FRENCH DISPATCHES

The DANCER WAS A SPY
GARY YOUNGE

PLUS
EUROPE’S WAR ON WOKE
A REPORT FROM THE FRONT LINES
JAMES MCAULEY

Shadow dancer: What does France’s decision to honor Josephine Baker reveal about that country’s current racial reckoning?
Afro-Creole Poetry in French from Louisiana’s Radical Civil War–Era Newspapers: A Bilingual Edition
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longlisted for the 2021 ALTA National Translation Award in Poetry
honored by the Modern Language Association, the American Alliance of Museums, and the Southern Independent Booksellers Association

AS THE UNITED STATES descended into civil war, New Orleans’s influential community of French-speaking free people of color fought racial hostility by founding newspapers: L’Union appeared in 1862, La Tribune in 1864. Protest poetry printed in these papers and collected here reveals a network of activist authors writing to each other before a public audience. The original French poems appear alongside Clint Bruce’s sensitive English translations.
Field of flags: An installation outside Griffith Observatory memorializes the nearly 27,000 Los Angeles County residents who have died from Covid-19.

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"To the French establishment, Americans who argue for social justice are guilty of ‘cultural imperialism.’"
The science tells us this is the decade to take action to avert the irreversible impacts of climate change. That’s the urgency behind the United Nations’ climate conferences, which bring together 197 members each year to make a commitment to emission reductions, provide funding to developing nations for mitigation and adaptation, and find other ways to address the crisis. Since the first climate conference in 1992, activists have been frustrated by the slow pace of the negotiations. This year’s conference in Glasgow, Scotland, which ended on November 13, was no exception. Yet there is no doubt that the strides made by the resulting agreement reflect, in part, the growing power of climate activism worldwide.

Over the past decade, climate activism has changed and grown, often reflecting shifts brought about by other movements, such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Standing Rock. As those movements brought demands for gender, race, and class equity to the fore, the climate movement responded, with many groups embracing an intersectional approach and with new organizations and initiatives foregrounding the voices of a much more diverse group of climate activists.

In 2016, the Standing Rock movement, initiated and led by Indigenous women, shut down the Dakota Access Pipeline. Their actions brought together Indigenous tribes in one of the largest mobilizations to occur within Turtle Island—as a number of Indigenous people refer to North America—in decades. Environmental organizations and settler allies showed up in solidarity. And actions took place across the United States in a solid sign of support.

Young people, too, have become a vital force. Fridays for Future, the solitary school strike started by Greta Thunberg, has grown into a global movement with actions and solidarity among youth worldwide. In the US, the Sunrise Movement and activists like Xiye Bastida, Jerome Foster II, and Alexandria Villaseñor are at the forefront of youth climate action. At the other end of the age range, Bill McKibben’s Third Act engages people over 60 in climate activism.

Watching the negotiations at COP26 unfold, it was obvious that the work of people of color, especially women, from the Global South made a significant impact. Powerful opening speeches by Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados, and youth activists Elizabeth Wathuti of Kenya and Brianna Fruean of Samoa immediately brought attention to the situation in their home countries, especially the impacts of sea level rise and drought.

This year, Tina Stege, representing the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the chair of the High Ambition Coalition, a group of 61 nations that aims to make the outcome of the negotiations as ambitious as possible, and Lia Nicholson, representing Antigua and Barbuda and the lead negotiator for the Alliance of Small Island States, stood out. Together with Ahmadou Sebory Touré, representing Guinea and the lead negotiator of G77 and China, an alliance of 134 developing nations, they pushed hard for much-needed funding, both for adaptation (actions taken to respond to the effects of climate change, such as moving infrastructure and people inland) and compensation (funding for loss and damage caused by the unforeseeable impacts of climate crisis events such as hurricanes).

While narratives about the UN climate talks often contrast the activists outside the halls and the negotiators inside, this erases the real alliances between activists and nongovernmental organizations and negotiators from the Global South. Groups like Action Aid, Climate Action Network–International, and Power Shift Africa, among many others, were at the forefront of calls for more funding. Those negotiators and activists notched a major win when Global North nations agreed to double the funding for adaptation starting in 2025. But trust is brittle, as the Global North has yet to pay the full $100 billion per year that was to begin in 2020 and run through 2025. The final agreement also includes acknowledgment of loss and damage, another win for the Global South, albeit with no funding to address it. The Global North nations, especially the United States, have consistently pushed back on funding for loss and damage, worrying that it will expose them to liabilities.

Similarly, while the announcement that 23 countries planned to phase out coal created a stir, activists pointed out that of the five major
coal producers—China, India, the US, Australia, and Indonesia—only Indonesia signed on. They also pointed out that the uproar over the last-minute change that India requested (and was excoriated for)—changing a “phase-out” of coal to a “phase-down”—deflects attention from the US, the world’s largest producer of oil and gas.

Still, these synergies, combined with the new focus on equity in the climate movement, will keep the pressure on the Global North to recognize and address its responsibility for historical emissions. Thus far, of the G20 nations responsible for 80 percent of emissions, only the European Union has made the cuts necessary to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Though some activists celebrated that negotiators have to return to the table in a year (rather than in five years, as the Paris agreement called for) with higher reduction targets, that’s still a year away.

It speaks volumes about the situation in many nations of the Global South that their focus is on funding. Funding is, as Stege put it, a “lifeline” to her country. Nations formed by low-lying atolls as well as the countries in sub-Saharan Africa do not have the luxury of time. The crisis is at their doorsteps, daily.

That’s why activists don’t confine themselves to climate conferences. When activists address inequities in their own communities, they are also engaging and addressing global inequities. Climate activism in the US and other developed nations—a gas pipeline prevented, a power plant shut down, fossil fuel subsidies reduced—has direct results in both local communities and the Global South. For example, an Indigenous-women-led activist movement has been putting pressure on both Enbridge Line 3, the 1,097-mile-long pipeline that carries crude oil from Alberta to Wisconsin, and Line 5, which carries the oil from northern Wisconsin to northern Michigan and on to Ontario. On the heels of COP26, Michael Regan, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, traveled to Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley,” an 85-mile-long chemical corridor between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and met with the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, which has long been calling for greater monitoring of the fossil fuel industry in the region. (It was the first time an EPA official had visited the area.) Soon after COP26 concluded, climate activists blocked the Port of Newcastle in Australia, stopping exports from the world’s largest coal port and protesting the theft of the unceded lands of the Worimi and Awabakal people. The movement to divest from fossil fuels continues to hit the industry’s bottom line. Each of these steps adds to the total, and each one is vital, as time runs out.

**Tina Gerhardt is an environmental journalist whose writing has also been published in Grist, The Progressive, and Sierra magazine.**

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**SHORT TAKE/D.D. GUTTENPLAN**

**Revealing the Truth**

The paper of record may be guilty of milquetoast politics, but credit is due for its brave exposure of a US war crime.

LIKE A LOT OF JOURNALISTS, I’VE LONG HAD A love/hate relationship with The New York Times. The paper’s enormous reach and influence, and the powerful lens it can train on people and events, so often seem wasted on the trivial and the transitory. Then there’s its longstanding role as cheerleader in chief for gentrification—not just in New York City, where the *Times* has been on the wrong side of nearly every fight dating back to the days of Robert Moses, but nationwide. There is nothing the *Times* likes better than a “rising housing prices” story—even if it has to go to Texas to find it.

Although I’ve written for it—even, for a few years, worked for it—the *Times* has always seemed to me the embodiment of the mainstream media: self-important, politically cautious, primed to apologize for the status quo. Yet precisely because of its outsized role in setting the media agenda, when the paper of record deigns to take notice, the rest of us have to pay attention. And when its reporting brings to light a war crime that, without the spotlight of its coverage, would likely have remained successfully covered up, *The New York Times* deserves our gratitude.

The November 13 front page story promised to reveal “How the U.S. Hid an Airstrike That Killed Dozens of Civilians in Syria.” Reporters Dave Phillips and Eric Schmitt and the paper’s Visual Investigations Team redeemed that promise handsomely, combing through videos, satellite images, and still photographs of the airstrike to reconstruct what happened in March 2019: A US F-15E attack plane dropped a 500-pound bomb on what an American military analyst, watching the attack in real time via drone, described as “50 women and children” near the Syrian town of Baghuz—and then went back and dropped two 2,000-pound bombs on the survivors.

As with most war crimes, exposing this atrocity required several serving members of the military to speak out, initially to their superiors and eventually to the Senate Armed Services Committee. Only when it became clear that military authorities were determined that the evidence should literally remain buried—US-led coalition forces bulldozed the blast site within days of the attack, and the lead investigator researching the incident for the Pentagon Inspector General’s Office was forced out of his job after he refused to remain silent—did the story reach the *Times*.

But when it did, the paper threw all its formidable resources into making sure the truth emerged, with unflinching and unimpeachable reporting. For that, everyone involved deserves our thanks.
Murder in Plain Sight

Here is no justice. And there is no peace.

And if you complain about that, white people will show up to shoot you.

That is the lesson of the Kyle Rittenhouse trial, which came to its bitter end on November 19. With the verdict, Rittenhouse, who was 17 years old when he shot three people, killing two, officially got away with murder. A jury of his white peers ruled that Rittenhouse acted in self-defense when he illegally acquired a gun, lied about his status as a medic, pointed his gun at protesters, and then opened fire.

The verdict was not surprising, if you are familiar with how the criminal justice system works for white people. Wisconsin Judge Bruce Schroeder, who presided over the Rittenhouse trial, consistently made rulings in the best interest of the white gunman. He refused to punish Rittenhouse for violating the terms of his bail; excluded evidence of Rittenhouse’s behavior before and after the shooting that spoke to his intent and lack of remorse; allowed the defense to mischaracterize the actions of the people Rittenhouse killed as “rioters”; yelled at prosecutors in front of the jury; dismissed an illegal-gun charge against the gunman; and had the jury clap for one of Rittenhouse’s expert witnesses.

Others might want to argue about why Schroeder was biased toward the defendant (I think the judge’s MAGA ringtones and off-color jokes tell you all you need to know about why he was sympathetic to a white gunman who shot up anti-police-violence protesters at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement). But that he was biased toward Rittenhouse was obvious to those watching the trial without blinders.

Still, a sympathetic judge and a predominantly white jury are just standard gifts the criminal justice system gives to white boys accused of criminal violence—even when the victims are white, as was the case here. Rittenhouse also enjoyed hero status among white supremacists and Republicans as well as favorable media coverage from Fox News and even The New York Times.

In the aftermath, some people expressed shock at the verdict. But Rittenhouse’s freedom is not a “miscarriage” of justice—it is our white justice system working as intended.

It doesn’t always work. But it works often enough (see: George Zimmerman) that it gives comfort and confidence to any white person who clearly realizes that they might do an obviously illegal and violent thing (like, say, storm the US Capitol) and either get away with it completely or receive a light sentence.

We know that the system does not work this way for Black people. It is difficult even to imagine a similar set of circumstances for a Black defendant. Nobody credibly thinks that a Black teenager who got an illegal gun and then crossed state lines to shoot up a MAGA protest would be greeted by a sympathetic Black judge in front of a predominantly Black jury, be lauded by prominent Black leaders, enjoy favorable media coverage, and then walk free. Nobody credible thinks that. In point of fact, here is the full and complete list of Black teenagers who have killed two people at a MAGA rally to defend their community: ...

Rittenhouse’s freedom is not a “miscarriage” of justice—it is our white justice system working as intended.

Rittenhouse, however, killed two people at a protest against police violence with an illegally obtained gun and was held accountable for none of it. And that is precisely how a majority of white people want the white justice system to work. We know this from their votes in elections (including elections for judges like Bruce Schroeder); their support of elected officials opposed to serious criminal justice reform; and the cold reality that prosecutors favor white jurors when the defendants are Black while defense attorneys favor white jurors when the defendants are white. They want a system that will be, if not sympathetic, at least empathetic to eruptions of white violence, while swift and harsh toward Black people accused of crimes. We don’t have to live with a biased criminal justice system; white people, enough of them, just like it that way.

So white violence will continue unabated. The Rittenhouse case started with a cop, Rusten Sheskey, shooting a Black man, Jacob Blake, in the back multiple times, paralyzing him. The cop was not punished. The outrage at that violence led to protests, which attracted Rittenhouse. Now he will not be punished. If you are the next violent white person, why would you ever worry about being held accountable for whatever despicable act you are planning? All we can hope for is that the next Sheskey or Rittenhouse isn’t gunning for us, or somebody we love.
The Leadership Look

Our visual understanding of power has always been male-coded. Women leaders are changing the script.

E’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO TALK ABOUT THE WAY female politicians dress. After generations of mostly male journalists writing with breathless fascination about the fact that women don’t look like men, it’s a welcome reprieve. But something radical is happening.

As more women run for and reach executive positions, the evolving standards for what leadership actually looks like are breaking the mold. Beyond just clothes, we’re talking about upending the male-coded image-making of power, those visual cues politicians use to inform our unconscious biases and the bedrock of most political legitimacy. It feels almost taboo to examine the choices women in politics are making for their public image, but if we can’t describe them, we won’t be able to codify women as leaders.

Take the new era of governance under New York’s first female governor, Kathy Hochul. Hochul isn’t some rogue like Senator Krysten Sinema posturing in a denim vest. She’s low-key remarkable precisely for what she’s not: the puffed-up fraud who preceded her. Instead of donning a windbreaker at press conferences thronged by uniformed men offering obligatory salutes, or personally heading out into the snow to pull drivers out of their cars, Hochul dealt with her first weather event in a dramatic departure. In one photo, we see the governor sitting down(!), wearing a mauve suit, listening(!) to her director of operations, Kathryn Garcia, standing over her(!) in a physically dominant position and wearing a cardigan over a dress, her hair pulled back in a “I’m too busy to bother” ponytail. This display by the executive—the receptive posture, the apparent attentiveness—was jaw-dropping and passed completely without note. No one praised her take-charge attitude or commanding presence. There was no story on the evening news about how the governor prop-erly delegated to the most qualified person and then made decisions based on her recommendation. The tabloids didn’t knock themselves out touting the fact that she didn’t preemptively blame New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio for something.

