wrote five years ago, “the United States can safely phase out its land-based [ICBM] force, a key facet of Cold War nuclear policy. Retiring the ICBMs would save considerable costs, but it isn’t only budgets that would benefit. These missiles are some of the most dangerous weapons in the world. They could even trigger an accidental nuclear war.”

Contrary to uninformed assumptions, discarding all ICBMs could be accomplished unilaterally by the United States with no downside. Even if Russia chose not to follow suit, dismantling the potentially cataclysmic land-based missiles would make the world safer for everyone on the planet. Frank von Hippel, a former chair of the Federation of American Scientists and a co-founder of Princeton’s Program on Science and Global Security, wrote this year: “Eliminating launch on warning would significantly reduce the probability of blundering into a civilization-ending nuclear war by mistake. To err is human. To start a nuclear war would be unforgivable.”

Better sooner than later, members of Congress will need to face up to the horrendous realities about intercontinental ballistic missiles. They won’t do that unless peace, arms-control, and disarmament groups go far beyond the current limits of congressional discourse—and start emphasizing, on Capitol Hill and at the grassroots, the crucial truth about ICBMs and the imperative of eliminating them all. N

In 1961, as a consultant to the Pentagon, Daniel Ellsberg drafted the top-secret guidance for the operational planning for general nuclear war. Ten years later he faced trial for releasing the Pentagon Papers.

Norman Solomon is the author of War Made Easy and a cofounder of RootsAction.org.

IN OUR ORBIT/DAVE ZIRIN

Athlete Activism

Nation sports editor Dave Zirin’s new book, The Kaepernick Effect, explores the politics of “taking a knee.”

HEN NATION PUBLISHER KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL invited Dave Zirin in 2006 to become the magazine’s first sports editor in the publication’s then-141-year history, many readers scoffed. What a waste of valuable space! Sports were a diversion, people argued, banal escapism, not worth the time of a serious magazine. One reader denounced pro sports as the modern-day opiate of the masses.

Fast-forward 10 years to NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who chooses to “take a knee” during the traditional pregame performance of the national anthem. After that protest, sports and politics seem irrevocably intertwined.

What better venue for examining the gender, class, and racial inequities roiling society and the forces of resistance pushing back against traditional norms and mores? Athletic protests become front-page news. ESPN starts a vertical on race. The Washington Post now employs two writers assigned to sports and race. USA Today hires an editor on race and sports.

By 2021, it would be impossible for The Nation not to cover sports.

When Zirin started writing he was a lonely voice, one of very few journalists focusing on the rich intersection of sports, race, class, and gender. Kaepernick’s groundbreaking 2016 decision was the moment when Zirin’s monopoly was broken. The quarterback’s gesture triggered an awakening in sports and marked a sea change around the world. Taking a knee gave athlete-activists at all levels a powerful new lever to demonstrate public support for racial justice.

In his 12th and most important book yet, Zirin assembles a riveting collection of first-person stories from athletes who chose to emulate Kaepernick’s protest. Zirin’s efforts to highlight their experiences began at the outset of the pandemic, when he implored his large social media following to share stories of young athletes who took a knee. His DMs were soon flooded with students wanting to share the “why” behind their protests. Their stories are all different, which lends them power, yet Zirin makes clear the common thread: a profound intolerance for injustice.

A strong proponent of the Howard Zinn school of “people’s history,” Zirin gives voice to a disparate group of high school, college, and professional athletes who provoked vital conversations, many enduring their own backlash without the financial insulation Kaepernick enjoys. These young student-athletes with everything to lose form the heroic core of Zirin’s inspiring new book.
The Latest Grift

*Celebrity opportunists are reinventing themselves as mental health champions. It’s a brazen con.*

Over a century before Princess Diana died at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, the physician Jean-Martin Charcot attracted *toute la ville* to his live demonstrations of neurological disorders on its premises. Charcot’s particular interest was hysteria, that mysterious, uniquely female complex—literally, “of the womb”—that seemed to afflict so many women of his day. His Tuesday lectures, featuring patients of the hospital on full display, were high spectacle, attended, according to one account, by “a multi-colored audience, drawn from all of Paris: authors, doctors, leading actors and actresses, fashionable demimondaines, all full of morbid curiosity.” Among them was Sigmund Freud, whose own deranged analysis of “the great neurosis” also made him famous.

There are certain symmetries in history that lend the impression that all has been foretold, when in fact it’s just a matter of human foolishness doomed to repeat itself. But it seems fitting that the Salpêtrière was the final destination of the most famously unhappy woman of her time—and that her son should turn his grief into a mental health grift.

Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, styled the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, fled to US shores at the beginning of the pandemic, when the whinings of the well-to-do were being eclipsed by the worries of the unwashed. There wasn’t time to care about an unemployed adult man whose falling-out with his family had forced him to quarantine in a $15 million home. But not for long. The Sussexes reinvented themselves as warriors for the oppressed, cashing in on their privilege by disavowing it loudly to anyone who would listen: Oprah, Dax Shepard, etc. Pitching themselves as refugees from the (inarguably oppressive) British monarchy and the (inarguably racist) tabloid press, they’ve made mental health projects into a kind of radical chic. Their search for well-being may not include fighting for universal health care, but an adoring public gets to see them thrive through gauzy photo shoots, expensive clothes, and multimillion-dollar Netflix deals. Harry has even become an influencer—pardon, the “chief impact officer”—for an app-based “coaching” company. Far from seeking a life less public, they’ve capitalized on the US media’s willingness to amplify their struggle without scrutiny and to frame their “advocacy” as somehow raw and brave.

That myth-making is antithetical to the actual work of psychotherapy, which is an intensely private experience. The Sussexes’ performance, meanwhile, is calculated to drive eyeballs, clicks, and consumption. They’re in good company, now that social media’s hegemony has made the appearance of living well into a spectator sport, arguably resulting in the recent massive and quantifiable uptick in generalized depression.

A July study published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* analyzed a century’s worth of Google Books data for instances of language reflecting negative ways of thinking called “cognitive distortions,” which are commonly associated with psychiatric disorders like depression and anxiety. It found a spike in the early aughts, then an increase to unprecedented levels between 2007 and the present day. That timeline just happens to coincide with the rise of Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), and Instagram (2010), leading researchers to theorize that “the widespread adoption of communication technologies such as the internet, the World Wide Web, and social media may have driven greater societal and political polarization at a global level.” They connect the polarization to cognitive distortions such as “us-vs.-them thinking (labeling and mislabeling) [i.e., a reliance on simplistic good/bad categories], dichotomous reasoning, mindreading [assuming one knows what others are thinking], overgeneralizing, emotional reasoning, and catastrophizing.” All of this helps explain the increasing prevalence of depression—and in turn the explosion of the wellness industry.

Instagram in particular—that aspirational portal—is linked directly to increasing rates of depression among teenage girls. A September *Wall Street Journal* exposé revealed that Instagram’s own research found that over 40 percent of teenagers who said they felt “unattractive,” and roughly 25 percent who felt “not good enough,” reported that those feelings began while using the app. (For more on the recent Facebook revelations, see Jeet Heer’s column on page 8.) Teens with existing mental health issues were unequivocal that using Instagram made things worse, but they struggled in their efforts to log off, for fear of missing out. Gazing incessantly at other people’s carefully curated lives does not, in fact, help emerging adults cultivate a healthy sense of self. It’s a huge market, though: 40 percent of Instagram’s users are under 22 years old. The other 60 percent include all manner of snake oil salesmen, as well as scheming royals who’ve been banished from Buckingham Palace for attempting to monetize their titles.
to 10 million followers.

Nevertheless, Meghan is writing a guaranteed best seller about “wellness” with Prince Harry as part of a $20 million four-book deal. This does not surprise Natalia Petrzela, a history professor at the New School who’s written about the hijacking of the wellness movement, which originated in the counterculture of the 1960s as a response to a medical establishment that failed women and Black patients (as it still does); their physical and mental well-being was and is routinely disregarded and their afflictions attributed to individual dysfunction rather than systemic failure. (Think Charcot’s and Freud’s pathologizing of women as “hysterics.”) “Mental health today is such an inchoate, capacious concept that it’s ripe for manipulation and exploitation by people who use that term to perhaps sell dubious products, services, or experiences to vulnerable people,” Petrzela explains. “It’s very hard to verify whether an app or a retreat, or a crystal or a self-help book, is really supporting mental health, but there really no barrier to billing it as such.”

Clearly not. There’s just something particularly nefarious about hawking mental health as part of the broader spectacle that’s destroying it on a grand scale.

It’s nefarious to hawk mental health as part of the spectacle that’s destroying it on a grand scale.

Facebook Knows How Bad It Is

Whistleblower testimony proves that the social media giant is harmful and dishonest.

N March 25, Republican congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers grilled Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg on whether social media platforms were doing harm to children. Zuckerberg’s first response was to sidestep the issue of children altogether and mutter vaguely about “people” instead: “Congresswoman, the research that I have seen on this suggests that if people are using computers and social—” Rodgers cut off this evasion and asked for a simple yes-or-no answer. Zuckerberg replied, “I don’t think that the research is conclusive on that. But I can summarize what I have learned, if that is helpful.”

In his gloss on the scholarship, Zuckerberg highlighted the happy news that “overall, the research that we have seen is that using social apps to connect with other people can have positive mental health benefits and well-being benefits by helping people feel more connected and less lonely.”

The words came across as weaselly and disingenuous at the time, but they sound even worse now. Thanks to tens of thousands of pages of internal documents provided by Frances Haugen, a former Facebook product manager turned whistleblower, we know that Zuckerberg was willfully lying about this and many other issues concerning his company. Haugen took these internal reports to The Wall Street Journal, which has published them in a lengthy series titled “The Facebook Files.”

Facebook has long been the object of a great deal of external criticism. Haugen’s massive cache not only validates this criticism but also makes much of it seem excessively generous. Some of the company’s research focused on Instagram, the image-sharing site it owns. As the Journal highlighted: “Facebook has been conducting studies into how its photo-sharing app affects its millions of young users. Repeatedly, [its] researchers found that Instagram is harmful for a sizable percentage of them, most notably teenage girls.” According to one internal Facebook slide, “Thirty-two percent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse.”

Summing up “The Facebook Files,” the Journal notes: “Facebook’s own research lays out in detail how its rules favor elites; its platforms have negative effects on teen mental health; its algorithm fosters discord; and that drug cartels and human traffickers use its services openly.” The newspaper adds, “The documents show that Facebook has often made minimal or ineffectual efforts to address the issues and plays them down in public.”

The repeated pattern the documents show is that, in an attempt to assuage public anger, Facebook would make periodic gestures at reform, mainly by conducting internal research into the impact it was having on its
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users. The researchers would come back with extremely negative reports and suggestions for wholesale reform. Zuckerberg and other top executives would then reject those recommendations because they would dampen the company’s growth.

There’s no denying that Zuckerberg’s single-minded focus on growth has paid off. Facebook has gone from an idea he and some classmates developed as Harvard undergraduates into a company valued at $1 trillion, with an estimated 3.5 billion users across Facebook and its affiliated platforms (Instagram, Messenger, and WhatsApp). Yet the bigger Facebook gets, the more it needs to keep growing. Speaking on 60 Minutes, Haugen said, “The thing I saw at Facebook over and over again was there were conflicts of interest between what was good for the public and what was good for Facebook.”

One of Facebook’s shrewder public relations moves was to ban Donald Trump on January 7, the day after a mob he incited attacked the Capitol. Bernie Sanders has been one of the few left-of-center American politicians to criticize the move, on the grounds that such power could be wielded less scrupulously by tech companies in the future.

“The Facebook Files” vindicates Sanders’s critique. Long before it banned Trump, Facebook gave him a special exemption. Along with other elite politicians and pundits, Trump was on a “whitelist” of figures who had immunity from normal enforcement rules. In May 2020, in response to the protests after George Floyd’s murder, Trump tweeted and also posted to Facebook an ominous warning that “when the looting starts, the shooting starts.” An automated system rated these incendiary words as 90 out of 100 in terms of violating the platform’s rules. If an ordinary person had posted that, it would take just one report from a user to cause the post to be removed. Instead, it was flagged for management review, and Zuckerberg himself intervened to keep the post up.

The lesson of “The Facebook Files” is that the company cannot be trusted to regulate itself. There’s no need for further arguments about whether Facebook has a deleterious effect: Facebook is now in the same position as tobacco companies that knew smoking causes cancer, or oil companies long aware that fossil fuel consumption is driving climate change.

Government reorganization of Facebook is the only way forward. The urgency became all the clearer after the outage of October 4, when the many platforms owned by the company went offline for hours. Facebook itself might be just a place to post pictures for most people, but for tens of millions, particularly in poorer countries, WhatsApp and Messenger are as essential as phones. Facebook is a public utility run by an irresponsible oligarch.

The political question now is what form that reorganization should take. Should the various internal remedies proposed by Facebook researchers be mandated? Should Facebook, as Elizabeth Warren advocates, be broken up into smaller companies? Or would a more radical proposal to socialize Facebook and run it as a public utility, freeing it from the imperatives of economic growth so that it works only to foster communication, be the best approach?