Negative space doesn’t scream, but the contrast was deafening.

Hochul’s first speech as governor was similarly stunning for its brevity. Just 11 minutes of straight talk without any verbal branding exercises (“New York tough”) or unsolicited life-coaching (“advice to fathers”). She doesn’t treat the job as a perfor-

Kathy Hochul dealt with her first weather event in a way that departed dramatically from her predecessor.

mance, and there isn’t much stagecraft to fill column inches, so her Jesuit notion of service and work-manship fly completely under the radar. But these are qualities that build morale and attract qualified professionals to government precisely because they feel that they’re joining a team, rather than pledging a fucked-up fraternity. Hochul’s muted ego is inextricably linked to real competence, not the imagined kind that may win Emmy Awards but also covers up an untold number of nursing home deaths.

Garcia made a more direct attack on convention when she ran for New York City mayor in the Democratic primary earlier this year. Rocking a red lip, knee-high boots, a leather jacket, and what looked like a white V-neck you’d find in a Hanes six-pack, she offered up a sexy outlaw in one of her commercials for mayor. Throughout the campaign, she mixed up the biker chick vibe with more traditional color-block shifts, suits, and high heels, her glasses pushed up on her head, always at the ready. This was the candidate widely acknowledged as the most competent, who came in a very close second. And she didn’t run away from talking about her clothes, either. Describing how as sanitation commissioner she tailored her work jacket to fit, she put it straight: “Are we gonna pretend like I’m not a woman?” Well, yes, actually, women have been retrofitting themselves into a man-made aesthetic ever since they cast off the crinoline and put on shoulder pads. But here was a mayoral candidate, in the same interview, talking about how she wears high heels to communicate respect for her workforce: “It was important that I always look professional, because they felt that it reflected on them.” Respect for others! What a completely wild idea, that leadership—absent any chest pounding—could also include a thoughtful discussion of humility and not be seen as somehow weak or trivial. Garcia was neither, and used a range of images to communicate thoughtfulness, cool, and knowing your shit cold as the baseline qualities for mayor.

The other top female contenders for mayor also defied the landscape. Maya Wiley, who placed third in the Democratic primary, campaigned in a crown of salt-and-pepper braids—a fact that merits its own think piece in the category of “things Black women have to deal with”—and wore jeans as often as a suit. And who can forget Dianne Morales in her striking black turtlenecks? With Leticia James, the state’s first female and Black attorney general, now running for governor, we’ll see a field where neither of the top two contenders look or act
like any of the people who came before.
Our visual understanding of executive power is interchangeable with maleness—the suit and tie—leaving women looking like a cheap imitation or, worse, impostors. Even as we’ve accepted women as legislators in collective bodies, where they exercise power in line with female-coded attributes like communication and collaboration, they still struggle to get elected to executive positions. There have been zero women presidents and only 45 women governors, ever. “I just don’t think she has a presidential look” is a thing a man in a suit once got to say, despite being the least qualified candidate for office who ever lived.

The problem is that men have been parading around in a costume that has defined power for so long that they can get away with being bad at their actual jobs so long as they look the part. It’s instant authority that legitimates any idiot who can find his way to a Men’s Wearhouse.

If we don’t want them to continue to dominate public life, we’ve got to acknowledge the narrative of power women leaders are redefining what executive power looks like—and therefore means—it’ll remain de facto male.

Our political system has no way to contain the Republican embrace of vigilantism.

On November 12, while promoting his new book, Betrayal, ABC News reporter Jonathan Karl released an audio recording of a conversation with Donald Trump. Responding to a question about the Capitol rioters who’d chanted “Hang Mike Pence,” Trump said those words were just “common sense,” given the fraudulence of the 2020 election. Two days later, Wyoming Republican Senator John Barrasso, who ran as a moderate but has since swung to the right, was asked by ABC’s George Stephanopoulos about Trump’s comment. Despite repeated prodding, Barrasso kept dodging the issue, emphasizing the need to move on and suggesting that there had been voting irregularities in the 2020 election that merited further investigation.

Barrasso’s dismal performance was even more ominous than Trump’s initial comments. Trump is Trump, a known quantity. But Barrasso’s cowardly inability to condemn him shows, once again, how thoroughly the Republican Party has been conquered by Trump, whose promotion of political violence now has the tacit approval of almost the entire party apparatus (with the few exceptions, like Representatives Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger, increasingly pushed to the margins—if not driven out of public office completely).

Trump occupies a curious position as an ex-president. Thanks to his social media blackout, he’s barely visible as a public figure—but he remains a magnetic force that tugs the party toward him. His reckless incitement ensures that he continues to be banned from the major social media outlets and the mainstream media. But Trump’s fans can easily follow his messages on Fox News and on fringe outlets like Newsmax and One America News.

The mainstream media’s blackout of Trump has done nothing to stop the circulation of his ideas or their ability to reshape the GOP. And these include the increasingly normalized threats of violence. When Republican Representative Paul Gosar tweeted an anime video showing him killing his Democratic colleague Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and swinging at President Joe Biden with two swords, there was hardly an elected Republican to be found to object or say that Gosar had crossed the line into indecency. Gosar’s claim that he was just joking has become, through complicit silence, his party’s line.

The normalization of threats of political violence has been an intensifying trend in 2021. At its core is the simple fact that Republican leaders like Barrasso have decided the party can’t afford to lose Trump—or even Gosar. The GOP has become an alliance between the brutal and the craven.

Surveying the rise of threats of violence in public life, The New York Times reported on November 12 that “threats against members of Congress have jumped by 107 percent compared with the same period in 2020,
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The Waldorf-Astoria and the Making of a Century
David Freeland

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Politics, Love, Sports, and Masculinity
John Massaro

“John Massaro writes about classic Springsteen themes—politics, love, sports, and masculinity—with insight, care, and thoughtfulness.”
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Folk Stories from the Hills of Puerto Rico / Cuentos folklóricos de las montañas de Puerto Rico
Edited by Rafael Ocasio

A bilingual anthology of Puerto Rican folktales that were passed down orally and then transcribed in 1914 by the team of famous anthropologist Franz Boas.

Nothing Is Impossible
America’s Reconciliation with Vietnam
Ted Osius
Foreword by John Kerry

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

“Shatters the myth that Americans lacked information about the dangers of Nazism.”
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Two Women: A Novel
Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda
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The first openly feminist novel published in Spanish, finally translated.

Apparition of Splendor
Marianne Moore Performing Democracy through Celebrity, 1952–1970
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The Audacity of a Kiss
Love, Art, and Liberation
Leslie Cohen

“Shatters the myth that Americans lacked information about the dangers of Nazism.”
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Americans and the Holocaust: A Reader
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according to the Capitol Police.” Remarkably, the situation is so bad that the paper, habitually given to framing all political disputes as the fault of both parties, was frank about the role of the GOP. The Times report noted, “From congressional offices to community meeting rooms, threats of violence are becoming commonplace among a significant segment of the Republican Party. Ten months after rioters attacked the United States Capitol on Jan. 6, and after four years of a president who often spoke in violent terms about his adversaries, right-wing Republicans are talking more openly and frequently about the use of force as justifiable in opposition to those who dislodged him from power.”

This analysis echoed a Reuters report on November 9. Profiling three individuals who’d made threats against elected officials, Reuters found some commonalities, including the fact that “all described themselves as patriots fighting a conspiracy that robbed Donald Trump of the 2020 election. They are regular consumers of far-right websites that embrace Trump’s stolen-election falsehoods. And none have been charged with a crime by the law enforcement agencies alerted to their threats.”

The last point is crucial. Like Gosar’s violent anime, many of the acts of intimidation that are becoming more common don’t lend themselves to a law enforcement solution. The threatening words and images are often vague enough that they fall under the legal definition of protected political speech. But make no mistake: These are words meant to intimidate—and they instill real fear.

Far from denouncing those issuing such threats, the GOP uses its political muscle to protect them. When the Justice Department indicated it was going to investigate threats to school board members over critical race theory, Republicans in Congress objected, with Representative Jim Jordan complaining of the creation of a “snitch line.”

Ultimately, these threats of violence need to be understood as primarily a political problem. They are happening because the GOP views them as offering a political advantage with no real downside. The way to combat them is to call attention to them politically, in speeches and campaigns, making clear that Trump’s gangster politics are now accepted by the Republican Party as a whole.

Biden failed to make the link between Trump and the party’s increasing extremism in the 2020 election. Like Hillary Clinton before him, he tried to distinguish between the toxic Trump and a redeemable GOP. But this sop to moderate Republicans effectively prevents Democrats from describing what’s actually happening. It reinforces the view that non-Trump Republicans, like the newly elected Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin, should get points just for being more polite. Going forward, Democrats have to make sure that the public understands the politics of intimidation isn’t just a Trump problem, but a Republican one.

Thoughts on People, Planet, & Profit is a collection of essays about impact investing from the field’s pioneer. It’s also a book about hope. Through short, thoughtful ruminations on everything from championing biodiversity to just saying “no” to war, Amy Domini demonstrates that when investors come together to care for the greater good, they can ensure both people and planet continue to thrive.
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The Score

Poor Form

BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

onths of negotiations over the Democrats’ agenda in Congress keep boiling down to one thing: What will Joe Manchin agree to? Since his vote is necessary to pass the party’s Build Back Better package, which includes funding on climate change, health care, housing, and caregiving, the conservative West Virginia senator has been calling many of the shots.

Manchin has steadfastly insisted that social programs separate the deserving from those who supposedly aren’t. The expanded child tax credit payments, which currently go to all low-income parents whether or not they have a job, have been a particular target of his ire. “Don’t you think, if we’re going to help the children, that the people should make some effort?” he argued recently. Apparently raising children is not enough effort to deserve financial support.

Manchin also wanted higher barriers for families trying to get child care subsidies and to force people to prove their previous earnings before they can take paid leave.

His campaign seemed to have partially succeeded when President Joe Biden pared down his once ambitious plan in October. Suddenly, if parents want to receive child care subsidies, they must prove they are working, looking for a job, training for one, enrolled in school, undergoing a health treatment, or on leave.

There’s also a work requirement in the House Democrats’ most recent paid family leave proposal. While governments typically ask for proof of employment to take paid leave, this one goes further, requiring people to file periodic reports telling the government how many hours each week they spent on caregiving.

The problem with these provisions is not that people aren’t doing what the government thinks they should. Most parents who need child care are probably working, studying, or trying to find a job. People on leave are caring for someone, either themselves or their loved ones. The problem is forcing them to demonstrate it, potentially over and over again. It’s the paperwork and bureaucracy, not complying with the rules, that keeps people off the programs they need to survive.

This is the lesson we’ve learned from the country’s largest experiment with work requirements, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. President Bill Clinton imposed such a rule on cash welfare recipients with the support of many in his party, including then-Senator Biden.

But TANF proved that forcing these rules on aid programs doesn’t compel poor people to work; it just keeps them poor. In some early TANF programs, the work requirements did modestly increase how much recipients worked, but they mostly held unstable jobs. Five years later those employment gains had disappeared, and recipients who were subject to a work requirement actually worked less. Few were lifted out of poverty, and some even fell deeper into destitution.

Work requirements have been just as disastrous elsewhere. They’ve lowered enrollment in food stamps without helping people find more work. After the Trump administration allowed states to impose work requirements on Medicaid, more than 18,000 people in Arkansas lost their benefits, with no uptick in the labor force.

Despite this evidence, Democrats until very recently still insisted on making the poor prove they deserve benefits. And yet that instinct seemed to fade with the onset of the pandemic. Democrats voted through three rounds of stimulus checks for nearly all Americans. Then they extended the existing child tax credit to over 90 percent of families, even those with little to no income from work.

The payments started to go out only in July, but they’ve already had a huge impact. Hardship and hunger among parents dropped the moment the checks hit their bank accounts, while deprivation actually increased for childless households. Three million fewer children were living in poverty in July. The payments aren’t reaching all eligible families; if they were, child poverty would have dropped from 15.8 percent to the single digits. Still, they offer a glimpse of the power of simply giving people resources.

It would be a huge mistake for Democrats to reverse course on this progress and return to embracing harsh rules. As a senator, Biden once wrote that the poor need to be made to “work their way out of poverty.” It’s time to prove that he and his party have left that approach well in the past.
Palestinian youth perform in the Al-Shejaiya neighborhood of Gaza City on November 14. Food and water insecurities, regular power outages, and skyrocketing youth unemployment have led to rising suicide rates in the area, especially among men ages 18 to 30. Many young people turn to sports and other activities to relieve the pressures of everyday life, from boxing to horse riding to spitting fire.

By the Numbers

**390K**
Minimum number of people killed in Latin America from 1945 to 2000 in anti-communist extermination programs, many with the US government’s backing.

**$650M**
Amount Saudi Arabia will pay for US missiles in its first major arms deal with the Biden administration.

**72**
Number of times the United States attempted to overthrow another country’s government during the Cold War.

**44%**
Percentage of respondents in a global survey who believe that US influence is a threat to democracy in their country.

**36%**
Percentage of “democratic backsliding” since 2010 attributable to the 41 US-aligned countries, according to the Swedish nonprofit V-DEM.

**17%**
Percentage of respondents who believe that American democracy is a good model to follow.

—Brian Osgood

Hero as Intern

Congressman Matt Gaetz says he’s open to offering Kyle Rittenhouse a congressional internship.

—News report

Following closely an intern’s routine,
Kyle arrives early, stays late at the scene—
Checking the congressman’s need for caffeine,
Conquering quirks of the Xerox machine,
Running some errands, and keeping things clean,
All the while toting his AR-15.
Giving Josephine Baker a hero’s grave won’t bury the truth about France’s republican racism.

As a student in Paris in the fall of 1990, my lodgings were the envy of my peers—even if the means by which I came about them were not. While fellow language students from my university in Edinburgh were stuck in soulless suburbs, I was ensconced in Rue des Fossés Saint-Jacques, a short walk from the Jardin du Luxembourg and around the corner from the Panthéon.

I had been lucky to find anywhere at all. Flat hunting in Paris is tough for anyone; being Black made it considerably tougher. People would ask about your “origins” when you called. If they didn’t, you’d turn up and find that the apartment was mysteriously no longer available.