These divergent solutions need to be hashed out politically. The one thing they have in common is that they start from the premise that neither Zuckerberg nor any other CEO can be allowed to dictate the future of the company. Facebook has become a public problem that needs public solutions.
Learning From Hardship

Our new podcast, Going for Broke, lets Americans living on the edge have the last word.

The pandemic has been a crash course in hardship and downward mobility for millions of Americans. Whether they thought they had their lives “set” or were already struggling to get by, the arrival of the coronavirus suddenly added a lot of new households to the ranks of those scrambling to make the rent, pay the electric bill, or make three weeks’ worth of money stretch to the end of the month.

Starting October 18, The Nation and the Economic Hardship Reporting Project are launching Going for Broke, a new podcast series I’m hosting that will bring you personal stories of prevailing through challenging times like these. For years I’ve told readers, listeners, and viewers that too much of American journalism consists of stories told by wealthy people to middle-class people about poor people. Those who are struggling are rarely given the privilege of self-definition. On our show, you’ll hear firsthand from people who have dealt with homelessness, poverty, bad jobs, or no jobs about the solutions they want to see in the world.

Going for Broke also includes something I never wanted as a reporter: the chance to talk about myself. When Al Jazeera America, the cable network where I had been anchoring an evening news program, went out of business with little notice in 2016, I wasn’t too worried. After long tenures at PBS NewsHour, NPR’s Talk of the Nation, and as a reporter at the NBC-owned station in Chicago, I had decades of high-level experience, domestic and foreign, on camera, on radio, and in print under my belt. I would find something, I figured. No need to panic.

Before long it became clear I did need to worry. Companies that had courted me in recent years now suddenly ghosted me. As the fruitless job search wore on, I began to wonder if it might be taking a physical toll as well. It turned out it was more than just feeling exhausted and run-down: I had cancer. Scan after test after scan were followed by surgery, healing, and chemotherapy. Through it all, I was wary of telling anyone what I was going through for fear that once the word got around, it would be even harder to find steady work.

I am now piecing my career back together, but it is starting to look like I will never have a sustained full-time job with a single employer again. I am healthy now, and my relief at recovering from cancer may be coloring my mood as I look at what is still a difficult employment landscape. What the experience drove home for me is that this could happen to anybody. All of it. And I am, after all, still anybody.

On Going for Broke you will meet Lisa Ventura, a social worker who bootstrapped her way into something like white-collar security, only to have the pandemic send her kids home from school and confront her with taking on her estranged father as an unofficial client.

You’ll get to know Lori Yearwood, a reporter for the Miami Herald who became homeless for two years after a series of traumas. She will share her reporting on how sleeplessness plagues homeless people and how the inability to get a good night’s sleep is built into the structure of the shelter system.

Ann Larson, an aspiring college professor turned grocery cashier, will take you inside her store for a look at how work that was previously invisible was suddenly defined as “essential,” and how the entrenched divisions of class and status are observed by worker and customer alike.

John Koopman reported on the Iraq War for the San Francisco Chronicle, but like so many who counted on what turned out to be a wobbly business model, he lost his job due to layoffs. There followed stints as an Uber driver and a strip club manager, then a move back to his Nebraska hometown to care for his aging parents.

Going for Broke will point out the problems with America’s frayed social safety net and offer solutions guided by a knowledge of adversity that our guests came by the hard way—through experience. Until we get where we need to be, Going for Broke will remind the afflicted that they are not alone and the rest of us of just how far we still are from a society that takes care of its own. You can subscribe to Going for Broke now wherever you get your podcasts. And if you’re new to podcasts, visit thenation.com/podcasts to learn more.

Ray Suarez is a broadcaster, reporter, and author and the host of Going for Broke, a new podcast from The Nation and the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.
Shifting Goalposts

Bryce Covert + Mike Konczal

It feels like eons ago, but as recently as March the Democrats took major action to address the ongoing Covid-19 recession with the American Rescue Plan. Yet ever since Congress passed the legislation, there have been critics, both conservative and centrist, who have attacked the plan for being too big and doing too much. Over the spring and summer, these naysayers made two dire predictions. Both proved wrong, but instead of pausing to reevaluate the policies they’d attacked, the critics continued at the same volume, moving the goalposts with brand-new claims.

The first prediction was that expanded unemployment insurance would prevent people from seeking jobs. The CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan made unemployment insurance more generous through a lump-sum grant and by expanding it to include independent contractors and the self-employed. In the late spring, as job numbers lagged behind some expectations, the media ran seemingly endless interviews with fast-food employers who said people weren’t willing to come back to work while they were receiving the expanded UI benefits.

This was never plausible. During this period, the highest job growth was in service-sector industries like hospitality and leisure. The missing jobs were largely in middle-income occupations unlikely to be affected by the expanded UI. But the most convincing evidence emerged after several Republican-controlled states ended their expanded benefits early. It’s rare that we see a real-life public policy experiment in which the consequences of a specific change are so clear. Yet sure enough, the economists crunched the numbers and showed that ending the program did not increase job growth. It did, however, increase hardship, as new wages didn’t make up for the lost benefits.

Something similar happened with inflation. Economist Larry Summers described the American Rescue Plan and Jerome Powell’s dovish policy at the Federal Reserve as the “least responsible fiscal macroeconomic policy we have had for the last 40 years.” The critics worried that inflation would build on itself. In this scenario, people would expect inflation, which would drive up prices, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of inflation cascading across the economy. Instead, we saw a summer in which inflation was contained to a handful of sectors that had been disrupted by the pandemic. Inflation increased as the economy came online but then decreased with time. There will be bumps in inflation in the future, likely driven by disinvested supply chains and housing costs, but each will be the story of a specific sector—not the beginning of runaway inflation that will tank the economy.

Yet instead of celebrating the fact that these worries turned out to be unfounded, the critics have shifted their claims, and the media covers them as if they warrant the same level of concern. Instead of focusing on extending unemployment insurance, the media has moved on to stories about weak wage growth. Instead of applauding the fact that inflation is contained, full-employment detractors are now warning that it might stay above 2 percent and not return to the previous rate until 2022 or ‘23. These are issues that demand serious research, but they are an order of magnitude less worrying than the alarmists’ previous divinations. Yet the speed at which the media simply moves from one critique to the next, without pausing to examine them, should worry us.

We saw the same thing during the Great Recession, when the debate over why the recovery was slow kept hopping from one explanation to another—be it the vague concept of uncertainty or the idea that workers lacked skills or the notion of a permanent unemployable class that would never find work again. All these excuses dissolved when unemployment, after nearly a decade of slow recovery, dropped to 3.5 percent before the pandemic thanks to the patience of the Federal Reserve. And it’s why this time we need to keep the threats to the recovery in perspective.

Already, the failure to extend unemployment insurance, based on false assumptions that were disproved by subsequent evidence, is a loss for those advocating for a full-employment recovery. Next year, as the federal government reduces the spending that was in the American Rescue Plan, the recovery will slow. These same critics who have repeatedly been wrong will make up a new line to try to convince policy-makers that we can’t get the unemployment rate lower than it was before the pandemic. If we let them continue to invent excuses, both workers and the economy will be left behind.

Mike Konczal
Celebrated, Then Defaced

Jonte “Jonoel” Lancaster plays a trombone during a celebration for the refurbished statue of George Floyd after it was vandalized following its Juneteenth installation in Brooklyn. The statue, now located in Manhattan’s Union Square Park, was vandalized again on October 3. According to police, a video showed an unidentified man on a skateboard throwing paint on the statue and then fleeing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>By the Numbers</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>700k</strong></td>
<td>Approximate number of people expelled by the Biden administration since February 2021 using Title 42</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6k</strong></td>
<td>Number of Haitians deported by the Biden administration between September 19 and October 1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>464k</strong></td>
<td>Number of people expelled by the Trump administration under Title 42, a public health provision used to deny asylum seekers due process</td>
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<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td>Number of years that the US military occupied Haiti (from 1915 to 1934)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>81%</strong></td>
<td>Percentage of migrants held in detention facilities owned or operated by private firms as of January 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3.2M</strong></td>
<td>Number of people in Haiti facing food insecurity</td>
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**What Riot?**

Mike Pence stood up to Donald Trump’s tirade. He certified the vote. He was unflinching.

He now implies that day’s been overblown, Though he’s the one the mob had talked of lynching.

Republicans with futures in the party
Do well to see the rioters as purest
Supporters of Trump’s view that he was cheated—
Or maybe, as one pol has said, as tourists.
How Not to Talk About Race

The right wants to convince America that critical race theory is a sinister program of indoctrination.

PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS
When I started teaching, in 1980, I was one of eight women of color teaching law in the United States, including at historically Black colleges: six African Americans, one Asian American, and one Latina. In those early years, men in my various workplaces openly and routinely commented on my hair, clothes, weight, legs, waist, age, skin color, voice, accent, makeup or lack thereof, jewelry (no ring?!), and marital status. My body felt spitted and twirled over a fire of others’ curiosity.

Make no mistake, I understand being curious about what one has never seen. Humans settle into perceived orders, and as those orders shift, people who appear “out of place” may find themselves marked, remarked on, exoticized, or shunned. But those experiences made me think deeply about how to be a thoughtful adult in the room of that curiosity. How do we move past the surrealism of “alien” encounters and begin to address the social uneasiness festering from invisible history, bad manners, mutual ignorance, and unfettered, in-your-face curiosity?

The very presence of new faces during those early years of my career forged new connections, new ways of thinking. We began to speak across all kinds of boundaries: disciplinary, linguistic, ontological—what Kimberlé Crenshaw later called “intersectional” work. Professor Bell was an important progenitor of such conversation: He worked tirelessly to recenter dropped histories. He’d point out how disabling racially restrictive covenants were, not just as a topic for a separate course on “race law” but as integral to the power relations within foundational courses like property law. He invited everyone to forge new connections, new ways of knowledge-seeking about how to deal with varied alignments of social power. Those diverse connections—I have always thought of what Bell started as a “critical race conversation”—were the origin of today’s grappling with the legal histories structuring complex theoretical arrangements. It is out of this grappling with the experience of structured marginalization that critical race theory was born.

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There are eight states that have passed laws against critical race theory, and around 20 more have bills pending.

Starting the conversation:
Derrick Bell with a group of Harvard Law students in 1990.

Here’s another story, plucked from recent news, about what happens when anxiously whispering children grow up: In Traverse City, Mich., a community that is more than 90 percent white, a group of high school students formed a Snapchat group called “Slave Trade,” in which they ruminated that “all blacks should die” and suggested “let’s start another holocaust.” The contents of their online exchanges became public only after they’d held a slave auction, selling off their Black classmates for money. “I know how much I was sold for: $100,” said one girl who was “traded.” “And in the end I was given away for free.”

When all this came to light, the school quickly drafted a resolution to create a social equity task force committed to “recognizing that the actions needed to combat discrimination and racism depend on new knowledge and community progress.” But the draft resolution became the object of fierce resistance from some parents, who, as of this writing, have succeeded in editing out language encouraging a “social equity and diversity lens” for the curriculum; taking out a promise to add books by “marginalized” authors to school libraries; cutting mention of teaching about “diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging issues”; removing language condemning “racism,” “racial violence,” “hate speech,” and “bigotry”; and removing the statement “racism and hate have no place in our schools or in our society.” The largely parent-driven backlash has led to the excising of the very vocabulary that would enable speakers of the English language to say that slave-trading one’s Black classmates on Snapchat is wrong.

This story illustrates all the unfortunate dynamics of how not to talk about race—indeed, how not to talk about anything at all. It demonstrates the degree to which some parents view race as though it were akin to sex in the 1960s: taboo, prurient, something to keep hidden because it’ll give the children fevers and make the parents squirm. As with sex, ignorance about race becomes a secret excitement; racial disparagement becomes an indulgent exercise, a species of cathartic emphasis, like swear words. For many children who are socialized as not-different, and for the normatively comfortable adults they become, discussion of race remains stunted and infantile, too much like assigning “cooties”—loosely undefined yet cruelly specific. So you ban sex education in the name of chastity, purity, innocence. You ban talk about race that is inherently “divisive.” But when Americans of different races greet each other as though they had just stepped off a ship in 1492, let’s just say that the division is glaringly already-there. It begs to be addressed.

At the school board meetings in Traverse City, the very notion of an equity resolution was, as one parent put it, “interlaced with critical race theory.” Parents held signs and testified that they considered the resolution “Marxist,” “anti-Christian,” “divisive,” and “anti-white.” I have read the resolution in both its original and edited form; there is nothing in either that hints of Marxism or of the Antichrist. Indeed, it’s quite a mystery why fear of the “divisive” would require eliminating antonyms like “inclusion and belonging.” It is a sign of the confusion of this moment that condemning racist language or bullying behavior is seen as the automatic and specific equivalent of being “anti-white.”

At the public hearings, most parents seemed to minimize the fact that many of their kids—many more, by all accounts, than an isolated Snapchat group—saw fit to disparage, humiliate, dehumanize, and even call for the killing of their nonwhite classmates. Instead, the greater sin, according to the parental pushback, was that “race” was ever mentioned at all. Darcie Pickren, one of the most-quoted parent leaders, maintained: “We don’t, not even for a second, think about race. We never would. And I think that this is opening a can of worms and we are not going to be able to go back.” Most intriguingly, Pickren feared that “schools have been revising their curriculums...and basically saying we’re going to cancel math and English to bring in these social justice studies instead. It sounds like we’re going to be teaching our kids our country is founded on racism and show them that if they’re white, they’re privileged and they’re part of the problem. I find that mind-boggling.” I would find that mind-boggling too—if it were remotely true. But it’s not.

As of this writing, there are eight states that have passed anti–critical race theory laws, and around 20 more have bills pending. As in Traverse City, school boards around the country have exploded in painful, community-destroying bouts of antagonism. The language of the laws is almost identical, having been drafted not at the local level but by a team coordinated and funded by an array of conservative think tanks, including the Manhattan Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation. That template starts off by mandating that there shall be no stereotyping by race or sex; no instruction that teaches that any one race or sex is inherently superior to another; no teaching that any individual is intrinsically racist, sexist, or oppressive; no teaching that anyone bears automatic responsibility for actions committed in the past by members of the same race. So far, so good. Indeed, my only concern is that this much is billed as “anti–critical race theory.” By this rubric, such laws strongly—and wrongly—imply that critical race theory is nothing more than crude biological determinism.

But the bills and the laws go further. Most bar “mandatory gender or sexual diversity training” and discussion of “controversial” topics; some ban teaching The New York Times’ 1619 Project. Others, like Alabama’s, propose
to ban critical race theory “outright”—and then define it as any belief that America is inherently racist or sexist, “whether consciously or unconsciously.” Nearly all versions prohibit teaching in which “any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.”

This last is perhaps the most troubling of all the provisions: The discomfort of public school students—from kindergarten through college—becomes, per se, a violation that may invoke monetary fines for teachers, risk their being fired, or result in withholding funds from individual schools or whole districts. In effect, the emotions of young children and immature youth become a metric for disciplining teachers and educational institutions. If students become upset about difficult dialogues, heads will roll.

So what are we really talking about when we talk about this newly corrupted fantasy of critical race theory? While the culture wars have plagued us for the past 30 years, the particular bitterness of this iteration began only last September with former president Donald Trump’s now-rescinded executive order banning critical race theory and diversity training in all federal programs. It’s worth looking back at the language of that order, which poisons the meaning of critical race theory as poisonous to the deadly; it deploys an executive order to authorize censorship; it carries the imperative of social contagion that operates like magic. It lifts the topic of race from the contentious to the deadly; it deploys an executive order to authorize censorship; it carries the imperative of a search-and-destroy surveillance mission with the express goal of quick extinction.

Extinguish, no less! This is a sentiment that far exceeds concern about bad pedagogy: It evacuates the meaning of critical race theory as an academic discussion, one that began decades ago in law schools. This definitional theft treats the mere discussion of race as a disease and a poison. It lifts the topic of race from the contentious to the deadly; it deploys an executive order to authorize censorship; it carries the imperative of a search-and-destroy surveillance mission with the express goal of quick extinction.

Christopher Rufo, a senior analyst at the Manhattan Institute, is widely credited with being the ideological picador behind Trump’s executive order. In a much-cited Twitter thread last March, Rufo stated that his goal was to “run a public persuasion campaign” that would conflate any number of topics and deposit them into a new bucket called critical race theory. “We have successfully frozen their brand—‘critical race theory’—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions,” he wrote. “We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category…. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.”

Rufo is straightforward about his political ends: “I basically took that body of criticism, I paired it with breaking news stories that were shocking and explicit and horrifying, and made it political,” he said. “Turned it into a salient political issue with a clear villain.” This is what critical race theory has become: an effigy. It is whatever the world-creating powers of Tucker Carlson and the Conservative Political Action Committee and QAnon say it is. It is a million Willie Hortons dressed up as teachers hired to feast on the brains of kindergartners, killing their innocence.

The sudden proliferation of identically worded laws not only suppresses conversation about race in schools and workplaces but also “deputizes” citizen spies. (The Nevada Family Alliance, an advocacy group, has even urged that teachers be forced to wear body cameras, like police officers, to make sure that they aren’t “indoctrinating” students to “hate America.”) It is in keeping with the new law in Texas that narrows access to abortion and those that allow armed poll watchers in open-carry states.

This framing makes it impossible to do what I am requested to do a thousand times a day—to tell you what critical race theory is—for this is no longer a definitional or a factual dispute. Like all good propaganda, its object exists in the bleary eye of the beholder. Critical race theory has been positioned as that which cannot be defined because Rufo et al. have transformed it from an epistemic referent into an emotional repository: It is well-spun sorcery, a haze of hate. Like the powerfully formless mumbo-jumbo of “cooties,” it is a gestural assignment of social contagion that operates like magic.

What is pernicious about these new bills and laws is that they outlaw feelings, which transfers agency beyond negotiation or norm or law: They remove intentionality or mens rea from teachers and literally place that power with children. Fox News touts stories of mixed-up, mixed-race children who

(continued on page 23)
Great divide: A new section of the US-Mexico border wall cuts through hills in the Sonoran Desert.
Miguel Fernández de Castro’s white Toyota pickup truck rolled into the empty gravel lot outside the Santa Ana bus station a few minutes after 5 PM. We were two hours south of the Arizona border, in the desert state of Sonora, one of the most sparsely populated regions in Mexico. I had met Fernández de Castro six months earlier in Brooklyn, at a Japanese-inspired cocktail bar run by the art magazine e-flux, where he was screening his experimental film Grammar of Gates. Released in 2019, the video examines the plight of the Tohono O’odham, the Indigenous group from which he is descended and whose territory straddles the US-Mexico border. Pairing drone footage of the tribe’s ancestral lands with clips from the kitschy 1970 western Geronimo Jones, it’s an impressionistic portrait of a nation encroached on from all sides.

From the south, cartels have established trafficking routes that snake through the territory. From the north, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has occupied the reservation as a base of operations. At the time of the screening, Fernández de Castro was nearing the end of a fellowship, and he and his partner, the anthropologist Natalia Mendoza, were preparing to return to Altar, the town in Sonora where he was born and raised. When he said I was welcome to visit, he probably didn’t think I’d take him up on the offer. But there I was, sitting on the curb outside the bus station next to a taco stand, watching 18-wheelers trundle by on Federal Highway 2.

Fernández de Castro pulled up to the curb. He is 35 years old, with dirty blond hair and striking gray-green eyes. He wears blue jeans, brown cowboy boots, and a dark baseball cap with a curved brim. When he’s driving, he always has a playlist at the ready—often corridos tumbados, the emerging genre that combines Mexican country music with hip-hop production and pop songwriting. Altar was an hour away, so after a few minutes on the highway, he decided to pull over to grab two Técate Lights from the cooler in his truck bed. “Don’t expect to find craft beer out here,” he teased as he cracked a can and placed it in his cupholder.

Just a few days ago, he said, he took his regular drive from his home in Altar out to his family’s cattle ranch, about 30 miles north, to find his farmhand missing. He asked around town to see if anybody knew his whereabouts, and heard he’d absconded to el otro lado—the

Max Pearl writes about art and politics across the Americas.
The job had probably gone sour, and the farmhand fled. So at that moment, Fernández de Castro's main concern was finding somebody to feed his cows.

Altar (population 8,000) is the second-to-last town before the border with Arizona. Because of its proximity to the United States, it’s become a way station for migrants from Mexico and Central America to prepare for the final leg of their trip. They pay exorbitant prices to mafia-owned smuggling operations for safe passage. Some migrants earn extra money by carrying drug shipments on their 170-mile hike to Tucson. This booming black-market economy has brought extraordinary violence to Altar. Most residents have a friend or family member who’s been killed or disappeared.

The knock-on effects of the cash infusions are plainly visible. There’s a new casino across the street from Fernández de Castro’s house that’s packed day and night with older ladies pulling slot-machine levers. Formerly run-down houses are getting paint jobs and renovations. Meanwhile, Altar’s main street is lined with general stores selling camouflage and desert survival gear from racks on the sidewalk—everything migrants need to make it to Tucson unharmed and unnoticed by CBP. At the town’s main intersection, Fernández de Castro pointed to a new restaurant serving stews that are rarely found this far north. Between food, lodging, and passage, Central American migrants spend up to $12,000 on their way to the US, and Mexican impresarios don’t miss an opportunity to catch the falling pesos.

Such is the context for Fernández de Castro’s art, which—via photography, video, and installation—offers a nuts-and-bolts view of how power operates in and through these economies. Where journalism might sacrifice nuance for the sake of an attention-grabbing headline, his works preserve the slippery relations of the people and things around him. His poetic imagery leaves room for layered meanings that would be impossible with a straightforward documentary style. While addressing current events, he sidesteps the spectacle of violence to focus on the material processes that drive the region’s social, economic, and ecological crises. By cutting through the melodramatic or moralizing attitudes that prop up clichés about the border region, he forces viewers to question the story lines imposed on it by people who don’t live there.

When people ask me what kind of art Fernández de Castro makes, I tell them about El Ladrillo, or The Brick, a work commissioned in 2017 by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tucson. On the way from Altar to the border, he passes an abandoned factory that once exported bricks engraved with the word mexico to clients in Arizona. It is now a brick graveyard, and when the museum contacted him for a site-specific installation, he decided to send one of the bricks as a neighborly gesture, to honor the historical bond between Sonora and Arizona. But rather than ship it via FedEx, he asked a trafficker he knew to smuggle it through the stretch of desert that leads to Tucson. This ‘brecha’ near his property to reach the US-Mexico border fence. The notebook suggested that his farmhand was moonlighting as a lookout for the local mafia. The job had probably gone sour, and the farmhand fled. So at that moment, Fernández de Castro’s main concern was finding somebody to feed his cows.

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“What I wanted to do with the gold was present them with a gift that was impossible to reciprocate.”


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of a car. The brick arrived after about a week’s journey, and the museum displayed it along with the photos.

By funneling the museum’s cash to a criminal organization, Fernández de Castro exposed the ties between economies that are more entangled than media accounts generally acknowledge. The image of the brick itself is evocative, too, insofar as it stands in for the bricks of cocaine, heroin, or methamphetamine that crossed the border with it. By flouting the moral standards that would have us see one brick as good and the other bad, he suggests that both commodity flows need to be understood to paint a full picture of the US-Mexico border.

The Brick isn’t the only art project that’s brought him into contact with organized crime. Some level of contact is unavoidable in a place like Altar, where everybody knows someone who knows someone. Fernández de Castro’s cousin is serving a sentence at a jail in Pima County for trying to move drugs into Arizona. Their grandfather knew the brechas from hunting, collecting honey, and shepherding cattle, and passed on his geographic expertise. Fernández de Castro’s understanding of his subject matter is something that it would take an outsider years to cultivate.

“The most honest way to do this work is to become part of it,” he said over breakfast the day after I arrived. We were eating eggs and machaca—salted, rehydrated steak served with tomatoes and chile peppers—in the cool, dark kitchen of his one-floor home. This insider angle allows Fernández de Castro to produce rigorous, detailed representations that defy victim and villain archetypes, so common in the work of activist-artists. “When you get up close,” he explained, “you discover things that don’t fit within that simplistic vision.”

But if you get too close, you might stop asking hard questions. “If I went out partying with these guys every night, I feel like my work would lose its critical capacity,” he said. That’s the central paradox of this kind of work: To call oneself a witness is to presume to speak for someone at a remove, but it’s equally fraught to try to collapse that distance.

Fernández de Castro will talk for hours about the people and things that inspired a given project, often careering past any discussion of the actual art object. For his next exhibition, which goes up in February at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in Manhattan, the objects seem secondary to the thought experiment that undergirds the show. Its title, The Absolute Restoration of All Things, is a reference to a Sonora state court ruling. In 2014, a judge ordered the mining corporation Minera Penmont—a joint venture of US and Mexican companies—to vacate a site it had occupied illegally in nearby Caborca. The judge not only returned exclusive mining rights to the villagers (along with $350 million for the gold and silver extracted) but also demanded that Minera Penmont restore the “mountains, waters, air, flora, and fauna” to their original state.

This mandate, as Fernández de Castro pointed out, is a “legal fiction.” Even with sufficient resources, restitution would be impossible. But it’s also a beautiful, utopian scenario to contemplate—one that might help society conceive alternatives to our current ecological death spiral. “There will be renderings and all that,” he said, “but the speculation won’t only be visual. There will also be videos with testimonies from a number of disciplines, like biologists and geologists. More so than trying to render the landscape, it’s about trying to speculate, critically, on what the hell ‘restoration’ means in a context like this.”

Mining in Sonora happens at two scales: industrial and artisanal. The artisanal miners, called gambusinos, work in small groups with low-tech machines that filter mineral deposits from the soil. In 2017, a fellow from Trinity College in Cambridge, England, asked Fernández de Castro to develop an installation for one of its libraries, a 17th-century building with stained-glass windows and tiles of black and white marble. Fernández de Castro gave the university one gram of gold, which he had bought from a gambusino he’d met while filming. He placed the gold specks in a glass display case at the center of the library, a representation of the centuries of colonial resource extraction on which the institution’s wealth is built. He told me, “I thought of it like, ‘Here you go: one more gram of gold. You want it? Take it.’”