All the other students were white and had found housing; I was still in a youth hostel. I stuck a note in the English Church stating, “Black British student, seeking accommodation.” A British blue blood saw it and said “God spoke” to him, and he started inquiring on my behalf. I was just about to return to Scotland to ask whether there was a less racist part of the Francophone world they could send me to, when a call came through to the hostel from a man I didn’t know saying a place had been found.

The flat was lovely. My landlady, an Eastern European specialist with French radio to whom I taught English, was delightful and one of the main reasons I ended up choosing journalism as a profession. But Paris still provided one of the most intensely racist experiences I had ever encountered. The color bars in nightclubs—many simply wouldn’t allow Blacks to enter—were bad enough, but one night I was beaten up by the French police in the Métro. They assumed I had drugs; I didn’t.

The most exhausting aspect was the constant stop-and-frisk by the police, which happened several times a week, usually not far from the mostly white area where I was staying. The sight of a young Black man in sweatpants and braids was sufficiently suspicious that I learned to always carry my passport with me. Whether I was out early in the morning getting the paper and a coffee or wandering back late at night from a film, police would often stop me and radio in my details—the fact of me—to make sure I had a right to be there.

On November 30, literally in the shadow of where this harassment took place, the American-born Black singer, dancer, and resistance agent Josephine Baker will be reinterred in the Panthéon—next to the nation’s great and glorious, including the philosophers Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the novelists Victor Hugo and Émile Zola. Baker will be only the sixth woman, the third Black person, and the first Black woman to be laid to rest there.

The petition to move Baker’s remains from Monaco, where they have been since she died in 1975, was initiated by the writer Lauren Kupferman, who told The New York Times he thinks President Emmanuel Macron approved the reinterment “because, probably, Josephine Baker embodies the Republic of possibilities. How could a woman who came from a discriminated and very poor background achieve her destiny and become a world star? That was possible in France at a time when it was not in the United States.” It seems not to have occurred to anyone to ask whether it would be

Gary Younge, a member of The Nation’s editorial board, is a professor of sociology at the University of Manchester.
Dancer, spy, activist: In France, Baker found acceptance, fame, love—and a country for which she was prepared to risk her life.
possible now for a Black woman to rise to such heights if she had been born in France under similar circumstances.

Nonetheless, the question of how and why Baker came to be so feted by the French state is a good one. Born into poverty in segregated St. Louis in 1906, she left an unremarkable singing and dancing career in the US and arrived in France in 1925 as part of La Revue Nègre, quickly making a name for herself, first on the stage and then in film. Outrageous, playful, and sensual, she performed the “Danse Sauvage” in just a feathered skirt and then another, more provocative number in a skirt made of 16 bananas. She scandalized and titillated Paris, appealing to the sense of the primitive and the exotic that pervaded Europe during the Jazz Age. “She is in constant motion, her body writhing like a snake or more precisely like a dipping saxophone,” wrote the critic Pierre de Régnier. “Music seems to pour from her body. She grimaces, crosses her eyes, wiggles disjointedly, does the splits and finally crawls off the stage, stiff-legged, her rump higher than her head, like a young giraffe.”

With her pet cheetah, Chiquita, her pet pig, Albert, and her “Rainbow Tribe” of 12 children of different races adopted from all over the world, her eccentricities were indulged when not celebrated. Baker loved France, and France loved her. Her hit song “J’ai Deux Amours/Mon Pays et Paris”—“I Have Two Loves/My Country and Paris”—misleadingly suggested that she was conflicted about her allegiances. Soon after marrying a Frenchman in the late 1930s, she renounced her US citizenship and became French.

Baker was something of a pioneer in this journey, but she was by no means alone. During the decades immediately before and after World War II, a significant cohort of Black artists, facing repression in the US, would seek exile in France—where they found not only acceptance but adulation. “There is more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America!” wrote the novelist Richard Wright, who moved to France in 1946, claimed French citizenship, and died there in 1960. You could form a big band with the musicians who found a home in Paris, including Don Byas, Kenny Clarke, Dexter Gordon, and Bud Powell. You could fill a library with the works of Black writers who did the same, like Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, and William Gardner Smith.

“Paris,” wrote Tyler Stovall in Paris Noir, “beckoned with a vibrant intellectual community sharply critical of American racism and the American perspective on the cold war in general. Given [the alternative], the decision for exile, while certainly not easy, had a forceful and undeniable logic.”

But for Baker, this love affair with Paris was far more enduring, intense, and consequential than for other artists. She enjoyed more freedom, acclaim, and status in France than she could ever have hoped for in the United States. “I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more,” she told the March on Washington from the podium. “But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad.”

During World War II, Baker leveraged her renown and celebrity to extract information from diplomats and dignitaries, which she passed on to Gen. Charles de Gaulle’s Free French forces. She used her home in the Dordogne region to shelter resistance fighters. And thanks to her fame, she was able to travel much of the continent as a courier for the resistance. In August 1961, she was awarded the Croix de Guerre and made a chevalier of the Legion of Honor, the highest French decorations, both military and
The French Republic today cannot satisfy itself with simply honoring the genius of Alexandre Dumas,“ Chirac said as Dumas was laid to rest in the Panthéon. “It must correct an injustice: an injustice that blighted Dumas since childhood, just like the injustice branded into the flesh of his slave ancestors.”

Over the years, there have also been attempts to correct the huge gender imbalance in the Panthéon, whose entrance is embossed with the message “To its great men, a grateful fatherland.” But it was centuries before Marie Curie became the first woman to be interred there. (Félix Éboué, the French Guianese–born administrator of Guadeloupe, was the first, in 1949.) The timing was no coincidence. Jacques Chirac’s first presidential term had seen a multiracial French soccer team win the World Cup for the first time. In Paris, the French Parliament acknowledged both the slave trade and slavery as a crime against humanity at a time when the extreme-right National Front’s Jean-Marie Le Pen shocked the world by coming in second in the presidential election.

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To fully understand the politics behind Baker’s impending commemoration, we must first realize that the long-standing love affair between African American artists and Paris was not all one way. France got a lot out of it too. The republican ideal on which the nation was founded rejects multiculturalism in favor of universalism, claiming, “We’re all French—and all other differences are not only secondary but irrelevant and even divisive.” In a nation that understood citizenship as indivisible, race was deemed invisible.

But if race did not officially exist, racism was nonetheless present. The French empire and its various overseas territories—which spanned Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific—depended on strict racial hierarchies. The fight to reimpose slavery in Haiti and the struggles against independence—particularly in Algeria and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam—were brutal.

Geopolitics also played a role in France’s welcoming of African Americans—particularly in the immediate postwar era, when American hegemony was most fiercely resented. The French delivered more votes to the Communist Party in 1946 than to any other; many mocked what they regarded as the cultural imperialism of the Marshall Plan as “Coca-colonization.” Embracing exiles from their ally-cum-rival gave the French a sense of being morally and culturally superior—even as they wrestled with their military and economic inferiority.

In the white French gaze, Black American artists in particular were from—but not entirely of—the United States: central to a version of its culture but absolved from the consequences of its power. They inhabited a liminal racial and political space in which their racial difference was embraced because the French found themselves neither familiar with nor implicated in the conditions that made their exile necessary. Theirs was an honorary, if contingent, racial status. They were free, for example, to write about racial atrocities in America—but not to comment on colonial atrocities committed by France, either at home or abroad.

Some found this space if not adequate then at least sufficient, given what they had left behind. Others did not. The freedom Wright found in that one square block of Paris was appreciated. The challenge came if you tried to step outside it. In the

“"The French could entertain the idea of me because they were not immersed in guilt about a mutual history.”" —Maya Angelou

Paris? Non, merci! Maya Angelou tried France but then returned to the US.
third volume of her autobiography, Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas, Maya Angelou reflected on the frosty reception meted out to a Senegalese friend when he accompanied her to a party in 1954. “Paris was not the place for me or my son. The French could entertain the idea of me because they were not immersed in guilt about a mutual history—just as white Americans found it easier to accept Africans, Cubans or South American Blacks than the Blacks who had lived with them foot to neck for two hundred years. I saw no benefit in exchanging one kind of prejudice for another.”

In James Baldwin’s essay “Alas, Poor Richard”—one of many oedipal swipes he leveled at Wright, his former mentor and friend—he wrote, “Richard was able, at last, to live in Paris exactly as he would have lived, had he been a white man, here, in America. This may seem desirable, but I wonder if it is…. It did not seem worthwhile to me to have fled the native fantasy only to embrace a foreign one.”

In October 1961, two months after Baker received her Legion of Honor, the Paris police, led by Maurice Papon, massacred hundreds of Algerian protesters and arrested more than 10,000 following an independence march. (Decades later, Papon would be convicted for his involvement in the deportation of more than 1,600 Jews from Bordeaux during the Second World War.)

This year, even as plans were being made for Baker’s reinterment, efforts to entomb the Tunisian French lawyer, feminist, essayist, and former MP Gisèle Halimi in the Panthéon were thwarted. Halimi, who died in 2020, campaigned on a range of left issues, including abortion, wealth redistribution, and human rights.

She was also a counsel for the Algerian National Liberation Front and a devout anti-colonialist. The campaign to have her buried in the Panthéon has so far been rebuffed because the president’s team believes her inclusion would be too divisive.

“African Americans have been celebrated in France both as a way to oppose the American societal model by showing French color-blindness as inclusive and as an effort not to address the colonial history of France and its legacies,” said Sarah Mazouz, a sociologist at the French National Center for Scientific Research and the coauthor of *For Intersectionality*.

Which brings us back to my student experiences of police harassment.

It is not possible to square the lived experience of Black and Arab people in France, particularly the young, with the French insistence on color-blind universality. Indeed, following a spate of terror attacks, the riots of 2005, and the rise of the far right—currently enjoying a surge in the polls—such reconciliation is even more difficult 30 years on.

Polling on racist attitudes is notoriously rare in France—it is illegal to collect data based on race, ethnicity, and religion. But in a poll released in June last year of Seine-Saint-Denis, a neighborhood that has a significant number of Black and Arab inhabitants, more than 80 percent said they believed that race or ethnicity was the basis of discrimination in dealing with the police or in employment.

A survey by the Migration Policy Institute in 2012 found that more than a third of children of immigrants believe they are not considered French by other citizens, while 45 percent cite their origins as being somewhere other than France, suggesting a significant degree of alienation. A 2014 survey revealed that more than a third of the French acknowledge being racist. A poll from last year revealed that one in four French believe their country’s empire was something to be proud of, while one in seven consider it to be a source of shame. (The British were both more likely to be proud and more likely to be ashamed, while the Dutch seem to be almost entirely without remorse.)

Last year’s Black Lives Matter protests, which pollinated across Europe, finding a home in the continent’s local struggles, brought these contradictions to the fore. Some of the biggest demonstrations were in Paris. Many European leaders at the time dismissed the notion that the protests had any domestic relevance. But the French were more insistent than most, claiming that “white privilege” and “intersectionality” were American concepts imported to sow division and rancor.

Macron even took time out of a national address on the coronavirus to pledge his “uncompromising” opposition to racism, but warned that this “noble fight” was rendered “unacceptable” when “usurped by separatists” who want to divide French society.

The backlash has been the most intense within the academy (see “Europe’s War on Woke,” page 20), with one veteran social scientist, Gérard Noiriel, claiming race had become “a bulldozer” laying waste to other disciplines. In January, the Observatory of Decolonialism (continued on page 27)
Whose Truth, Whose Creativity?
is an expert analysis of neuroscience and art theory — this new book delves into the source of all art and creativity, from ancient cave paintings to contemporary art. It explores why postmodern art theory has had a damaging impact on the art world and explains how neuroscience can prove this. Does talent spring from the unconscious mind as Paul Cézanne believed? Or does it, as Marcel Duchamp theorized, come from conceptual thinking at the conscious level?

Cognitive neuroscientific psychology, a fairly new field of psychology, explains a natural, mental basis for human creativity. This book exposes the many falsehoods and distortions of postmodern reasoning to demonstrate how, by following this disturbing, unnatural direction for decades, the art establishment has been responsible for initiating an era of damaging cultural chaos.

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Europe's War on Woke

Why elites across the Atlantic are freaking out about the concept of structural racism.

BY JAMES MCAULEY

On my 32nd birthday, I agreed to appear on Répliques, a popular show on the France Culture radio channel hosted by the illustrious Alain Finkielkraut. Now 72 and a household name in France, Finkielkraut is a public intellectual of the variety that exists only on the Left Bank: a child of 1968 who now wears Loro Piana blazers and rails against “la cancel culture.” The other guest that day—January 9, less than 72 hours after the US Capitol insurrection—was Pascal Bruckner, 72, another well-known French writer who’d just published “The Almost Perfect Culprit: The Construction of the White Scapegoat,” his latest of many essays on this theme. Happy birthday to me.

The topic of our discussion was the only one that interested the French elite in January 2021: not the raging pandemic but “the Franco-American divide,” the Huntington-esque clash of two apparently great civilizations and their respective social models—one “universalist,” one “communitarian”—on the question of race and identity politics. To Finkielkraut, Bruckner, and the establishment they still represent, American writers like me seek to impose a “woke” agenda on an otherwise harmonious, egalitarian society. Americans who argue for social justice are guilty of “cultural imperialism,” of ideological projection—even of bad faith.

This has become a refrain not merely in France but across Europe. To be sure, the terms of this social-media-fueled debate are unmistakably American; “woke” and “cancel culture” could emerge from no other context. But in the United States, these terms have a particular valence that mostly has to do with the push for racial equality and against systemic racism. In Europe, what is labeled “woke” is often whatever social movement a particular country’s establishment fears the most. This turns out to be an ideal way of discrediting those movements: To call them “woke” is to call them American, and to call them American is
to say they don’t apply to Europe.

In France, “wokesim” came to the fore in response to a recent slew of terror attacks, most notably the gruesome beheading in October 2020 of the schoolteacher Samuel Paty. After years of similar Islamist attacks—notably the massacre at the offices of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 and the ISIS-inspired assaults on the Hypercacher kosher supermarket and the Bataclan concert hall in November 2015—the reaction in France reached a tipping point. Emmanuel Macron’s government had already launched a campaign against what it calls “Islamist separatism,” but Paty’s killing saw a conversation about understandable trauma degenerate into public hysteria. The government launched a full-scale culture war, fomenting its own American-style psychodrama while purporting to do the opposite. Soon its ministers began railing against “islamo-gauchisme” (Islamo-leftism) in universities, Muslim mothers in hijabs chaperoning school field trips, and halal meats in supermarkets.

But most of all, they began railing against the ideas that, in their view, somehow augmented and abetted these divisions: American-inspired anti-racism and “wokeness.” Macron said it himself in a speech that was widely praised by the French establishment for its alleged nuance: “We have left the intellectual debate to others, to those outside of the Republic, by ideologizing it, sometimes yielding to other academic traditions…. I see certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States.” In October, the French government inaugurated a think tank, the Laboratoire de la République, designed to combat these “woke” theories, which, according to the think tank’s founder, Jean-Michel Blanquer, Macron’s education minister, “led to the rise of Donald Trump.”

As the apparent emissaries of this pernicious “Anglo-Saxon” identitarian agenda, US journalists covering this moment in France have come under the spotlight, especially when we ask, for instance, what *islamo-gauchisme* actually means—if indeed it means anything at all. Macron himself has lashed out at foreign journalists, even sending a letter to the editor of the *Financial Times* rebutting what he saw as an error-ridden op-ed that took a stance he could not bear. “I will not allow anybody to claim that France, or its government, is fostering racism against Muslims,” he wrote. Hence my own invitation to appear on France Culture, a kind of voir dire before the entire nation.

Finkielkraut began the segment with a tirade against *The New York Times* and then began discussing US “campus culture,” mentioning Yale’s Tim Barringer and an art history syllabus that no longer includes as many “dead white males.” Eventually I asked how, three days after January 6, we could discuss the United States without mentioning the violent insurrection that had just taken place at the seat of American democracy. Finkielkraut became agitated. “And for you also, [what about] the fact that in the American Congress, Emanuel Cleaver, representative of Missouri, presiding over a new inauguration ceremony, finished by saying the words ‘amen and a-women’?” he asked. “*Ça vous dérange pas*?” I said it didn’t bother me in the least, and he got even more agitated. “I don’t understand what you say, James McAuley, because cancel culture exists! It exists!”

The man knew what he was talking about: Three days after our conversation, Finkielkraut was dropped from a regular gig at France’s LCI television for defending his old pal Olivier Duhamel of Sciences Po, who was embroiled in a pedophilia scandal that had taken France by storm. Duhamel was accused by his stepdaughter, Camille Kouchner, of raping her twin brother when the two were in their early teens. Finkielkraut speculated that there may have been consent between the two parties, and, in any case, a 14-year-old was “not the same thing” as a child.

"I see certain social science theories [in French intellectual debates] entirely imported from the United States.” —French President Emmanuel Macron
to brand social justice activism as inherently illiberal—and to silence long-overdue conversations about race and inequality that far too many otherwise reasonable people find personally threatening.

But Europe is not America, and in Europe there have been far fewer incidents that could be construed as “cancellations”—again, I feel stupid even using the word—than in the United States. “Wokeism” is really a phenomenon of the Anglosphere, and with the exception of the United Kingdom, the social justice movement has gained far less traction in Europe than it has in US cultural institutions—newspapers, universities, museums, and foundations. In terms of race and identity, many European cultural institutions would have been seen as woefully behind the times by their US counterparts even before the so-called “great awakening.” Yet Europe has gone fully anti-woke, even without much wokeness to fight.

So much of Europe’s anti-woke movement has focused on opposing and attempting to refute allegations of “institutional” or “structural” racism. Yet despite the 20th-century continental origins of structuralism (especially in France) as a mode of social analysis—not to mention the Francophone writers who have shaped the way American thinkers conceive of race—many European elites dismiss these critiques as unwelcome intrusions into the public discourse that project the preoccupations of a nation built on slavery (and thus understandably obsessed with race) onto societies that are vastly different. Europe, they insist, has a different history, one in which race—especially in the form of the simple binary opposition of Black and white—plays a less central role. There is, of course, some truth to this rejoinder: Different countries do indeed have different histories and different debates. But when Europeans accuse their American critics of projection, they do so not to point out the very real divergences in the US and European discussions and even conceptions of race and racism. Rather, the charge is typically meant to stifle the discussion altogether—even when that discussion is being led by European citizens describing their own lived experiences.

France, where I reside, proudly sees itself as a “universalist” republic of equal citizens that officially recognizes no differences among them. Indeed, since 1978, it has been illegal to collect statistics on race, ethnicity, or religion—a policy that is largely a response to what happened during the Second World War, when authorities singled out Jewish citizens to be deported to Nazi concentration camps. The French view is that such categories should play no role in public life, that the only community that counts is the national community. To be anti-woke, then, is to be seen as a discerning thinker, one who can rise above crude, reductive identity categories.

The reality of daily life in France is anything but universalist. The French state does indeed make racial distinctions among citizens, particularly in the realm of policing. The prevalence of police identity checks in France, which stem from a 1993 law intended to curb illegal immigration, is a perennial source of controversy. They disproportionately target Black and Arab men, which is one reason the killing of George Floyd resonated so strongly here. Last summer I spoke to Jacques Toubon, a former conservative politician who was then serving as the French government’s civil liberties ombudsman (he is now retired). Toubon was honest in his assessment: “Our thesis, our values, our rules—constitutional, etc.—they are universalist,” he said. “They don’t recognize difference. But there is a tension between this and the reality.”

One of the most jarring examples of this tension came in November 2020, when Sarah El Hairy, Macron’s youth minister, traveled to Poitiers to discuss the question of religion in society at a local high school. By and large, the students—many of whom were people of color—asked very thoughtful questions. One of them, Emilie, 16, said that she didn’t see the recognition of religious or ethnic differences as divisive. “Just because you are a Christian or a Muslim does not represent a threat to society,” she said. “For me, diversity is an opportunity.” These and similar remarks did not sit well with El Hairy, who nonetheless kept her cool until another student asked about police brutality. At that point, El Hairy got up from her chair and interrupted the student. “You have to love the police, because they are there to protect us on a daily basis,” she said. “They cannot be racist because they are republican!”

For El Hairy, to question such assumptions would be to question something foundational and profound about the way France understands itself. The problem is
Structural racism is not some progressive shibboleth: It kills people, which need not be controversial to admit.

that more and more French citizens are doing just that, especially young people like the students in Poitiers, and the government seems utterly incapable of responding.

Although there is no official data to this effect—again, because of universalist ideology—France is estimated to be the most ethnically diverse society in Western Europe. It is home to large North African, West African, Southeast Asian, and Caribbean populations, and it has the largest Muslim and Jewish communities on the continent. By any objective measure, that makes France a multicultural society—but this reality apparently cannot be admitted or understood.

Macron, who has done far more than any previous French president to recognize the lived experiences and historical traumas of various minority groups, seems to be aware of this blind spot, but he stops short of acknowledging it. Earlier this year, I attended a roundtable discussion with Macron and a small group of other Anglophone correspondents. One thing he said during that interview has stuck with me: “Universalism is not, in my eyes, a doctrine of assimilation—not at all. It is not the negation of differences…. I believe in plurality in universalism, but that is to say, whatever our differences, our citizenship makes us build a universal together.” This is simply the definition of a multicultural society, an outline of the Anglo-Saxon social model otherwise so despised in France.

The effect of these language games is simply to limit the terms available to describe a phenomenon that indeed exists. Because structural racism is not some progressive shibboleth: It kills people, which need not be controversial or even political to admit. For one recent example in the UK, look no further than Covid-19 deaths. The nation’s Office for National Statistics concluded that Black citizens were more than four times as likely to die of Covid as white citizens, while British citizens of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage were more than three times as likely to die. These disparities were present even among health workers directly employed by the state: Of the National Health Service clinical staff who succumbed to the virus, a staggering 60 percent were “BAME”—Black, Asian, or minority ethnic, a term that the government’s report deemed “no longer helpful” and “demeaning.” Beyond Covid-19, reports show that Black British women are more than four times as likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth as their white counterparts; British women of an Asian ethnic background die at twice the rate of white women.

In the countries of Europe as in the United States, the battle over “woke” ideas is also a battle over each nation’s history—how it is written, how it is taught, how it is understood.

Perhaps nowhere is this more acutely felt than in Britain, where the inescapable legacy of empire has become the center of an increasingly acrimonious public debate. Of particular note has been the furor over how to think about Winston Churchill, who remains something of a national avatar. In September, the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust renamed itself the Churchill Fellowship, removed certain pictures of the former prime minister from its website, and seemed to distance itself from its namesake. “Many of his views on race are widely seen as unacceptable today, a view that we share,” the Churchill Fellowship declared. This followed the November 2020 decision by Britain’s beloved National Trust, which operates an extensive network of stately homes throughout the country, to demarcate about 100 properties with explicit ties to slavery and colonialism.

These moves elicited the ire of many conservatives, including the prime minister. “We need to focus on addressing the present and not attempt to rewrite the
past and get sucked into the never-ending debate about which well-known historical figures are sufficiently pure or politically correct to remain in public view,” Johnson’s spokesman said in response to the Churchill brouhaha. But for Hilary McGrady, the head of the National Trust, “the genie is out of the bottle in terms of people wanting to understand where wealth came from,” she told London’s Evening Standard. McGrady justified the trust’s decision by saying that as public sensibilities change, so too must institutions. “One thing that possibly has changed is there may be things people find offensive, and we have to be sensitive about that.”

A fierce countermovement to these institutional changes has already emerged. In the words of David Abulafia, 71, an acclaimed historian of the Mediterranean at Cambridge University and one of the principal architects of this countermovement, “We can never surrender to the woke witch hunt against our island story.”

This was the actual title of an op-ed by Abulafia that the Daily Mail published in early September, which attacked “today’s woke zealots” who “exploit history as an instrument of propaganda—and as a means of bullying the rest of us.” The piece also announced the History Reclaimed initiative, of which Abulafia is a cofounder: a new online platform run by a board of frustrated British historians who seek to “provide context, explanation and balance in a debate in which condemnation is too often preferred to understanding.” As a historian myself, I should say that I greatly admire Abulafia’s work, particularly its wide-ranging synthesis and its literary quality, neither of which is easy to achieve and both of which have been models for me in my own work. Which is why I was surprised to find a piece by him in the Daily Mail, a right-wing tabloid not exactly known for academic rigor. When I spoke with Abulafia about it, he seemed a little embarrassed. “It’s basically an interview that they turn into text and then send back to you,” he told me. “Some of the sentences have been generated by the Daily Mail.”

As in the United States, the UK’s Black Lives Matter protests led to the toppling of statues, including the one in downtown Bristol of Edward Colston, a 17th-century merchant whose wealth derived in part from his active involvement in the slave trade. Abulafia told me he prefers a “retain and explain” approach, which means keeping such statues in place but adding context to them when necessary. I asked him about the public presentation of statues and whether by their very prominence they command an implicit honor and respect. He seemed unconvinced. “You look at statues and you’re not particularly aware of what they show,” he said.

“What do you do about Simon de Montfort?” Abulafia continued. “He is commemorated at Parliament, and he did manage to rein in the power of monarchy. But he was also responsible for some horrific pogroms against the Jews. Everyone has a different perspective on these people. It seems to me that what we have to say is that human beings are complex; we often have contradictory ideas, mishmash that goes in any number of different directions. Churchill defeated the Nazis, but lower down the page one might mention that he held views on race that are not our own. Maintaining that sense of proportion is important.”

All of these are reasonable points, but what I still don’t understand is why history as it was understood by a previous
generation must be the history understood by future generations. Statues are not history; they are interpretations of history created at a certain moment in time. Historians rebuke previous interpretations of the past on the page all the time; we rewrite accounts of well-known events according to our own contemporary perspectives and biases. What is so sacred about a statue?

I asked Abulafia why all of this felt so personal to him, because it doesn’t feel that way to me. He replied, “I think there’s an element of this: There is a feeling that younger scholars might be disadvantaged if they don’t support particular views of the past. I can think of examples of younger scholars who’ve been very careful on this issue, who are not really taking sides on that issue.” But I am exactly such a younger scholar, and no one has ever forced me to uphold a certain opinion, either at Harvard or at Oxford. For Abulafia, however, this is a terrifying moment. “One of the things that really worries me about this whole business is the lack of opportunities for debate.”

Without question, France has faced the brunt of terrorist violence in Europe in recent years: Since 2015, more than 260 people have been killed in a series of attacks, shaking the confidence of all of us who live here. The worst year was 2015, flanked as it was by the *Charlie Hebdo* and Bataclan concert hall attacks. But something changed after Paty’s brutal murder in 2020. After a long, miserable year of Covid lockdowns, the French elite—politicians and press alike—began looking for something to blame. And so “wokeness” was denounced as an apology for terrorist violence; in the view of the French establishment, to emphasize identity politics was to sow the social fractures that led to Paty’s beheading. “Wokeness” became complicit in the crime, while freedom of expression was reserved for supporters of the French establishment.

The irony is fairly clear: Those who purported to detest American psychodramas about race and social justice had to rely on—and, in fact, to import—the tools of an American culture war to battle what they felt threatened by in their own country. In the case of Paty’s murder and its aftermath, there was another glaring irony, this time about the values so allegedly dear to the anti-woke contingent. The middle school teacher, who was targeted by a Chechen asylum seeker because he had shown cartoons of the prophet Muhammad as part of a civics lesson about free speech, was immediately lionized as an avatar for the freedom of expression, which the French government quite rightly championed as a value it would always protect. “I will always defend in my country the freedom to speak, to write, to think, to draw,” Macron told Al Jazeera shortly after Paty’s killing. This would have been reassuring had it not been completely disingenuous: Shortly thereafter, Macron presided over a crackdown on “islamo-gauchisme” in French universities, a term his ministers used with an entirely straight face. If there is a single paradox that describes French cultural life in 2021, it is this: “Islamophobia” is a word one is supposed to avoid, but “Islamo-leftism” is a phenomenon one is expected to condemn.