At the time, he was reading about certain non-Western gift economies that consist of three steps: giving, receiving, and responding in kind. “Within this framework, it’s implicit that by accepting the gift, you’re obligated to reciprocate,” he said, “which means you could end up ruined if you try to surpass the value of the original gift. So, what I wanted to do with the gold was present them with a gift that put them..."
in a position where it was impossible to reciprocate.” How could Trinity College possibly match—let alone surpass—a gift that represents all the gold it has extracted throughout its imperial history?

In 2019, Fernández de Castro began working with Madres Buscadoras (Searching Mothers), an organization of women in Sonora who are dedicated to finding the graves of their disappeared sons and daughters. At first, he just wanted to volunteer, because he had two things they needed: an all-wheel-drive vehicle and a drone-operated video camera. Less robust vehicles would get stuck on the unpaved roads, so he often plays chauffeur for the women. Meanwhile, his drone is useful for detecting any disturbances that might indicate the presence of something buried.

What interests him about the Madres Buscadoras is their landscape literacy: their ability to read and decipher the earth's surface like a code. It's the same skill he admires in the region's smugglers, who use subtle geographic clues to navigate the network of brechas while remaining unnoticed by CBP.

Fernández de Castro's own landscape literacy is useful to him. It allows him to understand the relations between people and things based on the physical traces they leave. He's obsessed with erosion—and not just in the way one usually thinks of it, with the passage of wind and water shaping land masses over hundreds or thousands or millions of years. He takes a big-picture view of it, one that encompasses human and natural processes of land alteration.

Recently, Fernández de Castro has been shooting aerial videos of the Pinacate Natural Park, a high-desert plain of mile-wide craters formed by volcanic explo-

sions that took place as recently as 12,000 years ago. In the 1960s, NASA brought its astronauts here to train for Apollo missions, because of the geological resemblance between the lava fields and the moon's cratered surface.

We arrived at the Pinacate in the late afternoon, because that's when the light is right. Fernández de Castro parked in front of a crater of Martian-red rock. On the rare occasions when it rains, the runoff causes jagged fissures to form on the outer surface of the crater. At this hour, the harsh contrast and elongated shadows accentuated the contours of this erosion. He pulled the drone out of the cab of his pickup, placed the monitor on his truck bed, and sent the drone buzzing toward the crater. In the monitor, shallow grooves filled the frame like veins.

There were only two hours of light left when Fernández de Castro was done shooting, which meant we'd miscalculated. In another era, we could have made it back to Altar in two and a half hours, but these days it can take four with the constant checkpoints, where soldiers and cops stop cars in search of contraband and enemies. Civilians know not to use this stretch of highway after dark, because of the reports of firefights, ambushes, and abductions. Cartel operatives throw ponchallantas—tire-popping spikes—onto the roads to cause their rivals' vehicles to crash.

It was pitch black by the time we were halfway home. At the checkpoints, the men with
their faces covered and AR-15s hung over their shoulders weren’t even wearing uniforms. Fernández de Castro’s partner kept texting for updates, and finally the sign for Altar appeared in the headlights. The next day Fernández de Castro showed me a local news report of a shoot-out between cartels that had taken place on that highway at a mile marker we had passed 20 minutes before.

On Sunday, we headed to Fernández de Castro’s ranch, passing vans full of migrants trailing clouds of dust. At one end of the property was a brick cabin with a well that his great-grandfather had dug; at the other, an arid valley with a forest of saguaros that climbed to 50 feet.

Beyond the cacti, a rocky promontory rose above the valley. Fernández de Castro pointed to a cluster of rocks covered in petroglyphs drawn by the Tohono O’odham, who lived here before the Europeans arrived. One resembled two parallel lightning bolts; another consisted of numerous concentric squares. The O’odham petroglyphs often feature a maze motif, with a man standing at the entrance, representing the winding path of life. The sun was low as we followed the dry, shallow riverbed that took us back to the cabin. It was too late to drive back to Altar, so we built a fire out by the truck and watched the sky turn orange and purple.

Before Fernández de Castro attended school in Tijuana, it hadn’t occurred to him to make art about the environment he grew up in. “I needed the geographic distance to see what was going on here,” he explained. “Because if you don’t leave, you also run the risk of getting trapped.”

In the same way that New York and Los Angeles hog the spotlight in the US, Mexico’s art world is dominated by its largest cities. The fact that he remains in Altar, makes art about his surroundings, and carries on his family’s cattle-ranching lifestyle makes Fernández de Castro something of a curiosity in the domestic art scene. But it also gives his work a rootedness and sense of place that many artists from the capital find enviable. It’s become fashionable for artists and curators to venture out into provincia—or the provinces, a colonial holdover word that refers to everything outside of the city—in search of new issues to address in their art. Having arrived in a place like Altar, Fernández de Castro says, they then try to speak on behalf of its inhabitants, without even listening to them first.

“They have preconceived notions of what the North is, and all they do is look for images to confirm them,” Fernández de Castro told me. And if the capitalinos are ignorant about life in northern Mexico, the gringos are even worse. “They think the world ends at the border. Even the ones who defend the migrants have no idea where they’re coming from.”

Fernández de Castro’s art offers a corrective to conventional ideas about the border, and not necessarily in the form of a counternarrative. Rather, his work drives home the impossibility of reducing the place to any single story, by showing that it’s just as complex as anywhere else.

Yes, the violence is a constant looming threat. But if he were to show the guns and gore head-on, the exotic thrill of danger would distract from the deeper dynamics of the reality he’s trying to convey. That’s why, as he says, he “prefers to keep the gun outside the frame.”

Images of atrocity might be useful for raising awareness. But a lack of awareness isn’t what Fernández de Castro is trying to address. Instead, he portrays the region in all its three-dimensionality—not just the emotional element, but the whole system of intersecting forces that sustains it: the human, the industrial, and the ecological.

(continued from page 17)

Outlawing shame, guilt, and discomfort is not only impossible; it positions race the way blasphemy laws position speaking ill of God or the king.
Before Walton

India Walton

Buffalo’s transformation wasn’t built in a day.
FEW ROADS IN AMERICA PROVIDE A SPECTACULAR INTRODUCTION TO ITS CITIES, BUT OF THOSE I HAVE DRIVEN NONE IS SO BOLDLY DEMANDING AS BUFFALO’S SKYWAY. IMAGINE YOU ARE APPROACHING DOWNTOWN FROM THE SOUTH. YOU MARCH ALONG ROUTE 5, PAST RELICS FROM THE LOST STEEL EMPIRE, PAST THE WIND TURBINES AND THE BEACHES AND THE OUTER HARBOR’S PARKLAND. YOU FOLLOW THE SIGNS. NOTHING INDICATES YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE SWEPT 110 FEET OFF THE GROUND. YOU ARE HURTING IN THE FLOW OF TRAFFIC NOW, HIGH IN THE WIND, AND THERE IS NO ESCAPE. THE SLIM ROAD ARCS. TO ONE SIDE IS THE BUILT WORLD: A VISTA OF URBAN ARCHITECTURE AND TRANSPORT ROUTES PUNCTUATED IN CONCRETE BY THE LARGEST COLLECTION OF GRAIN ELEVATORS ON EARTH. TO THE OTHER SIDE, LAKE ERIE. YOU NOTICE ALL THIS ONLY IN FLASHERS; YOU’RE MOVING, HANDS GRIPPING THE STEERING WHEEL.

YOU MIGHT ASK YOURSELF, ONCE YOU’VE BEEN DEPOSITED AT THE FOOT OF A STREET THAT LEADS TO CITY HALL: WHO BUILT THIS UNSETTLING BEAUTY? THE SHORT ANSWER: WORKERS WHO LIVED IN THE PLACE THAT HAD JUST DARED YOU TO LOOK AT IT IN AWE. THE LONGER ANSWER IS CONTAINED IN HISTORIES OF THE INDUSTRIAL CITY—THE SAGA OF STEEL AND THE WATER-BORNE COMMERCE THAT NECESSITATED THOSE GRANARIES, WHAT THE CRITIC REYNER BANHAM CALLED “A CONCRETE ATLANTIS.” THE POLITICAL ANSWER LIES WHERE IT ALWAYS DOES, IN DECISIONS PEOPLE MADE LONG BEFORE GROUND WAS BROKEN, IN EVERY NOD OR NO, EVERY CONFLICT CONTAINED INVISIBLY IN MATERIAL REALITY.

STRUGGLE BUILT THE SKYWAY. AS IT BUILT BUFFALO. AS IT BUILT THE POSTINDUSTRIAL WATERFRONT. AS IT BUILT THE CURRENT POLITICAL MOMENT IN BUFFALO, TOO. NOT A PASSION FOR SOCIALISM. NOT EVEN THE CAMPAIGN THAT LED THE INSURGENT INDIA WALTON TO THRASH THE INCUMBENT MAYOR BYRON BROWN IN THE JUNE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY. BROWN DIDN’T CAMPAIGN; HE COULDN’T FATHOM A THREAT IN AN ALL-VOLUNTEER OPPOSITION. WALTON IS IMMENSELY TALENTED, ALSO GUTSY. BUT HER VICTORY AND, MORE IMPORTANT, HER CONFIDENCE THAT SHE CAN GOVERN IF SHE PREVAILS OVER THE WRITE-INS OF BROWN AND TWO OTHER MEN ON NOVEMBER 2 ARE BEST UNDERSTOOD AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF WIDE-RANGING ACTIVISM THAT, FOR ALMOST 20 YEARS, HAS CULTIVATED THE PRACTICE OF SEEKING ALTERNATIVES.

“We have a mantra: If you can’t govern, you can’t win,” says Rahwa Ghirmatzion, the executive director of PUSH Buffalo. WHEN PUSH (FORMALLY PEOPLE UNIT ED FOR SUSTAINABLE HOUSING) WAS FOUNDED, IN 2005, BUFFALO HAD ALREADY ENDURED ALMOST 30 YEARS OF DEINDUSTRIALIZATION. “PEOPLE COULD SEE: HELP IS NOT COMING, SO WE HAVE TO SAVE THE CITY.” THOUSANDS OF HOUSES WERE ABANDONED; PUSH BEGAN RECLAIMING SOME ON THE WEST SIDE. THE PROCESS DEVELOPED SKILLS; IT DEVELOPED LEADERS AND MEMBERS. ONE STAGE OF ACTION LED TO ANOTHER. PUSH CREATED A LAND BANK, BUYING UP VACANT PROPERTIES TO HOLD FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOW-INCOME HOUSING. IT SUPPORTED A COMMUNITY GARDEN; MADE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ECONOMIC HEALTH AND PUBLIC AND ENVI RONMENTAL HEALTH; WORKED IN CITYWIDE COALITIONS AND NATIONAL NETWORKS.

IT SOUNDS NEATER THAN IT WAS. AND PUSH IS HARDLY ALONE. THE CITY’S SOCIAL ACTION TRADITION IS DEEP AND VARIED. OBJECTIVES AND POLITICAL ANALYSES DIFFER. IT INVOLVES PEOPLE AND PROJECTS, NON-PROFIT AND OTHERWISE, TOO NUMEROUS TO NAME. IN PARTS OF BUFFALO—LIKE THE LOW-INCOME, LARGELY BLACK AND BANGLADESHI EAST SIDE NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE I GREW UP AND STILL SPEND TIME—ONE MIGHT NOT EVEN KNOW IT EXISTS. THE VITAL POINT IS THAT DURING THE 16-YEAR TENURE OF MAYOR BROWN (WHOSE ACHIEVEMENTS MIGHT ALSO GO UNNOTICED IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD), A PARALLEL PEOPLE’S INFRASTRUCTURE OF SORTS HAS GROWN UP.

EXHIBIT 1: FROM 2004 TO 2006, A SMALL GROUP OF RADICALS HELD A SERIES OF MONTHLY EDUCATIONAL EVENTS, FILMS, AND DISCUSSIONS AT COMMUNITY CENTERS. THEY WENT AROUND THE CITY ASKING PEOPLE “WHAT’S WRONG?” AND “WHAT CAN BE FIXED?” TO THE FIRST QUESTION, ACCORDING TO ORGANIZER LESLIE PICKERING, ANSWERS CAME QUICKLY: CORRUPT GOVERNMENT, POLICE BRUTALITY, ROTTING INFRASTRUCTURE, NO JOBS. “WHEN IT CAME TO HOW TO FIX IT: NO IDEA.” THE DISCUSSIONS DREW AUDIENCES, BUT THERE WAS NO ACTION TO PLUG INTO. AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME, PRISONERS ARE PEOPLE TOO, A LOCAL ORGANIZATION THAT ADVOCATES FOR THE INCARCERATED, BEGAN A MONTHLY FILM AND DISCUSSION SERIES. AFTER ENCOUNTERING NUMEROUS OBSTACLES, INCLUDING HARASSMENT

JoAnn Wypijewski is the author of What We Don’t Talk About: Sex and the Mess of Life (Verso).

Struggle built the Skyway. As it built Buffalo. As it built the postindustrial waterfront. As it built this political moment.
by the FBI, Pickering and his group reassessed. In 2011, he, Theresa Baker, and Nate Buckley opened a store called Burning Books. Theirs is a radical resource project ideologically distant from electoral politics, but the store is a space where varied activist allies come together, focus on commonalities, and, as Pickering says, “stand up for each other.” In a generally brutal business environment, Burning Books is expanding.