Hundreds of academics—including at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France’s most prestigious research body—attacked the government’s crusade against an undefined set of ideas that were somehow complicit in the Islamist terror attacks that had rocked the country. Newspapers like *Le Monde* came out against the targeting of “islamo-gauchisme,” and there were weeks of tedious newspaper polemics about whether the term harks back to the “Judeo-Bolshevism” of the 1930s (of course it does) or whether it describes a real phenomenon. In any case, the Macron government backtracked in the face of prolonged ridicule. But the trauma of the terror attacks and the emotional hysteria they unleashed will linger: France has also reconfigured its commitment to laïcité, the secularism that the French treat as an unknowable philosophical ideal but that is actually just the freedom to believe or not to believe as each citizen sees fit. Laïcité has become a weapon in the culture war, instrumentalized in the fight against an enemy that the French government assures its critics is radical Islamism but increasingly looks like ordinary Islam.

The issue of the veil is infamously one of the most polarizing and violent in French public debate. The dominant French view is a function of universalist ideology, which holds that the veil is a symbol of religious oppression; it cannot be worn by choice. A law passed in 2004 prohibits the veil from being worn in high schools, and a separate 2010 law bans the face-covering niqab from being worn anywhere in public, on the grounds that “in free and democratic societies…no exchange between people, no social life is possible, in public space, without reciprocity of look and visibility: people meet and establish relationships with their faces uncovered.” (Needless to say, this republican value was more than slightly complicated by the imposition of a mask mandate during the 2020 pandemic.)
In any case, when Muslim women wear the veil in public, which is their legal right and in no way a violation of laïcité, they come under attack. In 2019, for instance, then-Health Minister Agnès Buzyn—who is now being prosecuted for mismanaging the early days of the pandemic—decried the marketing of a runner’s hijab by the French sportswear brand Decathlon, because of the “communitarian” threat it apparently posed to universalism. “I would have preferred a French brand not to promote the veil,” Buzyn said. Likewise, Jean-Michel Blanquer, France’s education minister, conceded that although it was technically legal for mothers to wear head scarves, he wanted to avoid allowing them to chaperone school trips “as much as possible.”

Nicolas Cadène, the former head of France’s national Observatory of Secularism—a laïcité watchdog, in other words—was constantly criticized by members of the French government for being too “soft” on Muslim communal organizations, with whose leaders he regularly met. Earlier this year, the observatory that Cadène ran was overhauled and replaced with a new commission that took a harder line. He remarked to me, “You have political elites and intellectuals who belong to a closed society—it’s very homogeneous—and who are not well-informed about the reality of society. These are people who in their daily lives are not in contact with those who come from diverse backgrounds. There is a lack of diversity in that elite. France is not the white man—there is a false vision [among] our elites about what France is—but they are afraid of this diversity. They see it as a threat to their reality.”

For many on both sides of the Atlantic, being aggressively anti-woke is a last-ditch attempt at mattering, which is the genuinely pathetic part.

As in the United States, there is a certain pathos in the European war on woke, especially in the battalion of crusaders who belong to Cleese and Finkielkraut’s generation. For them, “wokeism”—a term that has no clear meaning and that each would probably define differently—is a personal affront. They see the debate as being somehow about them. The British politician Enoch Powell famously said that all political lives end in failure. A corollary might be that all cultural careers end in irrelevance, a reality that so many of these characters refuse to accept, but that eventually comes for us all—if we are lucky. For many on both sides of the Atlantic, being aggressively anti-woke is a last-ditch attempt at mattering, which is the genuinely pathetic part. But it is difficult to feel pity for those in that camp, because their reflex is, inescapably, an outgrowth of entitlement: To resent new voices taking over is to believe you always deserve a microphone. The truth is that no one does.

And there would be no more actors in blackface or yellowface.

Such has been the standard response of cultural bodies in the West over the past year and a half as they shed some of the less enlightened elements from their inventory. That Marine Le Pen, the leader of the extreme-right National Rally Party, took to Twitter to condemn “anti-racism gone mad” was not surprising. But she was joined by the editor of the liberal Le Monde, Michel Guerrin, who claimed that the Paris Opera was practicing “self-censorship” as it pandered to identity politics. True, the director was German, but he had previously worked in Toronto and, Guerrin pointed out, had “been wallowing in American culture for 10 years” (a slight rooted in identity politics if ever there was one).

Such is the context in which Baker’s remains travel to the Panthéon. The African American artists’ pilgrimage to Paris, of which she was the patron saint, is now mostly the stuff of nostalgia (though Ta-Nehisi Coates did camp out there for some time after Between the World and Me came out), captured in walking tours, plaques, and retrospectives. The world moved on. For all its faults, America, with its Black former president, Black current vice president, and sizable Black middle class, is not what it was when Baker crossed the Atlantic, even if in some respects the country appears to be going backward. Today, France’s toxic blend of far-right extremists, secular fundamentalism, and racial denial has left it even further from the nonracial democracy it imagines itself to be.

Yet the competition over which country is least racist no longer holds quite the same appeal. The space that African Americans once occupied here, limited as it was, is no longer available. All that is left is the memory of it. And it is this, along with Josephine Baker, that the French are set to dig up—only to bury again.
Veteran Appeal

Can Brittany Ramos DeBarros, an anti-war ex-Army officer, defeat a centrist Dem and a Trumpian Republican to get to Congress?

BY LIZA FEATHERSTONE
A daunting fact, and a factor in Rose’s defeat, is that the district voted for Donald Trump twice. In 2016 and 2020, Trump beat the Democratic nominee by 10 percentage points. DeBarros and her supporters, however, point to other relevant numbers: Registered Democrats in the district outnumber Republicans by a wide margin. Plus Bernie Sanders performed impressively there in 2016, running a close race against Hillary Clinton. The district also has the highest union density in the city. DeBarros argues that she can turn out voters who wouldn’t get excited about Rose.

Congressional District 11, with its large share of white voters, is an odd district for New York City. Over half of Staten Island residents drive to work, and over half own their own homes. The median income is above the city average. But with many Muslims and Arabs in South Brooklyn, along with Irish, Italians, and Greeks, it’s by no means homogeneous, ethnically, religiously, or politically. About 8,000 Bay Ridge residents speak Arabic at home. In recent years, there has also been more progressive activism, with the emergence of groups like Staten Island Women Who March and Yalla Brooklyn, as well as electoral efforts like the Rev. Khader El-Yateem’s City Council bid in 2017 and the state senate campaign of Ross Barkan (now a Nation contributing writer) the following year.

Equally important, the boundaries of this eclectic district are likely to change. Redistricting is underway—the deadline for the redrawn map is January, in time for the midterms—and with the Democratic supermajority in Albany in charge of the process, it could benefit the Democrats for a change. The new district might include a more progressive chunk of Brooklyn or possibly Lower Manhattan, which could be bad news for Malliotakis, and possibly even for Rose.

Prognosticators are not yet calling the seat for a Democrat. Richard Flanagan, a political scientist at CUNY’s College of Staten Island, told me he expects redistricting to add a few Democrats but not many. Besides, he pointed out, Democrats nationally are expected to struggle in the midterms. He said Malliotakis was the favorite but added a self-deprecating caveat: “I am serving up a big, hot bowl of conventional wisdom that bold challengers...
If we don’t address this empty nationalism, we are never going to get economic and racial justice.

—Brittany Ramos DeBarros

He attended a birthday party at her house in northern Staten Island, where she occasionally do tip into my lap.”

One factor that might tip that bowl over: This month’s elections were bad for normie Democrats. Most prominently, the avowedly centrist Democrat Terry McAuliffe lost the gubernatorial race in Virginia, with many Biden voters flipping Republican. There is so much distress in centrist circles over recent results like these that it’s possible that some conservative Democrats, like Rose, might decide not to run in 2022.

Indeed, DeBarros’s case against Rose is partly a strategic one: He failed to beat the GOP last time, so why leave the fate of the seat in his hands again? When she canvassed for Rose, DeBarros said, voters’ biggest objection was that they didn’t see a difference between Democrats and Republicans. DeBarros and her supporters argue that a real progressive running against a January 6 Trumpist could excite volunteers and grab voters’ attention.

Knocking on doors, you hear that the issues of most concern in the district tend to be education, climate, and the opioid epidemic. The Staten Island side of the district has some of the highest opioid overdose rates in the city. People also worry about the effect of real estate interests on their neighborhoods, particularly on housing affordability. But the race has also drawn interest far beyond South Brooklyn and Staten Island. DeBarros has raised over a quarter-million dollars in small donations, with no corporate PAC money. She’s attracted a range of endorsers: liberal groups like MoveOn, BlueAmerica, and Brand New Congress, celebrities like Gloria Steinem and Mark Ruffalo, and radical left intellectuals like Barbara Smith and Barbara Ransby. If Rose runs, according to Paul Sperling of the Staten Island Progressive Action Network, he faces a formidable competitor in DeBarros. “Brittany is a far better fundraiser than anyone who ran in the 2018 primary,” said Sperling, who ran his own campaign for Congress against Rose that year. “Progressives and many liberals are strongly opposed to Rose’s candidacy. They want someone who will be more honest with voters and more aggressive on left-wing issues.”

As for the general election, less progressive Democrats who want to beat Malliotakis may want to give DeBarros a look too. Faced with a “raging radical” like Malliotakis, Sperling said, “it would take an energetic and inspiring woman like Brittany Ramos DeBarros to win.”

Standing with Younus on the corner of Third Avenue and 84th Street in Bay Ridge, the neighborhood where he grew up and still lives. We could see a shawarma place and Italian, Greek, and Chinese restaurants, and I asked him why he encouraged DeBarros to run for Congress.

“We threw down for Max Rose,” he explained, speaking of the Arab and Muslim communities in the district as well as the progressives. But, he said, they were disappointed when Rose attacked the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement and posed, smiling, for a photo with Trump. “Those were some of the nails in the coffin of his relationship with Arab and Muslim communities.”

Younus also mentioned Rose’s tepid response to police brutality, which was especially glaring given that Eric Garner—a Black man who was killed by police as they attempted to arrest him on suspicion of illegally selling cigarettes in the street—took his last breath in Rose’s district. As 2022 approached, Younus didn’t want progressives to have to unify behind Rose again. At the same time, he said, “Nicole is a problem.”

Younus went looking for a candidate who would support Medicare for All, strong climate action, and other urgent left priorities, someone who could unite the district on both sides of the Verrazzano Bridge. He found DeBarros last November when he attended a birthday party at her house in northern Staten Island, where she lives with her husband. DeBarros said she was able to buy her home because of her veterans’ benefits, but that everyone should enjoy this security. You shouldn’t have to point a gun to have a comfortable home, she told him. Younus was delighted by her political potential: “anti-imperialist, anti-war, nixed, a veteran, and a homeowner!” he recalled, laughing at his own electoral calculations. He tried to talk her into running for Congress on the spot. DeBarros told him she wouldn’t discuss work at a party and asked him to call her on Monday. DeBarros confirmed Younus’s anecdote and rolled her eyes: “Leftists are such nerds.”
positive leadership environment.” Remembering this, she teared up. “The saddest thing is, I think I believed him,” DeBarros said.

It wasn’t these experiences of racism and sexism that turned her against the war, however: “What made me anti-war was seeing how abusive the culture could be, and the way that was turned outward.” That came from her exposure to the perspective of the Afghan people. She was reassigned as a “strategic communications officer,” which meant, she said, “doing propaganda for the Afghan national army.”

To find out what kind of messaging would work, she needed to talk with Afghan people, who she found were terrified of being killed or kidnapped by Americans and their allies. The more she heard their side, the more she questioned the mission. “A military is designed to maximize violence,” she said. “You can’t take an institution that is designed for violence at its DNA and just do some trainings and shift it around and have it be a force that is contributing to healthy, safe, happy communities.”

After her deployment, DeBarros worked for a nonprofit focused on racial and economic justice, but it wasn’t until San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick started taking a knee during the national anthem that she felt she had to speak out as a veteran. “I’m watching the flag and people like me—veterans—being weaponized against this man for taking a stand for the very freedoms that I supposedly was signing up to fight for in the military,” she said, realizing that “if we don’t address this empty nationalism, this plastic patriotism, we are never going to get the economic and racial justice that we say that we want.”

For the first time, she told me, she understood that as a veteran she had special credibility in speaking out against war and injustice. “I jumped with both feet” into the anti-war movement, she continued, becoming active in About Face: Veterans Against the War.

DeBarros also joined the Poor People’s Campaign, and at a rally in Washington, D.C., in June 2018, in front of thousands of people, she gave an impassioned three-minute speech on why she opposed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, connecting that opposition to poverty in the United States: “There can be no true economic, racial, gender liberation without addressing the militarism that is strangling the morality and empathy out of our society,” she told the crowd.

Reflecting on that speech now, DeBarros said, “It was one of those moments in your life where you just know that you’ll never be the same after. It was an almost spiritual moment of truth-telling.”

At this point, DeBarros was still in the Army Reserve. She said her husband would bring home a bottle of wine the night before her monthly drills, and “I would just get wasted.” At the time, she said, she “didn’t have the language” to describe the psychic conflict of being an Army officer while not supporting the wars. She feared the financial consequences of leaving before her contract was up and adding student loan debt to her family’s burdens. It didn’t stop her from posting, though. She tweeted that the United States was bombing seven countries on any given day. She kept doing her job in the Reserve so no one would be able to say she was a bad officer. Not only was she experienced in messaging from her time in strategic communications in Afghanistan, but when she returned, the Army sent her to psy-ops school. Now she was turning her training against the military itself.

Her tweets landed in Army Times, and she learned she was under investigation. As a comms expert, she was thrilled that her message was getting out. She was receiving death threats and facing the prospect of military prison. But she said she remembers it as the time she began to feel of service: “I think in my soul, I felt like it mattered that I did this, because at least a lot of people saw this truth that wouldn’t have seen it otherwise.”

The investigation dragged on. A court-martial, she said, would have forced the Army “to have to explain why me sharing publicly available facts is ‘conduct unbecoming.’” The comms professional in her relished that prospect. “I think they also knew that was what I wanted,” she said with a laugh. Eventually, with her contract nearly over anyway, the Army found a way to allow her to wind down her service.