Exhibit 2: In 2007, a program officer at the local Oishei Foundation (its fortune rooted in the windshield wiper and its maker, Trico Products, which by then had abandoned Buffalo for Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico) invited 20 young leaders from regional organizations to a retreat. There was no agenda—just food and drink and space to talk. People shared knowledge. They mapped power. They discussed how to quantify the information that was always coming from communities’ lived experience to help people imagine solutions to problems. Ghirmatzion, then heading Ujima Theater, says what solidified from this was Partnership for the Public Good, specializing in community-based participatory research. More projects followed. In 2015 came the Crossroads Coalition, which organized annual public summits, workshops on How We Fix the City, and policy goals developed and voted on communally. Like every nonprofit discussed here, the groups have kept separate from elections, but their work—those community policy planks, PPG’s policy research—is reflected in Walton’s platform.

In numerous settings, people were talking, practicing collective decision-making. Since 1995, community gardeners have been determining what food to grow on vacant land (now also at schools and a new land trust). In 1996, Voice Buffalo, a faith-based labor and community group, was founded to ensure that “People should have a say.” In 2005, when PUSH started and Brown became mayor, Walton was raising children and studying nursing. She’d go to various actions and attend meetings, but it wasn’t until after 2015, when she enrolled in the Emerging Leaders program run by Open Buffalo, that she started thinking of herself as an organizer. Two years later she founded the Fruit Belt Land Trust, an organization which itself grew out of anti-displacement actions prompted by the encroachment of new development on an East Side area where many Black homeowners lived.

Covid brought this parallel infrastructure into plain view. “Leadership wasn’t coming from City Hall,” said one Buffalo resident. “People had to turn to each other.” Numerous groups, including Buffalo Mutual Aid Network, Coalition for Economic Justice, Grassroots Gardens and Freedom Gardens, PPG, and many neighborhood activists mobilized to meet common needs. When protests over police brutality erupted in the summer of 2020, led by Free the People and others who had long been organizing on this front, everything came together. All the building energies, the converging issues of inequality—health disparities, poverty, racial and economic violence, selective city revitalization—led, as PPG’s Tanvier Peart put it, to one unvarnished conclusion: “Business as usual is killing us.”

“T

HERE’S A PALPABLE SENSE THAT the lights are out in City Hall,” says a Buffalo resident I’ll call Marty who routinely has professional dealings there. “Even if Walton were to load the place up with Occupy Wall Streeters who had no experience at all—and she won’t—you’d at least have some people with light behind their eyes willing to do the work. There are plenty of good, long-serving public servants, but the level of incompetence and poor performance I have witnessed from administrative and director levels is more akin to what you’d see in a rinky-dink town. This summer the pools were closed because there weren’t enough lifeguards. That is not an unsolvable problem: ‘Listen, the community needs a win. Let’s put a little energy into shaking loose some lifeguards.’ There’s just an inadequate view of what satisfies as public service. So, no, I’m not worried about Walton snuffing out the candle of good government.”

Brown’s route to City Hall came out of another organizing tradition: the post-civil-rights-movement track to elective office. He joined Grassroots, a club founded in 1986 by Black neighborhood leaders on the East Side and ambitious young people to work the Democratic Party machinery and break the lock on power by entrenched Black officials. The upstarts spoke of “giving people a voice” but quickly settled into king-making. When I first saw Brown, at a conference in New York City on Black politics...
shortly after he became mayor, he was hailed as part of the next generation of progressive leadership. He moved up in Democratic politics, allying with Andrew Cuomo, who as governor made Brown the state party chair from 2016 to 2019 and showered Buffalo with largesse (covering as much as 30 percent of the city budget).

His political success brought undeniable improvements to parts of the city, but not shared prosperity. Consider, at the most superficial level, the condition of major East Side streets, whose holes and hazards say, “You are nothing” to the people trying to negotiate them every day. Consider, at a policy level, moves by the Common Council, effectively the mayor’s tool, that have dragged out taking action on a community-backed measure for independent oversight of the police. Consider, at the most profound level, the persistent poverty. No one who watches television these days in Buffalo can escape the cruel irony of where Brown’s tradition of Democratic Party organizing has taken him: corralling public workers—mostly people of color and women in the police force—to appear in a lying political ad claiming that the Democratic standard-bearer wants to fire them and risk public safety.

Yet, unintentionally, Brown also abetted the growth of the people’s infrastructure that has rocked his world—and not only, or even mainly, because so many in Walton’s multi-color, cross-class, cross-neighborhood coalition of supporters loathe him. Again, struggle has shaped Buffalo.

Without struggle, one of Brown’s signature selling points, the transformation of the waterfront from an industrial sewer into a three-mile-long pleasure ground where multicultural Buffalo shows up, would be unrecognizable. The hodgepodge of Canalside—music venues abutting Erie Canal history abutting a play area abutting a carousel and so on, all facing the lake, with its kayakers and boat rides—would instead be dominated by the sporting goods behemoth Bass Pro. The Outer Harbor’s relatively untarnished beauty would likely have been under greater commercial pressure.

Brown inherited the idea of using public funds to lure Bass Pro to “save” the waterfront and then embraced it. He was thwarted by the Canalside Community Alliance: environmentalists, small businesses, researchers from the Public Accountability Initiative, and other local groups. Arguing for the equitable use of public land, they forced the idea of community benefits agreements into a public conversation that was already full of inchoate skepticism across the ideological spectrum. They used data, pressured the Common Council (which was more independent then), and finally won in 2010. Brown was livid. “It changed the trajectory of my life—and the city’s!” says Harper Bishop, who was part of that fight. He works with PUSH now and in 2020 cofounded Our City Action, a multiracial organization that aims to build power through electoral change.

At its best, the Walton campaign is that invitation. And Brown knows it. Win or lose, the ideas that were once marginalized, the talk about a just, fair, and equitable city—all the language that, as Bishop says, “was not in the vernacular 15 years ago: community benefits agreements, land trusts, solidarity economy—now they are. They’ve become the floor, not the ceiling.”

The long, successful fight to save public access to Buffalo’s spectacular waterfront “changed the trajectory of my life.”—Harper Bishop

According to Brown’s narrative, his leadership brought Buffalo its waterfront. Walton’s supporters could flip that script—and opponents’ scaremongering over “socialism.” The lakefront is not an amenity incidental to the fight for the city—especially as the developer class backing Brown is poised, fortified with public aid, to make a private cash cow out of the public asset that so many voters love.

“Enjoy it while you can,” says Dennice Barr, “because it’s going to be swallowed up.” Barr lives in the shadow of Brown’s other signature development, the sprawling hospital corridor and the expansion of the SUNY Buffalo Medical Campus. A veteran community advocate and head of the Fruit Belt Advisory Council, she also volunteers for Walton’s campaign. Barr talks plainly about the indifference of UB, as the university is called, to the community whose lives it is affecting: “They’re not a good neighbor, never have been, and they’re not doing too much to change that.” As for City Hall under Brown, “Its vision for my community is ‘It should have been gone.’”

In an hour’s conversation with Barr what emerged was not just the details of the Fruit Belt’s formidable organizing but the reason gentrification is an issue even for people who don’t yet feel its sting. There is the creep of homogenization, as village-like neighborhoods lose their character, as local businesses are priced out. There is, simultaneously, the divided city, where in some areas vast tracts of decay “send children the message ‘If you’re a poor person, if you’re a person of color, we don’t have anything for you.’” Ultimately, it is a question of the social compact, as the people as a whole have not been invited to imagine a city that is a healthy place for all its members, and what development to that end, without displacement, might look like.

At its best, the Walton campaign is that invitation. And Brown knows it. Win or lose, the ideas that were once marginalized, the talk about a just, fair, and equitable city—all the language that, as Bishop says, “was not in the vernacular 15 years ago: community benefits agreements, land trusts, solidarity economy—now they are. They’ve become the floor, not the ceiling.”
Simply by hearing his constituents out, the New Jersey governor has become one of the most progressive in the country.

Phil Murphy Listens

More than two years before George Floyd’s murder by a white police officer in Minneapolis sparked a national outcry for a crackdown on police violence, New Jersey Assemblywoman Britnee Timberlake was fighting to make the investigation of deaths in police custody fair and impartial, unclouded by the often intimate relationship between county prosecutors and law enforcement. At times it seemed like an uphill battle. Timberlake’s proposed bill, A3115, required the state to take charge of police-involved death investigations, moving prosecutions out of the counties where the killings occurred. It faced staunch opposition from the state’s powerful police unions and New Jersey’s attorney general. Because the attorney general was a high-profile appointee of Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, there was speculation that A3115 would be vetoed. But, Timberlake recalls, “Governor Murphy listened to us, even though he was getting pressure from folks who were very opposed. He knew that it was the right thing to do, and he proceeded according to his moral compass.”

The day the legislation was signed, Timberlake hailed Murphy “for proving yet again his dedication to being progressive, not just in words but in action.”

Murphy is getting similar reviews from plenty of left-leaning legislators and activists this fall as he seeks a second term as a Democratic governor who—to the surprise of those who were once skeptical about the former investment banker—has compiled a record as an innovative leader on issues ranging from criminal justice reform to economic inequality and mass transit. “He’s proven to be an extraordinarily progressive governor,” says Sue Altman, the executive director of the New Jersey Working Families Party. In his first term, Murphy began the process of raising the minimum wage to $15 an hour, guaranteed paid sick leave, implemented a tax on millionaires, and funded tuition-free
community college for low-income students. He’s made it easier to vote, issued orders to empower immigrants and refugees, restored state funding for Planned Parenthood, and signed what’s been celebrated as the most sweeping equal pay law in the United States.

Hetty Rosenstein has four decades of experience with New Jersey’s largest state employee union. Shortly before she stepped down in April as the longtime state director of the Communications Workers of America, she said, “There has never, ever been a more progressive [New Jersey] governor, or a governor who’s been more effective on progressive issues. He’s raised so many expectations because of that.”

Rosenstein would eventually join Murphy’s reelection campaign with a title—senior adviser for progressive coalitions—that nods to the governor’s approach and a charge to “create a mandate for even greater change and progress.”

Frustration often accompanies high expectations, and Murphy still gets his share of criticism from activists, especially reformers who fret that he has not done enough to challenge the county Democratic machines—and their legislative allies—which have often been as bad as the Republicans when it comes to obstructing change in New Jersey. But many former critics acknowledge that the businessman turned politician has not merely kept his promises to address economic, social, and racial justice concerns in a state that until nearly four years ago was under the thumb of the bombastic Republican Chris Christie. Indeed, Murphy has often exceeded them.

His record is particularly significant at a time when Democrats across the country are watching President Joe Biden struggle to implement his agenda and when many Democratic governors have earned mixed reviews—or worse. Consider the scandals swirling around Rhode Island Governor Dan McKee, the downfall and resignation of New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, or California Governor Gavin Newsom’s (now averted) recall scare. Meanwhile, Murphy’s approval ratings consistently hover in the 50s, and polls show him with a lead at or near the double digits over his Republican challenger, Jack Ciattarelli, heading into the November 2 election. If Murphy wins a second term, he’ll be the first Democrat to do so in more than four decades—a reminder that, while the Garden State tends to vote Democratic at the presidential level, Republicans have remained highly competitive in state races.

What can Democrats outside New Jersey, who will be facing fierce battles for statehouses nationwide in 2022, learn from Murphy’s approach? The New Jersey governor’s humane response to the pandemic has certainly been a factor in his success. He holds lively press conferences twice a week, where he and other state officials make the case for masks, vaccinations, and state interventions to address economic hardship, and he includes poignant reflections based on conversations he’s had with New Jerseyans who have lost loved ones. But the more pointed lesson may be that Murphy has figured out how to sell progressive policies as common sense. Instead of presenting himself as a bleeding-heart liberal, the governor says he’s a “cold-blooded” manager who can make the case for taxing the rich, legalizing marijuana, and dismissing anti-vaxxers as “knuckleheads.”

Murphy is certainly no radical. He’s a Harvard- and Wharton-educated former Goldman Sachs executive who became wealthy during more than two decades with the multi-national investment bank—the governor and his wife, Tammy, also a Goldman Sachs alum, are worth more than $50 million based on older tax records. A “Kennedy Democrat” raised in a working-class Massachusetts family that he says talked about politics at the dinner table, Murphy became a prolific fundraiser for the Democratic National Committee when former Vermont governor Howard Dean chaired the DNC and launched his 50-state strategy. After raising millions for Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential bid, Murphy was appointed US ambassador to Germany. His Wall Street background didn’t exactly endear him to progressives when in late 2014 the Murphys launched a think tank, New Start New Jersey, which was widely seen as a vehicle to prepare for his 2017 gubernatorial bid.

Activists had other favorites in that year’s primary race—as did many party insiders—but Murphy outspent them and earned grudging support for running an issues-oriented campaign that outlined plans to raise wages, support teachers, address gun violence, and defend abortion rights. He easily won the nomination of a Democratic Party that was desperate to regain the state’s top job after nearly eight years of Christie’s scandal-plagued governance. In the fall, Christie’s lieutenant governor, Kim Guadagno, tried to paint the Democrat as an out-of-touch rich guy. She got no traction. Indeed, with his talk of creating a public bank and requiring New Jersey’s pension funds to divest from hedge funds and private equity firms, along with an outsider’s pledge to put an end to the cozy relationships between New Jersey politicians of both parties and corporate interests, Murphy won praise from Dean, who argued, “Sometimes, it takes someone who knows capitalism to fix it.”