Vince Emanuele, a Marine who was deployed to Iraq twice and is now an anti-war activist and community organizer in Michigan City, Ind., told me that having “somebody in Congress who has seen what war is like, at a time when we’re still struggling with the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan” is “priceless.” If DeBarros can start “to question fundamentally what the military is doing—that it’s not fighting for our freedom—if she can bring that to the table, to me that would be maybe as big as what AOC and the rest of the Squad have brought.”

In fact, Emanuele added, what DeBarros is doing is long overdue: “One of the fundamental mistakes of the anti-war movement early on was that we did not have an electoral strategy.”

It may be a good time for DeBarros’s anti-war message. I spoke with her again this fall and asked whether the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan had changed how people respond to her. On the campaign trail, she was finding that, despite the media coverage, people were “grateful that we had left” and were curious about how defunding the war machine could help sustain their communities and create “true safety here.”

The Army-trained comms expert is still posting facts on Twitter, this time without the threat of court-martial. On Veterans Day she used the platform to call attention to an awful statistic: On any given night, more than 50,000 veterans are homeless. She also tweeted about PTSD and suicide, adding the hashtag #MoralInjury. DeBarros urged people to join the fight to end unjust violence and ensure that everyone has a home, a job, enough to eat, and “the care they need.”
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A Place of Freedom
Gayl Jones’s Brazilian epic
BY FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN

Upon its publication in 1975, Gayl Jones’s literary debut, *Corregidora*, was met with great acclaim. Jones’s mentor and teacher, the poet Michael Harper, had introduced her work to his friend, the editor and novelist Toni Morrison, who published *Corregidora* and also Jones’s second novel, *Eva’s Man*, the following year. Still in her mid-20s, Jones was immediately heralded for her genius by readers as diverse as James Baldwin and the *New York Times* critic Raymond Sokolov. Part of what drew them was what Sokolov referred to as her “nonchalance” and “ease” of style, which served as her fiction’s “consummate deception.” Writing with a clarity and matter-of-factness that quietly understated her work’s difficulty,
Jones often relayed moments of intense brutality with a kind of quotidian ordinariness.

This was evident in her first novel. Set in Kentucky and narrated by a blues singer named Ursa Corregidora, it was both an intimate history and a family one. Telling the story of several generations of Black women, two of whom—Ursa’s great-grandmother and grandmother—have been raped repeatedly by their master, Old Man Corregidora, the novel also followed Ursa herself, who chooses to devote her life to music, even though she cannot wholly escape her family’s past of sexual violence and trauma.

In the fiction that followed, Jones’s attention to the complicated, sometimes disturbing psyches of her characters intensified. Eva’s Man and White Rat offered stories of psychological complexity, experiences of sexual violence and trauma, and explorations of her female characters’ interiority and agency. In Eva’s Man, for example, the protagonist first poisons and then castrates her lover after feeling trapped in his apartment, while in White Rat we get stories centered on a bevy of unique, if marginalized and often troubled, characters who are presented with unrelenting clarity.

With Jones having published three works of fiction in three swift years, many of her admirers expected a similar creative pace in the 1980s. But while Jones spoke of working on “another novel...Palmares” and released an exquisitely beautiful book-length poem, Song for Anfinho, that was set after the destruction of the community that would be the subject of Palmares, she did not publish any new fiction until the late 1990s. When she did, it was not Palmares but The Healing and Mosquito, the former about a faith healer traveling through small-town America and the latter about a Black woman trucker who transports Mexican immigrants across the Texas border. In many ways, the two novels—full of humor and a sense of optimistic possibility—marked a departure for Jones. But her newfound momentum stopped abruptly after a sensational personal tragedy. A Newsweek profile accompanying the publication of The Healing led a SWAT team to the home she shared with her husband, Bob Higgins. The police had an outstanding warrant for his arrest on a 14-year-old weapons charge. After a standoff, Higgins committed suicide as the agents rushed into his room. Fearing Jones would take her own life, the authorities placed her in a house. It was no surprise she soon disappeared from public life.

Nonetheless, Jones continued to write through her tragedy, working with particular intensity on Palmares. Now published, the book proves to be one of her most ambitious and, at times, extraordinary works of fiction. Corregidora was one of the first examples of what would become a genre of Black fiction dealing with the legacy, consequences, and what Saidiya Hartman calls the “afterlife of slavery,” a new body of literature that depicted the mundane sexual violence and ongoing generational trauma that is the inherited legacy of slavery in the United States and throughout the Americas. The life and afterlife of slavery is also Palmares’s subject, but following so many formidable contributions to this new body of work—including Morrison’s Beloved, Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection and Lose Your Mother, and Marlon James’s The Book of Night Women—Jones was faced with a difficult question: How does someone write in the considerable wake of a literary genre that she helped to create and define? Jones’s answer is a sweeping epic, set in 17th-century Brazil, that focuses as much on the meaning of freedom as it does on the experience of enslavement. In form and in content, Palmares aspires to do what Jones’s early works of fiction did, but much more as well: to develop a narrative form that embodies the complexity, mixtures, contradictions, and possibilities of the Americas with their multiracial population, multilingual heritage, and syncretic religious practices.

The writers whom I would most like to be like are those whose works have a certain kind of reputation, but the person, the writer, is more or less out of it. I would want to maintain some kind of anonymity. I think of J.D. Salinger…. I guess that’s the kind of reputation that I’d like…where you can go on with what you’re doing, but you have a sense that what you do is appreciated…that there is quality to what you’re doing.

Jones was denied this privacy, and the publicity surrounding her writing did far worse. It was no surprise she soon disappeared from public life.

Nonetheless, Jones continued to write through her tragedy, working with particular intensity on Palmares. Now published, the book proves to be one of her most ambitious and, at times, extraordinary works of fiction. Corregidora was one of the first examples of what would become a genre of Black fiction dealing with the legacy, consequences, and what Saidiya Hartman calls the “afterlife of slavery,” a new body of literature that depicted the mundane sexual violence and ongoing generational trauma that is the inherited legacy of slavery in the United States and throughout the Americas. The life and afterlife of slavery is also Palmares’s subject, but following so many formidable contributions to this new body of work—including Morrison’s Beloved, Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection and Lose Your Mother, and Marlon James’s The Book of Night Women—Jones was faced with a difficult question: How does someone write in the considerable wake of a literary genre that she helped to create and define? Jones’s answer is a sweeping epic, set in 17th-century Brazil, that focuses as much on the meaning of freedom as it does on the experience of enslavement. In form and in content, Palmares aspires to do what Jones’s early works of fiction did, but much more as well: to develop a narrative form that embodies the complexity, mixtures, contradictions, and possibilities of the Americas with their multiracial population, multilingual heritage, and syncretic religious practices.

Farah Jasmine Griffin is the author of Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature.
her mother and grandmother. She is precocious and self-aware: “I was seven and I was a slave,” she says emphatically. Having been chosen by a Jesuit priest, Father Tollinare, to receive a formal education, she becomes one of his “experiments” and is taught geography, the Bible, and how to read and write. Almeyda is also educated in matters of the spirit, healing, and history by her grandmother, who is alternately identified as a healer, a madwoman, and a consort of the spirits. If literacy will assist Almeyda’s quest for freedom, knowledge of the spiritual realm will allow her to experience it.

Almeyda first hears of Palmares as a child. A white man and his Black wife visit her master and share tales of the legendary settlement of free Blacks and fugitive slaves. The stories, relayed to her by her mother, spark Almeyda’s interest in the place “where black men and women are free.” When, in adolescence, she is sold to a cassava farmer, her curiosity and longing only increase. Without explanation, a group of “men from the Quilombo” arrive and ask, “Do you wish to come freely with us and be... a free woman?” Her answer is “Yes”—and, just like that, she is taken to her longed-for destination.

Now a beautiful woman, Almeyda is chosen by one of the settlement’s leading figures, Anninho, to be his wife. His selection confers on her the status of free woman, but Almeyda soon learns that in Palmares there are also captives, prisoners, and slaves. Palmares is a free space for some Blacks, but it is also a place of hierarchy and social stratification. Often, we learn, freedom is a process, something to be fought for, something precarious. Palmares is merely a temporary physical space of freedom, a place always embattled, attacked, destroyed, and reconstituted elsewhere. There is always a new Palmares on the horizon.

Eventually, the Palmares that Almeyda settles in is raided and destroyed by the Portuguese. Jones chooses not to portray the destruction of the free African state; instead, for most of the rest of the novel, we follow Almeyda on her journey to find her husband in hopes of helping rebuild the space where Black people are free. Her search for Anninho constitutes this epic’s Odyssey-like quest. Almeyda, often disguised as an old woman, encounters many figures, guides, and teachers along the way who help her shape her conceptions of freedom and discover her own spiritual gifts. Palmares, for Almeyda, is a state of mind, a state of being, even more than a physical location.

The truest freedom offered by Palmares is a spiritual one that transcends time and space.

The truest freedom offered by Palmares is a spiritual one that transcends time and space and challenges linear notions of temporality. Healers, diviners, and prophets exist both inside and outside of time, capable of traveling vast expanses of land and occupying multiple dimensions. The spiritually gifted, including Almeyda, can experience the past, present, and future as parallel contexts. For others, freedom exists in the realm of the imagination—and this is the case for Almeyda as well. Her grandmother tells her, “The imagination is broad. It ranges.” Another character, an aspiring writer, states, “I believe in the force of the imagination.”

Jones, too, clearly believes in the imagination and its force. It takes a few- cund imagination, after all, to give us this sprawling novel, one that describes and contains multiple forms and genres. Chapters are devoted to a maker of dictionaries, a travel notebook left by a European woman, and a fictional narrative written by a mixed-race freeman. All of these are invoked to tell a New World story in a New World language, contained within the broader tale that Almeyda herself tells. In a very early interview with her mentor Michael Harper, Jones said, “I really think of myself as a storyteller.... ‘Storytelling’ is a dynamic word, a process word. ‘Fiction’ sounds static. ‘Storytelling’ for me suggests possibilities, many possibilities.”

Almeyda fulfills this role in the novel. She is, as she explains to a woman she encounters, “an itinerant storyteller.” Later, she crystallizes her wish to be “writing histories of the country...of this place, this Palmares.” But Almeyda confronts a quandary that many novelists also experience: “How can one write such a history and live through it at the same time?” For Jones, and for Almeyda, the answer is found in storytelling itself. By telling a story about the pursuit of freedom, Jones and Almeyda also create a place where Black freedom, if not realized, can at least be imagined, and thus remains a possibility.

Fly, Pelican, Fly

What’s this all about? Let’s do a list. Die is last. Dawn is first. Underneath it all, the sea tries to say the sea is all there really is. Fly, pelican, fly. It’s not enough to love. Not even to die is enough. Shouldn’t we somehow learn to live with what sinks us? Here’s what works in the end: Spain, maybe. Flamenco. Friends at my side. Lorca, still alive.

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IN DECEMBER OF 1944, ON THE PHILIPPINE ISLAND OF Leyte, the soldiers of F Company of the 128th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division, dug in. Stationed just outside the town of Limon, they were attempting to take a strategic ridge overlooking the town. In the face of fierce Japanese resistance, it was all they could do to hold their position. A first lieutenant who was also a Lutheran pastor addressed the company and gave words of encouragement by means of a brief sermon. God guides the US Army’s bullets toward the Japanese, the lieutenant assured his fellow soldiers, while protecting us from theirs.

These words failed to lift the spirits of at least one young soldier in F Company; instead, they infuriated him. Years later, he described this incident as one of the experiences that best explained why he eventually abandoned his faith. Whatever God’s will actually was, he decided, it would have to accord with the most basic ideas of justice that we have—thereby ruling out the lieutenant’s assertion that God had selective concerns for one side in a clearly godless war. What else could the will of an all-just God be? By that same token, what else could justice be? If absolutely nothing else, any true God would have to be fair.

Katrina Forrester’s In the Shadow of Justice provides a detailed account of the intellectual development of this young soldier, John Rawls, who eventually became the celebrated philosopher. The question of fairness would remain with Rawls for the rest of his life. In 1971, his 600-page magnum opus, A Theory of Justice, debuted to critical acclaim and cemented his position as one of the most famous political philosophers in the English-speaking world by insisting that justice was fairness—that the kind of objective standards for human society and individual action capable of replacing God required an ability to view the world from a distance and assess what allocations of duties and wealth were fair. In the book, Rawls argued that “basic liberties” and the equality of citizens were essential to this idea of fairness. Societies could deviate from an equal distribution of benefits and burdens only in cases governed by the “difference principle”—those instances when inequalities were required to make the least advantaged citizens better off. Otherwise, a just society would have to be governed by the fair distribution of responsibility, work, hardship, and the wealth produced by a community—a distribution whose fairness, he insisted, could be determined from behind a “veil of ignorance” that prevented a hypothetical person from knowing exactly where he or she would end up in the social hierarchy.

With its doctrine of fairness, A Theory of Justice transformed political philosophy. The English historian Peter Laslett had described the field as “dead” in 1956; with Rawls’s book that changed almost overnight. Now philosophers were arguing about the nature of Rawlsian principles and their implications—and for that matter were once again interested in matters of political and economic justice. Rawls’s terms became lingua franca: Many considered how his arguments, focused mostly on domestic or national issues of justice, might be applied to questions of international justice as well. Others sought to extend his theory’s set of political principles, while still others probed the limits of Rawls’s epistemology and the narrowness of his focus on individuals. A decade after A Theory of Justice appeared, Forrester notes, 2,512 books and articles had been published engaging with its central claims.

Rawls’s liberal theory of justice as fair-
ness has continued to define the shape and trajectory of political philosophy and liberalism writ large to this day. In this sense, In the Shadow of Justice is aptly named. But as Forrester shows, the limits of Rawls’s theory and the political philosophy that it helped birth remain with us as well. By redirecting us from both history and sociology and premising justice on abstract game theory, Rawls’s book and its liberal vision of justice ended up promoting a political philosophy that was ill-equipped for the era of sustained academic and popular attention to historical injustice.

Rawls was born in 1921 in Baltimore, the second of five sons in an affluent Episcopalian family. He had a privileged and mostly happy childhood; the kinds of calamities and hardships suffered by many during the Depression were sharply attenuated by his family’s wealth and status in the city. After attending private schools, Rawls quickly rose through some of the most prestigious universities in the world: He received his doctorate from Princeton and studied at Oxford, after which he taught at MIT and Harvard.

Yet Forrester reminds us that not everything was as rosy as it might seem on the surface. Two of Rawls’s siblings died in childhood from diseases they had contracted from him; such tragedies likely influenced his later interest in questions of fairness and luck and how both formed the basis of a just political system. His native Baltimore was a deeply segregated city and had cultivated social norms and mores to match. (Rawls later recounted his mother’s fury when she learned that he had struck up a friendship with a Black boy and had even visited his house.) But Rawls knew from an early age that the luck of being born into an affluent white family entirely explained the difference between his opportunities and those of his Black friend. As well, Rawls’s graduate studies at Princeton were interrupted by the trauma and violence of his three years in the infantry in the Pacific theater during World War II, and his experiences with luck during the war likewise shaped his view of justice. At one point, he was passed over for a mission because he had the right blood type to donate to a wounded soldier; the man who went in his place was killed in an ambush. This was only one of the countless examples of bad luck and unfairness found in any war—but in particular in the wars that had become commonplace in the first half of the 20th century. When Rawls returned to Princeton, his wartime trauma and disillusionment led him to abandon his interest in theology and to turn instead to political philosophy in his search for a system that would ground political decision-making in an objective morality rather than in God or fealty to the state.

Rawls’s highly abstract and intricate philosophical system was not a flight from the real world’s effects on him, Forrester argues, but rather a direct response to the harrowing experiences, personal and political, that had shaped much of the first three decades of his life. Rawls was trying to find something to stand in place of the God that had abandoned him and his enemies alike on the battlefield as well as the two siblings who had died when he was growing up—but it also had to be something that did not involve simply trusting in the state. Neither the God he had lost faith in nor the military he had served in could be fair, Rawls contended—but perhaps, if we relied on the kinds of rules that could emerge from rational decision-making processes, society could be.

Forrester’s book next turns to the real-world politics of the 1950s and ’60s, which made Rawls’s pursuit of a tidy, fairness-preserving system of justice so difficult. The postwar years were an era of social upheaval, defined by the struggles against Jim Crow at home and the Vietnam War abroad, and to develop his system in these uncertain years, Rawls began to publish a series of essays reckoning with the times that would eventually become A Theory of Justice.

Rawls advanced his view of justice as fairness in these years, but with certain qualifications. A fair and just society, he argued, would be one with a “basic structure” of democracy: The society’s major institutions would endow everyone with a fundamental set of political liberties and divide the benefits and burdens of social cooperation in a broadly egalitarian way. Social inequalities could be tolerated only if they met two conditions: They needed to be attached to offices open to all under the conditions of fair and equal opportunity, and they needed to work to the greatest benefit of the society’s least advantaged members.

Rawls’s view of justice as fairness would apply in a society free of racial segregation. But since he was convinced that Jim Crow was so clearly unjust, he addressed it only indirectly: The philosophical questions he regarded as worth asking were exclusively “implementation” ones about how to dismantle it. At the same time, for Rawls, the questions concerning Vietnam and the draft in particular were harder to engage. In one sense, being conscripted into the military was a matter of luck, as some young men received draft cards and others did not. But college men, predominantly from privileged class and racial backgrounds, were able to escape military service when other men could not: 2-S deferments exempted some university students from conscription. If distributive justice was at the center of Rawls’s overall theory of justice, then he had to reckon with how the deferments that many of his students received gave them an unfair advantage at the expense of others—and this meant not only pondering his political arguments in the abstract but also in terms of the institution where he actually worked. To remedy this situation, Rawls helped organize Harvard’s faculty to oppose the deferments.

The civil disobedience tactics that various youth movements used to challenge the war posed another problem for Rawls’s theory of justice. His own and his contemporaries’ commitment to liberalism and its attendant values, such as stability and the rule of law, needed to reckon with the fact that civil disobedience was a response to an unjust war that the country’s citizens had every right to protest and oppose. Could breaking the law be justified, Rawls wondered, if the law itself was conceptualized as a fair agreement—the outcome of a process of rational deliberation among the people...
subject to it? How could political philosophers account for the kind of moral exception being claimed by those breaking from this overall “cooperative” scheme to conduct sit-ins or burn their draft cards?

Rawls finally published his answer at the end of the 1960s. Civil disobedience could be justified as an occasional escape hatch, he maintained in a 1969 essay, when the majority overreached and placed too heavy a burden on others. But individual conscience could not reign supreme: Even if would-be protesters had a serious moral objection to some decisions of the majority, this was not enough to justify breaking the law, as it would result in an “unstable” scheme of society. In coming to this view, Rawls made a telling shift from his earlier “fair play” view of social cooperation, in which obligations were voluntarily acquired, to a stronger one that regarded stability as a “natural duty” binding all citizens within a society. Thus, civil disobedience could be tolerated, but only within strict limits. Such protest had to be aimed at changing a society’s laws, and its participants had to accept punishment and arrest without resistance.

Rawls’s evolving views on obligation and civil disobedience, Forrester notes, helped shape A Theory of Justice. In general, Rawls believed that the aim of political philosophy was to find a reliable method built on noncoercive procedures to justify ethical beliefs and judgments—and that included acting according to one’s political duty (such as military service) and also according to one’s moral conscience (such as opposing an unjust war). Rather than try to generate freestanding moral principles to guide human conduct, Rawls argued, or uncover hidden truths that were separate from life as it was actually lived, philosophers needed to study the ethical principles already implicit in people’s intuitions and actions and then develop a system through which these could be judged and assessed.

Mining the nascent field of game theory, Rawls contended that this system could be built on the rational procedures that follow from someone acting in their economic and material interests. To decipher a moral approach to real-world problems required a system that could, in effect, step outside the real world—one that was bound not by history or sociology but by human rationality alone. Rawls described a hypothetical procedure, conducted from behind a “veil of ignorance” about one’s status in society, for deciding on its basic rules. Heads of households, he argued, should be placed in an “original position” that allowed them general facts about psychology and economic life but denied them information about the past history of their society as well as where they would themselves end up in the society they were designing. This disinterested position, Rawls argued, would allow these heads of households to formulate rules that would benefit people in a range of social positions, since they would have no clue which one they might fall into, and these rules would then form the basis for a fair and “well-ordered society.”

Of the many things that Rawls proposed in his 600-page opus, the original position is among the most hotly debated and sharply criticized. It is indeed a move that prominently displays many of the shortcomings of his approach to philosophy. Populating the original position with heads of households involved a seemingly uncritical nod toward patriarchal social relations, and the related organization of family life drew serious and sustained criticism from feminist political philosophers like Susan Muller Okin and Iris Marion Young. Philosophers attentive to race and colonialism, like Charles Mills, likewise criticized the original position’s abstraction from the history of society, which Mills argued would serve to obscure issues like racism and other forms of injustice that a theory of justice ought to respond to directly.

While many of these criticisms have teeth, they also demonstrate the profound success of Rawls’s thought. The Harvard philosopher Tommie Shelby noted as much in his high-profile debate with Mills: While the latter offered strident objections to Rawls’s racial amnesia, he stopped short of providing alternative principles or procedures or suggesting that the liberalism undergirding so much of Rawls’s thought should be fully abandoned. And while Mills would later offer his own principles of “corrective justice,” they were explicitly presented as additions and revisions to Rawls’s set. Whether this effort succeeds or not, it was literally proposed on Rawls’s terms.

If anything, Mills was ahead of many of Rawls’s critics in having a comprehensive and positive position on what constitutes a just society. While there were examples of alternative systems of distributive justice—especially from the so-called communitarians—most of the writing on the subject was dedicated to critiquing Rawls’s system and offering suggestions on what to avoid when theorizing on such questions in the future, whether the objection was to the patterns of abstraction (heads of households instead of past injustice), or to abstracting too much or too freely (e.g., criticisms of “ideal theory” and of systematic moral philosophy), or even to the purported objectivity or universality undergirding the abstractions in the first place. But proffered alternatives to the Rawlsian approach were few and far between, and their authors often found it difficult to match the scale and systematic nature of A Theory of Justice, tending instead to offer ad hoc, incomplete, and overly specific moral systems instead of all-encompassing ones.

Forrester tracks in exacting detail the responses that Rawls’s elaborate system of thought prompted. But if there’s a criticism to be made about her book, it is that this meticulous tracking of key figures and concepts risks overwhelming readers with unnecessary detail. At times, Forrester seems to take the challenges posed by the historical moment more seriously than the subjects of her investigations did. As a result, the abundance of detail about how Rawls and his contemporaries did change their political commitments in response to their times can risk obscuring the fact that they mostly did not. Indeed, they were often selective about which of the many philosophical questions posed by their tumultuous times they deigned to answer, and it is this selective conscience that is the most assailable aspect of Rawls’s legacy. He may have been speaking on laudable principle when he insisted that Jim Crow was obviously unjust, but in the same breath he also excluded it from philosophical discussion.

Rawls’s leadership in the faculty opposition to 2-S deferments marked another principled stand against the consequences
disproportionately suffered by others because of race, class, or perceived mental ability. But even here, selective conscience ruled the day. The decades of the Cold War were punctuated by intense levels of violence. The Vietnam War killed 2 million Vietnamese civilians, injured over 5 million more, and displaced some 11 million people. This violence included known massacres like the infamous My Lai incident and untold numbers of unknown ones; as recently as 2001, the results of internal war-crimes investigations lay rotting and forgotten in a nondescript case of records in the National Archives. And yet the body count for this war piled up largely outside the United States—and thus mostly outside the sphere of “domestic justice” that Rawls was willing to consider at the time. The barbarity and injustice of the war itself went neglected in his discussions of military conscription and its opponents.

So too did the violent footprint of the American empire as a whole. Vietnam, after all, was but one theater in a hot war waged by the United States and its allies for control of the global economic and political system. In Indonesia, for instance, nearly 1 million civilians were murdered by a US-backed anti-communist dictatorship. Indonesia was simply one of 22 third world countries in which the United States facilitated mass murder between the end of World War II and the 1990s—at which point, Forrester observes, international politics finally attracted Rawls's consideration. Throughout the period of the Vietnam War, liberation movements confronted US-supported apartheid regimes in wars of national liberation: in Mozambique, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and South Africa. What differentiated Vietnam from these struggles? I can hazard a guess: their lack of major deployments of US troops, and thus a link for a domestically focused philosopher like Rawls to consider.

To his credit, Rawls was a vocal and public opponent of the Vietnam War from the beginning. But amid all the global carnage, it was the draft deferments that he chose to organize against. The primacy of domestic justice and the “natural duty” of social stability directed his political action toward fighting the unjust distribution of draft cards in the United States rather than the unjust distribution of napalm and Agent Orange in Southeast Asia. One would be on principled grounds to insist, contra Rawls’s own theory and pattern of political action, that addressing the latter injustice ought to have far outweighed addressing the former. Such an approach might acknowledge—as a younger and perhaps wiser Rawls had clearly been willing to do—that neither God nor justice should care whether you were American or Vietnamese.

Rawls developed a two-tiered approach that kept domestic and international politics separate.

Through it all, the Cold War stamped the “domestic” politics of these new nations and the old ones alike with the indelible mark of geopolitical maneuvering. Rawls’s theory gave so much primacy to domestic justice that Forrester describes him as having set aside the “international realm” altogether until the 1990s.

Despite Rawls’s relative inattention to supposedly secondary global matters, prominent philosophers in the 1970s began to bring his insights to bear on the international realm. The fit was odd and unwieldy: Rawls’s theory makes the basic structure the target of domestic justice, which he takes to be the institutions that primarily distribute the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.

Under the highly theoretical conditions of A Theory of Justice (including a society that is “closed” to external intervention), the basic structure can reasonably be assumed to refer to a given country. But in the context of an international system, the central Rawlsian assumption of a closed society does not apply. The United Nations debated a New International Economic Order—one predicated on economic sovereignty for every country—under pressure from many of its new member-states. The most dynamic political movements of the time were attempting to literally remake the world, and Rawls and his colleagues were content merely to add the occasional epicycle to their existing theories of ideally just practice.

None of this is to say that they were politically unserious or responding cynically to the events of their day. In Rawls’s case especially, the point is exactly the opposite: At the end of the day, he was genuinely committed to the project of liberal philosophy as he understood it. As such, he was also committed to the fundamental intellectual tenets that sustained it: trust in liberal political principles and in the basic common-sense arguments of the state system that had spread them (even though he was less interested in the historical particulars of how that spreading was done).

As a serious and committed liberal, Rawls did not position his theory as a response to the many radical tendencies of his day, because he was convinced that his position, like liberalism itself, already represented an adequate response. These challenges were, in the main, the same radical challenges that liberalism has faced since its inception. That inception did not take place in a hypothetical “state of nature” but rather in a real era of slave states and imperial conquest on a planetary scale, and it was these forces that spread its putatively universalist tenets around the world as it developed ever more incisive criticisms of injustice and inequality. That liberal vision had long been wedded to theories of property and popular sovereignty formed in response far more to imagined histories of political and economic inheritance than to the actual history that explained the distributions of income, rights, and privileges that liberalism and liberals promised to equitably manage. By every indication, Rawls really meant what he said about equality, fairness, and justice in his personal and intellectual life, though he came to a partial and selective understanding of what those things required of him and the structures around him.

Of course, things could be worse. Many of liberalism’s cousins to its political right could not manage to sustain even a pretense of interest in equality and justice for all. Perhaps this lack of even a pretense is what irked the young Rawls as he listened to that first lieutenant insist that God was on their side—and their side alone—in their deadly struggle with the Japanese. What’s so godly, after all, about a selective conscience?
**Pain Machine**

*Why our health care system is broken*

BY RYAN COOPER

The American health care system is a notorious disaster. On the one hand, even “good” private employer-based insurance is often a nightmare to actually use, while tens of millions of people have much worse coverage or none at all. At the same time, our system is also incredibly expensive—eating up 17 percent of the US gross domestic product, or nearly twice what peer rich nations spend on average.