No one is going to confuse Murphy with Bernie Sanders. But, like President Biden, the New Jersey governor has embraced the notion that the proposals Sanders and Elizabeth Warren brought into the mainstream as presidential candidates make sense morally, socially, and economically. While Biden sometimes struggles to commu-
Governors, like presidents, often start out strong. Murphy certainly did, with his bold first budget plan and his support for an investigation into tax incentives benefiting politically connected companies, including some associated with South Jersey Democratic power broker George Norcross. The challenge is to sustain faith in the prospect that progressive governance can bring real change. Murphy, for his part, has faced criticism from environmentalists for joining regional governors in approving a fracked-gas export facility on the Delaware River and from immigrant rights groups for taking years to sign legislation banning state and local governments from renewing contracts with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. And there’s frustration with Murphy’s failure to reform local elections in ways that might weaken the power of the machines, as well as his recent support for business tax incentives that reformers say will be abused.

Still, Altman, the Working Families Party activist who has frequently tangled with old-school party leaders, says Murphy has forced Democrats in the legislature to move in dramatically more progressive directions. “He came in with this refreshing vision that said, ‘I want to be first. I want New Jersey to be the best in the country,’” she recalls. “The Democratic Party often muddles along here in New Jersey. The governor came in and said, ‘That’s not good enough.’ They didn’t react well at first, but if you look at the record, you can see he’s had real success.” In a recent review of the governor’s first term, Ben Dworkin, director of Rowan University’s Institute for Public Policy and Citizenship, told The Star-Ledger that Murphy had “fulfilled or started to fulfill virtually all of the major progressive promises he made in his first campaign.” Dworkin suggested that the popularity of the agenda helped explain why polls put Murphy ahead in a reelection race that—like Virginia’s contest on the same day—will measure public sentiment regarding Democrats a year after Biden’s election.

Murphy is a student of history, clearly familiar with Louis Brandeis’s axiom about the states serving as America’s “laboratories of democracy.” He gets cagey when asked about whether New Jersey should serve as a model for other states or for the Biden administration. Yet, if he is reelected in November, especially by a wide margin, Phil Murphy will offer an object lesson in how a governor—perhaps even a president—can implement a progressive agenda and thrive.
GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION
WITH BILL MILLER

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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues. He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country’s second largest city.

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Leaps of Faith

Jonathan Franzen’s Midwestern saga

BY RUMAAN ALAM

O STATE THAT JONATHAN FRANZEN ranks among America’s best novelists reliably provokes ire—especially on the Internet, where such ire is never in short supply. Nevertheless, his work has long been discussed in these terms, at least since his third novel, 2001’s *The Corrections*, the rare work of literary fiction that was both a critical and a commercial hit. Whether or not he is any good, let alone one the best novelists in the country, Franzen’s tidiest trick has been to force us to litigate his own excellence every few years.

Franzen began his career in 1988, with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and followed that experimental novel about St. Louis a few years later with *Strong Motion*, which
established the themes that have concerned so much of his work: the environment, capitalism, faith. These novels share a self-conscious, postmodern sensibility and an ambition to probe deeply into the world—to use fiction to talk about reality. But it was The Corrections that saw this ambition most fully realized; abandoning the earlier works’ hyper-exuberance for a more realistic mode. His follow-up, 2010’s Freedom, trod the same territory as its predecessor—an exploration of sexuality, morality, money, and power through the lens of family bonds; easy to read, indeed, difficult to put down.

Purity, published in 2015, was, in its way, a sidestep, indebted to Dickens, full of coincidence and intrigue (secret identity, mysterious paternity, a billion-dollar fortune). There was still a family and big issues involved (gentrification, journalism, the fall of East Germany, and the rise of the Internet), but there was also a tone of near-absurdity. The book was zany, a ripping yarn that felt like it must have been fun for the author to write, especially after the dour Freedom.

Crossroads, Franzen’s sixth work of fiction and the first of a planned trilogy (called “A Key to All Mythologies,” after Edward Casaubon’s life’s work in Middlemarch; maybe Franzen isn’t as humorless as he can seem), will doubtless reignite the familiar debates about his stature. The novel itself is familiar, stepping back from Purity’s manic register, eschewing interest in the present moment and attempting a study of God and faith set in the 1970s. It’s played straight, with nary a joke or postmodern gag in evidence. But that I read all 580 pages of it (too many; being presumed great means editors give you a wide berth) in three days is a testament to Franzen’s ability with the novel form. He’s a storyteller, a master at holding the reader’s attention, himself attentive to that reader’s pleasure. He’s surely among the great American novelists, but Crossroads also finds Franzen discharging his powers in a way that feels like a departure.

Crossroads centers on the Hildebrants of New Prospect, Ill., an invented Chicago suburb. They are Russ and Marion. He’s a pastor, and, given when the novel is set, maybe the best word for her is “housewife.” They have four children: the idealistic naïf Clem, an undergraduate; Becky, a pretty and popular high schooler; Perry, a too-brilliant-for-his-own-good teen; and Judson, the baby of the family, in whom no one, Franzen included, seems especially interested. (Perhaps we’ll hear from Judson once he’s more than “an appealing and well-regulated youngster.”)

Nothing about the Hildebrants’ middle-class, Midwestern anomie is new for a Franzen novel, even if it is well-done. Pastor Russ is smitten with another woman, a young widow who is one of his parishioners. Marion is dissatisfied with the way her life and marriage have turned out, which is manifested mostly in her desire to lose weight. The kids have their own struggles. Clem, long a dutiful student, wonders whether there’s more to life than obedience; the well-adjusted Becky finds herself experiencing a spiritual revelation; Perry spirals into drinking and drug addiction. In The Corrections and Freedom, a family’s crises lead the author and the reader to politics, the environment, ethics, the Internet, sex, and class in the present moment, but in Crossroads, every plotline leads to God. Not religion, although that’s of interest, but the individual’s relationship with the big guy himself. It’s not couched in metaphor or coyly suggested; it is explicitly Crossroad’s central question. “Almost everything in life,” Franzen writes, “was vanity—success a vanity, privilege a vanity, Europe a vanity, beauty a vanity. When you stripped away the vanity and stood alone before God, what was left?”

Pastor Russ’s obsession with the widow Frances Cottrell is the novel’s first disclosure to readers. For some, it will serve as a litmus test. American literature is not short on depictions of the heterosexual male libido at midlife; do we really need another? The way Russ tries to involve the woman in the church, eager to spend time with her, is mostly cringe-inducing. But his desire and his pursuit of Frances is emblematic of Russ’s alienation—from his family and the church he serves, but maybe also from his faith itself. Not only is he chafing at his commitment to Marion and puzzled by his children; he’s also at war with his colleague, the youth pastor Rick Ambrose. Russ is a man, you might say, at a crossroads—sexually and spiritually as well as in terms of his work and family life.

As it happens, Crossroads is the name of the youth group at First Reformed from which Russ was recently ejected—Franzen is making things easy on his reader. Russ’s ouster is the reason for his animosity toward Rick, a former protégé, who has supplanted Russ as the group’s leader. (Russ “had lost his edge and couldn’t relate to young people anymore.”) Insult to injury: Both Becky and Perry join Crossroads, drawn in by the crowd that surrounds their dad’s groovy, long-haired colleague. It’s hard to believe that Franzen followed up Purity, which features a fictionalized WikiLeaks trafficking in state secrets, with a novel about the internecine battles of a suburban church youth group, but Crossroads is very much what Crossroads is about. Through it, Franzen probes the evolution of belief in this country. Russ’s God was a force to be obeyed, a way to bring meaning to life, while his children’s faith is one of rap sessions, guitar tunes, and good vibes. “It was undeniably pleasant to have the full attention of the mustachioed leader about whom his irreverent friends spoke admiringly,” Franzen writes about Perry; “to be in frank conversation, for once, with an adult.”

Maybe this new mode of belief-as-lifestyle is insubstantial. Clem, Russ’s oldest son, abandons college and, with it, his draft deferment, but just as he’s willing to sacrifice the self for the state, the war wraps up. Unable to be a martyr, Clem becomes a wandering soul, knocking about America, North and South. Perry, meanwhile, is more comfortable with modern life’s meaninglessness, slipping from furtive pot smoker to full-on drug addict, in the trajectory of a cautionary after-school special. He means to be good, Franzen assures us; that’s why he goes to Crossroads’ meetings. But he’s not quite able to be. Perry gets loaded at a church
We Came Here to Get Away From You

**Port Townsend, Washington**

Downhill, a skeleton of an orca suspended: a female beached; belly full,

at that time, of seal and fish; the seal and fish full, at that time of poison. The volunteer, white bob, soft face, knew too the desire
to see a body—its echoes—suspended.

Hope, the name given to a dead whale once located by clicks and whistles in echo in inlet in open sea. The volunteer tells me she visited the Smithsonian Museum of African American History—says,

*The saddest part, to me,*

the Emmett Till—do you know him?—exhibit.
The whale, killer, weakened by a scaffold of old poison: DDT, PCBs,

which no prey can process but holds in its fat its tissues its soft parts. See her Southern scaffold: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia. See, I hadn’t thought to think of him here, under the reconstructed skeleton I had come to see, and once seen, to mourn. She wanted to stand over his bones, his grave on her bucket list.

She pushed into me her desire,
the sound surfacing what had, long ago,
leached into my softest parts. I wanted to hold her shoulders, vomit into her mouth
this water full of dead or dying, to fill her with a little knowing, change her, heavy her, let the knowing wash her into the Salish at low tide, past driftwood and eel grass, hope a warning at her back.

DONIKA KELLY

Christmas party and holds forth on God and goodness, sounding like every insufferable drunk you’ve ever met, if not quite like the 15-year-old boy he is. “I suppose what I’m asking,” Perry says to a crowd of his father’s fellow clergy and their wives, “is whether goodness can ever truly be its own reward, or whether, consciously or not, it always serves some personal instrumentality.”

But this new, gentler faith is Becky’s salvation. Caught in an uninteresting teenage love triangle, the novel’s most exhausting plotline, the Hildebrands’ only daughter sees God (yes, really) and changes her life. She renounces the vanity of popularity and the vapidity of American adolescence. She marries her crush, a musician named Tanner (the coolest dude in the youth group), and is granted the happiest ending in the book, not because she’s chosen by God but because she’s chosen God.
meet in the book’s opening, that’s either Franzen’s point or else he’s so skillful at telling a story you don’t really mind.

Russ’s backstory is compelling too, though much of its power is diminished by its placement late in the book. Born a Mennonite in Indiana, Russ sits out World War II as a conscientious objector at an alternative-service camp in Arizona. With little to do there, he volunteers on a nearby reservation, impelled by a well-intentioned desire to serve others and by a naive curiosity. “To the U.S. government, the Navajos were a problem to be solved by force,” Franzen writes. “To Russ, who was haunted by their faces, what needed solving was the mystery of them.”

Some risk attends a white writer addressing the subject of Native life. Franzen depicts Russ’s benighted and troubling view of the Navajo as an inscrutable other without reducing the Navajo themselves to such on the page.

Russ doesn’t want to evangelize the Navajo but is on his own spiritual quest, experiencing during his time among them an awakening, though not in the way one might assume. “He mistook a hovering falcon for an angel,” Franzen writes, “and then he saw that the falcon was an angel, unaffiliated with the God he’d always known; that Christ had no dominion on the mesa.”

Russ’s sojourn among the Navajo is the first stop on this spiritual journey; a visit to observe a Catholic Mass at which he meets Marion is another. Thus the spiritual becasomes romantic, a journey to full selfhood. The young lovers’ meeting is inextricable from their relationship with God. Even their fucking is a kind of sacrament: “What the Bible meant by joy...he learned the following afternoon, when he went back to Marion’s uncle’s house. There was joy in his unconditional surrender to her.”

If Russ’s spiritual awakening begins in Navajo country, perhaps it’s fitting that his return there, years later, rekindles his faith. Through machinations too complex to summarize (it’s a long book), Russ leads Crossroads on a mission trip to the reservation he’d visited in his own youth. Frances, the object of his affection, is a parent chaperone; Perry is on the trip too. As father and son go off to serve in the spirit of Christ, Marion and Judson fly from Chicago to California, where Marion, newly svelte (one of the book’s least credible details), intends to visit the love of her youth.

It’s to Franzen’s great credit that each trip goes wrong in its own way. Marion’s attempted fling with Bradley is revealed as foolish—a lifetime has passed, and he’s now an old man, awakening her pity, not lust. Russ does at least get Frances into bed, but his sin is overshadowed by his son’s: Perry, coked up and half-mad, burns down a Dine barn on Navajo land and is arrested.

Husband and wife reunite in Arizona and, despite having hated each other for most of the novel, fall into bed. In this moment of crisis, they rediscover what held them together—God and sex. “I want us to pray together every day,” Marion says. “I want us to change. I want us to be closer. I want us to experience the joy of God together.” I’ve never heard postcoital talk quite like this, but Franzen’s storytelling has the force of the tide, bearing the reader along nonetheless. I can’t quite believe anyone would speak of God thus, but if anyone would, it’s Marion to Russ.

I have a tic of underlining especially lovely sentences in novels; I didn’t mark a single one in all of Crossroads. I don’t mean to insult Franzen’s prose so much as to marvel at how ably he writes by marshaling language in the service of story over beauty. I love books where language is the principal concern, narratives constructed from oblique fragments, and works of fiction that test the boundaries of how we define the novel. Crossroads is none of those things. Yet even readers like me cannot but succumb to the charms of plot and momentum, characters and conversation.

But what can readers like me—so secular that even “atheist” doesn’t seem the right designation—make of a novel in which a teenage girl sees God; in which a teenage boy wonders whether the soul grows as the body does; in which a mother is confident that she loves her children more than she loves Jesus but wonders whether she loves God more than she loves her children?

Franzen is dramatizing a historical collision between liberal Protestantism (Russ’s church hosted Paul Robeson in 1952, and the room in which Crossroads meets is emblazoned with painted quotations from e.e. cummings, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, “even Jesus”) and secularism. We know how this battle—between religion and the counterculture, psychiatry, women’s liberation, individualism—turned out. For the reader too young or secular, Crossroads’s interest in the individual, unmediated relationship of the person with God is hard to parse. Indeed, there’s so much talk about God in Crossroads that I eventually stopped trying to make sense of it, much as I gloss over the untranslated French that peppers Henry James’s novels.

Knowing this is but the first installment in a larger work changed how I read it: The novel didn’t quite satisfy, but I never expected it to be more than a first course. A novelist this skilled can do a lot with faith as a subject. What willbefall the Hildebrandt kids as they become adults; what will Franzen light upon (televangelism, astrology, money) as the 1970s become the ’80s? Impossible to answer, but I’ll certainly read the subsequent volumes, because I want to know.

I hope that as Franzen progresses from the distant to more recent past, he’ll relax into the material. Crossroads is a measured work, but writing about God doesn’t need to be so pious. There’s a moment when Becky is in a speeding car, and while I didn’t dislike spending time with her, I wanted Franzen to dispatch her the way he did (famously, to South Asian readers like me) a supporting character, an Indian woman named Lalitha, in Freedom. Not only is Crossroads about God; it reminded me how all authors are playing God.
In the Light of Youth

Can the memoir capture the mysteries of childhood?

By John Banville

The years of childhood, the stupider adults used to assure us, are the happiest years of our lives, but as every child knows, they are, in fact, among the most horrible. When we are little, nothing makes sense, and everything is the wrong size. There are spikes and sharp edges everywhere. The people who unaccountably have charge of us seem incomprehensible, or mad, or both. Then we are sent to school, and the real trials and torments begin. We quickly come to understand that what we have to learn in order to get on in the world, or at least to get by in it, is how to impersonate ourselves convincingly; it’s a hard task, and many of us fail at it.

In his radiant masterpiece Germs, Richard Wollheim presents us with a childhood that is understood precisely in these terms, as a period to be survived only by stratagems. For him, to be a child is to be wholly at the mercy of blind, unpredictable forces, hard to resist for creatures handicapped by ignorance, small stature, and the undependability of the body. Wollheim, who died in 2003, was a highly respected philosopher in the areas of art and aesthetics and the thought and teachings of Freud. Germs is his final work, published posthumously in 2004, and now reissued with a warm and perceptive introduction by Sheila Heti. It is the book Wollheim considered his best, and we can safely trust his judgment in the matter; certainly it is his most radically conceived and passionately executed work. It is by turns exquisite, appalling, mysterious, and very, very funny.

On the surface, it is what it says it is: a memoir of childhood. But this is a childhood, and a memoir of it, like no other, though there are echoes of Proust, of Nabokov’s Speak, Memory, and of Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. In places where the narrative voice takes on what might be termed a meticulous bleakness, we might even be in Beckettland.

Any account of childhood written by
fitting epigraph to Germs could be Philip Larkin’s stark yet somehow comic line “Life is first boredom, then fear.” A lot of Wollheim’s deadpan humor derives from the glaring contrast between the conditions of his boyhood in Larkinesque suburban England—both boring and frightening—and his family’s florid background.

Wollheim’s father’s people were German Jews; the first to leave a record was Jacob Salomon Wollheim, born in 1745 in Breslau, now Wrocław, Poland. Among Jacob’s descendants were some truly extraordinary figures, who are dealt with in the book’s captivating central section. The most memorable of these ancestors is the polymath Anton Edmund Wollheim, born in 1810, the grandson of Jacob Salomon. “Anton was a scholar, a journalist, a playwright, a novelist, a dramaturge, a diplomat, a poet, and twice a soldier, and knew, in some serious sense, thirty-two languages,” Wollheim writes. After a stint in the Portuguese Army, Wollheim recounts, “the more worried he felt about which young Richard remained stolidly incurious.

In contrast, Wollheim’s father, Eric, was a theatrical agent who had moved from Breslau to Paris to England by 1900 and set up a highly successful agency in London, representing superstars of the day like the great Russian ballerina Kar-savina and the French chanteuse Lucienne Boyer, famous for her best-selling song “Parlez-Moi d’Amour.” Lucienne delighted Richard on her visits to his home by bringing along a huge jigsaw puzzle, which they would work on together in the garden in the pallid English sunlight.

There was also the sexually provocative singer Suzy Solidor, who on coming to England was entranced to discover shiny black Wellington boots, which she wore to lunch at the Wollheims’. “In wartime Paris,” Wollheim writes, “she graduated, I learnt years later, to studded belts and leather and whips, and, with a few lesbian friends, became the darling of the SS.”

The most illustrious visitor chez Wollheim was Sergei Diaghilev, for whose Ballets Russes company Eric acted as London manager from 1918 onward. Though ever phlegmatic and poised, Eric seems to have idolized the Russian tyrant, yet not to the point of missing the comedy that went along with the melodrama. As Eric described Diaghilev to a journalist, Wollheim recounts, “the more worried he was about time, the shorter and shorter steps he took, so that, in the end, he was at a standstill.”

*John Banville’s latest novel is* April in Spain.
ince to the child everything is strange, nothing is strange. Richard accepted the trials and terrors of the existence he was forced to lead as perfectly normal, if utterly unacceptable. He lived as an alien in a familiar land. He says of his parents that “if jointly they brought it about that I grew up in England, they also ensured that I didn’t grow up English.”

To escape this predicament, or at least to cope with it, he conjured for himself a heartland of the imagination situated somewhere between the mythical Scotland of the Waverley novels and the monde damné of Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du Mal. Young Richard’s main hobby, his main obsession, was being unwell and recovering from being unwell. He might have adapted Pope’s line and spoken of “this long convalescence, my life.” Once, after getting into a brief tussle among his schoolfellows, he was so upset and fevered that he contracted pleurisy. “I luxuriated in my new-found weakness, as other boys might delight in their new-found strength,” he recalls.

The illness was only the first in a series of similar afflictions, most of them of the ordinary childhood run but which assailed him “with excessive ferocity, and with a frequency out of the ordinary, so that I had measles three times, which I was told was a record.” Even in the adult voice we hear the small boy’s note of quiet pride.

What viruses are to us, so were germs to an earlier generation, the silent invaders that could bring anything from the common cold to devastating afflictions such as rheumatic fever or polio. As with the narrative itself, Wollheim’s title is suggestively ambiguous. Ideas, passions, obsessive loves—these also have their germs. As to love, there are lovely interludes in which some of Richard’s earliest infatuations are beautifully evoked. The account of how, in wartime London sometime in 1943 or ’44, he lost his virginity to “a young girl in a brief belted coat”—a French prostitute who accosted him outside the Piccadilly Hotel—is as tender as it is funny, as precise as it is melancholy.

But before that, long before, there was school. We are well used to accounts of the horrors inflicted upon English schoolboys of a past age—girls seem to have fared better—but Richard’s tales of woe are special unto themselves. His tone is one of bemusement rather than anger. He looked upon school as another place of exile and confinement, where the grown-ups were crazier than usual and his fellow captives feral to a boy. “If there was early fear in my life, long before the word ‘love’ was breathed, it was school that introduced me, not to fear, but to the idea of a world of fear. By that I mean a world that fear stalked like a wild animal bent on indiscriminate revenge.”

Though there is much anguish and many an accident—“disgraced myself by falling into a tank of cow-dung, and then getting drunk on elderberry wine. I was probably eight or nine”—the book is far from being merely a list of grievances or a rancorous settling of scores. The author’s endearingly skewed perspective on the world, and the sparkle and immediacy with which he describes what he saw and experienced, make this a unique work. The set pieces in particular are masterpieces of descriptive writing. Wollheim does what the best artists do: He estranges us from the world and at the same time makes us gasp in delighted recognition of things we have always known but never noticed.

There is an extended passage devoted
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to the town’s messenger boys “of fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, with their rough skin and their large chapped lips, and their hair clipped to the skin over the ears and high up the nape of the neck.” They were the sons of the working class, Wollheim tells us, and always would be, as they grimly and resentfully knew. They would congregate at places throughout the town, holding meetings, their form of “a morning council of war”; “with much ringing of bicycle bells, they rode always to one overruling end, which was, by all the means at their disposal, to take over the quiet suburban roads, and make them their own.”

Richard was terrified of them, and he was right to be. One day they cornered him, forced open his mouth, and filled it with rabbit droppings. “I felt that they were taking revenge upon me for years of humiliation suffered at other hands.... In front of my dog, I sat down and cried.” Away from the gang, however, these wild boys grew tame. Wollheim describes, with a compassion all the warmer for the restraint with which it is expressed, standing at his kitchen window and seeing one of them enter the yard to make a delivery: “Off his bicycle, on someone’s property, which was clearly signed ‘No Hawkers, No Trespassers’, weighed down by his load, the boy shuffled like a prisoner.” The messenger boys carried to young Richard the news that the world is a hard place, and make them their own.

Wollheim is one of those supreme observers who we feel is presenting things as they actually were and not as they emerge from the alembic of memory. His mother, Connie, is a set piece all to herself, someone he regards with what seems an unwontedly hard heart. Admittedly, she is both domineering and a person with little knowledge of or curiosity about herself, her emotions—or lack of them—and the workings of her own mind. She had been an actress, not very successful, but she “found a supporter, protector, attenuated lover” in C.B. Cochran, the overlord of London theater in the first half of the 20th century. In old age, she confided to Richard that she had never gone “all the way” with Cochran and asked if he understood what she meant, “as though,” Wollheim writes, “the secrets of sexuality were known exclusively to a generation that professed to have little use for them.”

The book does not say how Eric and Connie met. They both worked in the theater, and presumably this was how they found each other. They were married in 1920, and Connie gave up the stage. “There were several possible reasons for this,” Wollheim writes. “My father might have feared her failure, he might have feared her success, he might have wanted her at home.” In later years, she presented the decision, if decision it was—in those days, even the most momentous changes in a woman’s life could come about by mere drift.

In her son’s account, Connie lived a vapid life, reading nothing, learning nothing, a prey to various quirks and phobias, chief among the latter being her fear and detestation of germs. She was, Wollheim tells us, “a woman of great beauty,” one possessed of much energy but with nothing to expend it on, and so she “hit upon something the ultimate appeal of which may very well have been that in itself it meant nothing to her: it was cleaning the bathroom in the morning, your dad or mine would have a paunch and a rip in his pajamas; Wollheim’s has a gold pencil pocket, he wrote down his weight in fine German numerals, on a pad which was attached to a metal ashtray.” Spied in the bathroom in the morning, your dad or mine would have a paunch and a rip in his pajamas; Wollheim’s has a gold pencil pocket, he wrote down his weight in fine German numerals. One can only say: Poor Connie.

Wollheim is ever aware of his limitations. He writes, at the close of the book, that one of the ways in which childhood ends “is when, no longer reconciled to the cold fact that there are things about ourselves we cannot say but can at best express in tears, we try obliquely to conquer the inability to say one thing through the hard-won ability to say another thing that neighbours on it.” It is a way of inching toward the truth, and certainly Wollheim is a master of obliquity. He ends with a small flourish, and a glorious mixture of metaphors:

However little there was in the way of truth to the first thing said, there might be more to the second thing said, and eventually, or such was the hope, I would, in saying one thing after another after another after another, each with a grain more of truth to it than its predecessor, come to spill the beans: I might, if only the ear stayed steady, and that was another hope, find myself, with one broad archaic gesture, scattering the germs.
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The Mirror

HBO’s Gossip Girl

BY ERIN SCHWARTZ

The entertainment industry is in a golden age of reboots. Some stories, it seems, are compelling enough—after a few obligatory tweaks in style and tone—that an audience can be persuaded to make a repeat visit every five or 10 years. An incomplete list of such archetypes includes: A misanthropic clown commits crimes but has interesting reasons for doing so. Beset with bad health insurance, a chemistry teacher becomes a drug kingpin. Four female friends drink cosmos and have unrealistically large apartments in New York City. And on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, bloodthirsty cliques of teenagers party and scheme, surveilled by an anonymous blogger known as “Gossip Girl.”

HBO’s Gossip Girl is a reboot of the 2007–12 CW show of the same name, which starred Blake Lively and Leighton Meester as best friends and rivals Serena van der Woodsen and Blair Waldorf. (The show was based on a series of novels by Cecily von Ziegesar.) Today’s Gossip Girl revival takes place in the same world—there are references to the accomplishments of characters in the original series, now adults—and follows a fresh cast of Constance Billard private school students who occupy many of the same roles.

The central pair of rival-friends are now Julien Calloway (Jordan Alexander), a charismatic and wealthy influencer, and her half-sister Zoya Lott (Whitney Peak), recently moved to New York City from Buffalo and thus uncool. Joining them are Obie Bergmann (Eli Brown), the vaguely anti-capitalist scion of a German real estate family, who appears in my notes as “fake DSA guy”; amoral bisexual Max Wolfe (Thomas Doherty); and bored couple Audrey Hope (Emily Alyn Lind) and Aki Menzies (Evan Mock).

The most significant departure in the reboot involves the “Gossip Girl” blog itself. In the original show, the blog was secretly run by student Dan Humphrey, who was a central participant and observer of the events; in the 2021 version, it’s an Instagram account created by a cabal of teachers led by Kate Keller (Tavi Gevinson, a noted blogger in her own right) to curb their students’ excesses. This leads straight into the ethical thicket you’d expect—at one point, a teacher uses the account to spread rumors that a student has an STI—but the problems with these posts are only briefly addressed. Instead, “Gossip Girl” is presented as a force for good, and its monitoring of rich teens is seen as inciting tough conversations and a more honest culture.

To get it out of the way: The new Gossip Girl is a mess. It’s tonally muddled, badly acted, and oddly tame and timid despite its over-the-top aesthetic. The clothes—one of the main reasons for watching the original series—are just OK in the reboot; to quote fashion YouTuber Mina Le, “I wasn’t impressed by them, but I wasn’t particularly angry.” The plot is meandering, the characterizations inconsistent. But Gossip Girl’s greatest sin is squandering the opportunity to update a narrative that, in some ways, fits better in 2021 than it did in 2007. As a story about the lengths to which people will go to maintain the attention of an audience, it fails to add insight—through either satire or documentation—to our understanding of the fickle tides of content.

A typical Gossip Girl episode goes like this: Things are tense but not openly hostile between Zoya and Julien. Their relationship is strained when Zoya suspects Julien of leaking personal information to “Gossip Girl,” and Julien’s henchmen execute a
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The new Gossip Girl is a mess. It’s muddled, badly acted, and oddly tame despite its over-the-top aesthetic.

A mirror is not a bad metaphor for Gossip Girl, both the fictional social media account and the IRL show. Let’s use the vanity-plus-ring-light setup from which Julien streams on Instagram Live in the mornings as an example. The mirror image represents something basically real that has been angled and filtered to maintain its glamour, the unsightly bits left out of frame. The way this image has been cropped and skewed can be as informative as a more dispassionate gaze.

It doesn’t have much documentary use, but it reveals the priorities and vulnerabilities of the beholder’s taste. It indicates what they consider good content—what engenders that bright, larger-than-life engangement, enlightened and principled. Julien as empathetic and principled. Julien gives a long, ad hoc speech about bullying after doing something cruel and absurd; after defending his parents, Obie goes to a protest against their development, toting a sign that reads “SHELTER FOR ALL.”

At least three monologues are devoted to the positive influence of “Gossip Girl” itself. One teacher behind the account opines that it “makes people talk face to face. It forces conversations that would never be had…. It just isn’t important, it’s vital.” A late-season plot point involves Kate Keller’s decision to abandon her literary career because she believes that running the “Gossip Girl” account offers a better way to have an impact on the world. In a manifesto posted to the account after a brief hiatus, “Gossip Girl” writes: “I’d begun to wonder if I was abusing my considerable power when I realized you’re the ones who do that, not me…. I’m your mirror.” The authors then go on to explain that the account is shutting off comments.

Plan to force Zoya to leave New York. The half-sisters throw dueling parties to mark their territory (“If your party is loud enough, no one’s going to hear the sound of the bomb she’s trying to explode,” one of Julien’s henchmen advises). The parties are merged; the combined bash goes badly at first, and then well. Both half-sisters perform acts of public sabotage to “murder [each other] socially.”

Then, after a heartfelt speech, they tear to “murder each other socially.” The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro-

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The characters of the original Gossip Girl were just as shallow. But the original show’s appeal came from how stairly the cast maintained patterns of callous- ness, competition, and deceit, even when they so often backfired, simply because it was more fun. At the center of both iterations is an ephemeral quality described in the aughts in terms of “relevance” and today in terms of “content”: the ability to make your life into something both interesting and friction- less enough for other people to consume. The gaze of “Gossip Girl” is the content-making gaze; to be namedropped in one of its bitchy quips is a process of aggrandizement, the magnification of one’s most dramatic, polarizing qualities and the elision of the small and mundane. No wonder the Constance Billard teens poison each other’s food or sabotage fashion shows to remain in the blog’s crosshairs.

This sensibility may not be particularly inspiring, but at least it is interesting—or to borrow from 2007, “relevant” to contemporary culture and thus good ma- terial for a teen soap opera to riff on. The problem is that the new Gossip Girl never commits to that sensibility, vacillating between muddled cruelty and unsatisfy- ing, earnest justifications. Never while watching a show have I wanted more fiercely to seize the original footage and recut the series as a satire, placing its best bits of observational comedy in sharper focus. There’s a line in the first episode in which Obie somberly reports that he was late for school be- cause he brought gourmet doughnuts to a picket line; when a friend asks wheth- er the development the protesters are picketing is owned by his family, Obie replies, “Yeah, it is. And they know ex- actly how I feel,” a statement breathtak- ing in its uselessness. Later, after Zoya confronts some of her friends’ parents about their business at an opulent meal, Obie chastises her: The way they operate “is wrong,” but, he emphasizes, “we’re at dinner”—dinner, of course, being the neutral Switzerland of the rich.

There’s more. A young socialite croons on social media, “Join us on Clubhouse, where we talk trauma. Invite only.” Julien quips about a florist influencer: “She’ll be a billionaire in 10 years—if there are still flowers, that is.” If only these lines had room to echo as the rich, capacious indi- cent they are, both of their speakers and their surroundings! These ideas mat- ter only in their ability to show us how deeply screwed we are, how completely the inanity and callousness of wealth influ- ences what we desire and inures us to what should shock us. Instead, the series takes pains to show that these are funda- mentally good people: Other scenes depict Obie as sincere and self-aware, Julien as empathetic and principled. Julien gives a long, ad hoc speech about bullying after doing something cruel and absurd; after defending his parents, Obie goes to a protest against their development, toting a sign that reads “SHELTER FOR ALL.”

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It doesn’t have much documentary use, but it reveals the priorities and vulnera- bilities of the beholder’s taste. It indicates what they consider good content—what engenders that bright, larger-than-life feeling—and what resists the impetus to make content entirely. (For example, a protest.) The view of the world it pro- vides can be revealing.

When Gossip Girl holds up a mirror to its subjects, the resulting image is too unfocused to show us anything new. We see indulgence without abandon, self-dis- closure without introspection. The show suffers the fate of a less-than-compelling Instagram Live stream: It makes it too easy to scroll away.
Letters

Our Carbon Bootprint

Re “20 Years of Bloodshed and Delusion” [Special issue, September 20/27]: I am puzzled and increasingly alarmed by the absence of a robust and widespread public debate about the intimate connections between climate change and the military-industrial complex, along with corporate capitalism and the foundations of imperialism, racism, and patriarchy that feed and are fed by it.

The recent US military “withdrawal” from Afghanistan and the torrent of mostly obfuscating finger-pointing and responsibility-dodging it has triggered presents the perfect opportunity to tackle this subject.

Sharry Lapp
Pittsburgh

The Forgotten Forever War

Danny Sjursen and Lawrence Wilkerson’s “Repeal the AUMF Now” [September 20/27] does a fine job of arguing that the United States should end its “forever wars” in Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately, Sjursen and Wilkerson forgot to mention our nation’s “foreverest” war: Korea.

Seventy years after the hostilities began, we are still technically at war with North Korea. The US relentlessly torments the North Koreans for seeking to defend themselves from the threat of 28,000 American troops in South Korea and US nuclear weapons that have been deployed in the region. North Korea’s “nuclear threat” almost certainly would end after the US signed a peace agreement, lifted its cruel and unjustified sanctions on that country, and brought home its troops.

Lawrence Beck
Elkhorn, Neb.

Fuzzy Math

In “Party of the Rich?” [September 6/13], David Bromwich uses statistics in ways that do not enlighten. He tells us that 65 percent of households earning more than $500,000 a year are in Democratic districts and that 74 percent of households in Republican districts earn less than $100,000 a year.

Those numbers are not comparable in any way, nor do they show, as he wants us to believe, that the Democratic Party is the party of the rich. There is a lot to criticize in Democrat politicians’ attitudes toward money, but Bromwich’s misuse of statistics vitiates his argument. The first says nothing about the income of Democratic voters but vaguely suggests that rich people tend to live in large metropolitan areas where Democrats tend to be concentrated. It might mean something else, but you would need more information to learn anything useful from it. The second by itself also says nothing. It needs a contrast. What percentage of households in Democratic districts, or in the country as a whole, earn less than $100,000 a year? And why make the cutoff $100,000? For most Americans, that is a dream income.

Katharine W. Rylaarsdam
Baltimore

Correction

“Chain of Command,” by Zoë Carpenter [August 9/16], incorrectly stated that US Senator Joni Ernst is the only female combat veteran in the Senate. Two female combat veterans serve in the Senate, Ernst and Senator Tammy Duckworth.

Letters to the Editor:
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Military recruits, oil-rig workers, killing-floor operators—some might say they have blood on their hands. But in his new book Dirty Work, Eyal Press turns the prevailing narrative on its head and looks instead at the psychological costs these workers pay and the moral injuries they suffer. Rather than place the most blame on those with the least power, Press asks, what if we collectively assumed responsibility for the violence? We discussed this and more in the following interview, which has been edited for length and clarity.

JL: Your book tells the stories of correctional psychiatrists, drone operators, slaughterhouse workers, and offshore oil-rig workers. What unites all these people under the category of “dirty workers”?

EP: What unites them is that they are doing work that causes substantial social harm—sometimes to people, sometimes to nonhuman animals or the environment—and the work is also damaging to them. The other piece of it is that they are doing work that society depends on and tacitly condones but doesn’t want to hear too much about.

JL: Why do you suggest that dirty work is condoned by the public?

EP: I don’t mean that it is explicitly approved of. It’s a passive acceptance of these institutional arrangements because at some level they are convenient. It’s not that people want to see animals treated brutally, but many want cheap meat. It’s not that people approve of the unsafe conditions that led to the Deepwater Horizon blast, but many people want low gas prices. It’s less a matter of the public saying, “We approve of these horrible things,” and more that the institutional arrangements have become very entrenched and invisible to much of the public.

JL: Can you talk about why that dirty work is so invisible to us today?

EP: An essential contention of the book is that concealment is central to how dirty work is perpetuated and organized. If we go back in time, dirty work in every society has been obscured and pushed to the margins. One of the historical examples I cite is the domestic slave trade in the United States, which greatly embarrassed Southern plantation owners, who of course perpetuated and depended on it but wanted not to be associated with it. There was this effort to distance themselves from auctioneers and traffickers and to pretend that households of slaves being dragged through town were somehow not connected to the system of slavery. It’s not entirely new that morally unconscionable forms of work are pushed out of sight.

But I do think it’s one of the marks of the modern world and, I suggest in the book, of “civilization,” in the sense that Norbert Elias, a sociologist, described it in The Civilizing Process. What Elias says is that the civilizing process is about pushing disturbing events behind the scenes of social life. We live in a society where that insight is borne out. Just consider the fact that jails and prisons and industrial slaughterhouses are so hidden from view—not just from the public’s ability to walk in there, but from the airwaves. That is very central to the organization of dirty work and the perpetuation of it.

JL: You contrast dirty work with jobs in finance and tech. Why are those jobs not necessarily dirty work?

EP: When some people hear “dirty work,” Nation readers in particular, they’re going to think, “Oh, you mean Wall Street—the folks who cooked up all those fraudulent financial products that caused the meltdown of the entire economy in 2008.” Those are certainly morally troubling activities, but I don’t think that the people who carry them out are as prone to feeling stigma, shame, marginalization. One of the reasons is that, if you work in a high-paying white-collar profession like banking, and you think, “Oh, this is kind of shady. I may be shouldn’t be doing this,” your ability to leave and wash your hands of it is far greater.

The second thing is that wealth in America and material success have always conferred virtue on the people who rise to the top. For bankers, corporate lobbyists, and tech workers, who have very high-paying jobs that are highly desirable in terms of the salary at least, it’s much easier to find a sense of self-worth.

JL: What is the antidote to the powerlessness experienced by the workers you profile?

EP: I think the best antidote is a collective one. My own conclusion is that just as the responsibility for dirty work is shared, the only way to have better conditions in some of these industries, or to stop some of this dirty work altogether, is by acting collectively.
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