Our Rube Goldberg mishmash of public and private programs is simultaneously miserly when it comes to people getting the care they need and a colossal pain in the neck to use, and somehow it still costs an arm and a leg. If we count insurance premiums as taxes—which makes sense, since they are basically mandatory—American workers are the second most highly taxed among all rich nations (behind only the Netherlands). Just our existing tax revenues would be more than enough to fund a universal Medicare-style system as it exists in similar countries. If we could somehow transplant Canada’s system into the United States, taxes would actually go down.

Why are we stuck with this expensive, broken system? One good answer can be found in *Ten Year War: Obamacare and the Unfinished Crusade for Universal Coverage*, an excellent new book by veteran health care reporter Jonathan Cohn about the political history of health care reform in this country. Cohn shows how repeated failures by both Democrats and Republicans to get a decent policy through our rickety 18th-century constitutional structure led to the strategy that produced Obamacare, formally known as the Affordable Care Act—a policy that improved our system in many ways but also entrenched some of its worst elements. For advocates of universal health care of any political stripe, Cohn’s book is essential reading.

The story starts in the early 20th century, when medicine was being rapidly revolutionized to provide treatments that actually worked (as opposed to quackery like bloodletting) and a number of countries were setting up national health care systems. Mutual aid societies proliferated in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including for the purpose of providing health insurance, but their scope and resources were necessarily limited. In the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt considered creating a universal national health insurance system as part of the New Deal, but he eventually decided against it for fear that it would “jeopardize Social Security or other proposals,” Cohn writes. Harry Truman promoted legislation for such a system in 1945, but opposition from the American Medical Association, the insurance lobby, and Southern segregationists, who worried it would mean integrated hospitals, blocked it. Even in the best of times, it was very difficult to get anything through the House and Senate and signed by the president, let alone sweeping reforms.

Lyndon Johnson took those failures into account when his administration was working up Medicare and Medicaid, which apply to the elderly and the poor, respectively. Johnson was an unparalleled master of legislative procedure and had enormous Democratic majorities in 1965, but he still aimed his Great Society programs at only those groups—two increasingly difficult-to-insure populations—and did not attempt a more robust and expansive health care policy. By 1970, Medicare and Medicaid covered 21 million and 14 million Americans, respectively, who were previously uninsured, but the programs also provided some handy benefits.
to medical providers and insurance companies by allowing doctors to make money treating old people and by allowing private insurers to focus on the more profitable employer-based market.

Health care remained off the table for the rest of the Johnson administration; in fact, only with a Republican in office did it return to the political front burner. In 1974, Richard Nixon got behind a quite ambitious reform effort, but it stalled out when Democrats and the unions thought they could get something better with a Democrat in the White House after Watergate. They were sorely mistaken—Jimmy Carter would prove to be the most conservative Democratic presidential nominee since John W. Davis in 1924, and one reason Ted Kennedy ran against him in the Democratic primary in 1980 was Carter’s refusal to support an ambitious national plan.

Health care remained a dead issue in both parties until 1993, when Bill Clinton tried once again, but this time with a more conservative plan, one that represented the newly enshrined neoliberal consensus that private markets should be the cornerstone of a universal healthcare program. It too died, for a number of reasons, including a dishonest propaganda campaign against it and quarrels with members of Congress—especially Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then chair of the Senate Finance Committee, who allowed Republicans to filibuster the bill and who personally detested the Clintons, in part because they would not cut welfare benefits for poor mothers before attempting health care reform.

The Ten Year War offers a concise history of these five efforts to provide health care to some or all of the American people, but its main focus, as its title and subtitle suggest, is the political negotiations around the passage of Obamacare in 2009-10 and the ensuing conservative attempts to destroy the program. When it comes to Obamacare, Cohn details how congressional Democrats designed their effort around the lessons they had learned from all the previous failures and partial successes. Private insurance would be left mostly untouched, so vested medical interests would not do to Obama what they had done to Truman. Congress would take the lead rather than the president imposing his own plan, to avoid the backlash seen in the Clinton years. The design for Obamacare was not Democratic in origin; in fact, it was based on a plan that Mitt Romney implemented as the Republican governor of Massachusetts, which was centered around protecting private insurance and market competition while also insuring those who had fallen through the cracks. As Cohn notes, the Obama administration picked this Republican model partly because it hoped to coax some support from the GOP, which both Obama and anxious Democratic moderates badly wanted as cover. Republican votes were also desired because Senate Democrats were unwilling to kill the filibuster, meaning they would need 60 votes for Obamacare to pass. Moderate Democratic Senator Max Baucus of Montana, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, started the outreach to Republicans by bringing his old friend Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa into the design process.

Despite all the careful planning, the political strategy almost didn’t work. All of the efforts by Democrats to get Republicans on board by cadging from Romney and doing whatever they could to appease Grassley achieved nothing. On the contrary, the GOP screamed that the plan was rank socialism, and after months of stringing Baucus along, Grassley (under heavy pressure from fanatics in the Republican base) openly opposed the bill and even repeated the smear that it would lead to the creation of “death panels,” implying that under Obamacare, health care bureaucrats could decide to euthanize Grandma. To make matters worse, when Ted Kennedy died in August 2009, the special election to fill his seat was whipped by the Democratic candidate, Martha Coakley, thereby erasing the 60-vote Senate majority that Democrats had had for a few months. White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, with his typical brand of cringe-making timidity masquerading as foul-mouthed bluster, kept shouting that the Democrats should just give up.

To Obama’s credit, he didn’t. With Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate majority leader Harry Reid, he helped rally the party to get the Affordable Care Act through. They abandoned any attempt at bipartisanship and passed a plan using the budget reconciliation process in the Senate, which allowed them to bypass the filibuster. The House then passed the Senate plan, even though it was markedly worse than the House’s own version—especially given that it lacked a public insurance option—and Obama signed it into law on March 23, 2010. “Looking back, it’s remarkable they passed anything at all,” Cohn writes.

Cohn is refreshingly open about his biases. He is unabashedly in favor of universal health care and is also firmly in the camp that believes Obamacare was a solid improvement over the status quo. Yet he is also clear-eyed about the policy’s substantial shortcomings. At bottom, it was a moderate, half-hearted reform—and unlike Romney’s plan in Massachusetts, it was passed without bipartisan buy-in, and so hastily that many large problems were overlooked. “The Affordable Care Act, like the Clinton plan before it, was an attempt to achieve the liberal end of universal coverage through a more conservative scheme that relied heavily on competition among private insurers. But the intellectual foundation for that calculation seems increasingly shaky,” Cohn writes.

The rollout of the Obamacare exchanges was delayed for years simply to game the 10-year budget window and make the policy seem less expensive than it really was. The opening of Healthcare.gov proved to be a humiliating tech disaster, and even when the website was working, the exchanges quickly developed a deserved reputation for narrow coverage networks, high deductibles, and—for people outside the quite small subsidy zone—very high premiums. That was particularly painful for those who made just over 400 percent of the poverty line (about $51,000 for an individual), where the subsidies suddenly vanished, and especially for those just short of Medicare eligibility.

A 60-year-old man who accidentally fell off that subsidy cliff, for
instance, would see his monthly premiums for a silver plan jump from $417 to $870. The expansion of Medicaid under the act was comparatively successful, with far more enrollees than anticipated. But even that improvement was dented when the policy framework single-payer or something else: “The health care system is still so broken that the policy framework is a policy that was even more generous would be that much more untouchable. Biden and congressional Democrats did follow something like this suggested strategy in the passage of the pandemic rescue package. The $1.9 trillion bill contains a sweeping overhaul of Obamacare that is almost as ambitious as the original policy. The subsidy cliff was eliminated (though only temporarily, at least for the present), and for the first time the exchange premiums should be affordable to everyone, costing no more than 8.5 percent of a person’s income. The government will also cover the entire cost of COBRA coverage (again temporarily), so people who lose their jobs can stay on their current private plans for free. And all this was passed on a party-line vote, again through reconciliation, with much smaller majorities than the party enjoyed in 2010. Burned by Grassley’s duplicity, the Democrats barely bothered to even pretend they cared about trying to get Republican votes and just rammed it through. Unfortunately, most of those choices are still designed to prop up the broken private system. The COBRA expansion in particular is staggeringly wasteful—$35 billion to cover perhaps 2 million people, which is about three times as costly as putting the same number of people on Medicaid. So far, Biden’s campaign promise to put a public option on the exchanges is nowhere to be seen. Throwing trainloads of money at the extant hideous semi-private health care mess might, someday, get almost everyone in the United States technically insured. But the coverage will probably not be very good, and it will not stop the cost bloat that is devouring the American economy from the inside. If we want true universal health care, where anyone who is sick can go to the doctor without the terror of being slammed with an unpayable bill, and we want the price of that care not to eat up nearly a fifth of the economy, a lot of powerful corporate interests are going to have to take a major hit. Time is short: Democrats may not keep their current razor-thin congressional majorities for long, so it’s up to them to take the initiative—and for the rest of us to keep up the pressure.

The shortcomings of Obamacare did end up teaching some valuable lessons.

he shortcomings of Obamacare, however, also taught some valuable lessons. The only realistic way forward I see is ripping off the political band-aid—rather than standing on their hands and trying to please everyone at once, the Democrats ought to pass a very aggressive policy that ignores vested interests but provides a really good benefit that voters will appreciate. As Cohn observes, the American health care system is still so broken that there is basically no other choice, whether the policy framework is single-payer or something else: “The reality is that any system that covers everybody with low out-of-pocket costs and some kind of government control over spending is going to look a lot more like Medicare for All than what the U.S. has now.”

Conversely, even a heavily compromised policy like Obamacare has proved to be quite popular with voters. In the House of Representatives, Republicans passed dozens of bills repealing the law after they took control of that chamber in 2011. But as Cohn points out, when Trump took office six years later with the GOP in control of both the House and the Senate, their attempt to finish the job failed, thanks to the defection of three Republican senators—no doubt largely because the repeal bill was hideously unpopular, with its favorability polling about 25 points underwater. The GOP never even attempted to touch Medicare; surely

never produce genuine universal health care at a reasonable cost. On the merits, it is just not very good policy, and on the politics, buying off all interested parties created a policy that was so complicated and penny-pinching that the party had taught itself to fear over the preceding decades, and they ended up losing anyway—on net, passing the law probably worsened the 2010 midterms defeat the Democrats’ strategy was designed to avoid.

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Desert Planet

Denis Villeneuve’s Dune

BY ERIN SCHWARTZ

Dune, Denis Villeneuve’s adaptation of the science fiction novel by Frank Herbert, begins with an ambush. Armed figures patrol a desert devoid of human life, guarding machines that mine swirls of sand for a rare and mysterious commodity called “spice.” Then attackers emerge from the sand beneath their feet, and the desert erupts in gunfire and explosions. The ambush is part of a campaign that is not successful; in voiceover, an enigmatic character named Chani (played by the actor Zendaya) reveals that “our warriors couldn’t free [the planet] from the Harkonnens,” the occupying force responsible for the mining operation. But the scene establishes a motif that recurs throughout the film: a landscape that appears static and unchangeable shifts under one’s feet.

Dune is, by almost any set of criteria, a difficult novel to adapt into film. (Alejandro Jodorowsky’s failed attempt and David Lynch’s campy and largely unsuccessful 1984 adaptation provide evidence of the pitfalls.) The story takes place within looming spaceships and across ecologically distinct planets, including its main setting, the desert world of Arrakis, which is inhabited by enormous sandworms that regularly gobble up mining rigs and aircraft. (These worms produce the spice—a cross between a fossil fuel and a powerful hallucinogen—needed for everything from space travel to religious rituals.) Given the importance of alien fauna and futuristic technology to the story, it’s hard to avoid the slapstick of failed special effects—for example, in a climactic scene in Lynch’s adaptation, you can see bits of green screen floating in Kyle MacLachlan’s hair as he attempts to ride a sandworm.

Many of the book’s defining moments take place within its characters’ minds, in their apprehension of subtext, strategizing, or moments of enlightenment—another difficult hurdle for film. In Dune’s first section, members of the Atreides family engage in political machinations to avoid the downfall of their house after they are put in charge of Arrakis, and in its second, Paul Atreides (played by MacLachlan in Lynch’s version, and by Timothée Chalamet in Villeneuve’s) joins Chani’s society, the Fremen, and contends with his growing powers of prescience and his prophesied role as humanity’s savior. As the latest adaptation of a sprawling science fiction classic written in the 1960s, Villeneuve’s film meets a long-standing fan base primed to dissect any errors, and the context for its central themes—particularly religious war and totalitarianism—has changed significantly since it was first published.

Villeneuve handles these challenges well: His film, which tackles the novel’s first half, is comprehensible while retaining its alien quality, its dense, esoteric world depicted in a level of detail that feels compelling without being opaque (or, as in Lynch’s adaptation, cheesy and over-the-top). The narrative has been adjusted to place it closer to contemporary postcolonial theory (“They ravage our lands in front of our eyes…. Why did the emperor choose this path? And who will our next oppressors be?” Chani asks in the film’s opening scene), clarifying its political allegiances. The film’s greatest success is its understanding of scale: clusters of humans in vast landscapes of their own making, isolated from the past and future. These landscapes, and the structures humans build on top of them, appear stable and
the appeal of science fiction comes from extrapolating the future of intelligent life from existing patterns in society. These stories can feel as endlessly fascinating as staring into a fun house mirror, marveling at how your face appears reflected across an unfamiliar topography. Where would I fit in if Earth became sentient and rejected humans? What would I do if an alien planet made the dead come back to life? But this need to extrapolate is also science fiction’s limitation. Many of the human patterns available to authors as the foundations of their worlds are arbitrary—the product of historical contingency, material fact, or luck—or the manifestations of power misunderstood as axioms, especially where they involve race and gender. “Science fiction, more than any other genre, deals with change—change in science and technology, and social change,” Octavia Butler wrote in her 1980 essay “The Lost Races of Science Fiction.” “But science fiction itself changes slowly, often under protest.” The challenge of science fiction is in finding a premise expansive enough to avoid reproducing those errors.

Herbert’s Dune draws on a wide range of references—the idea for the novel began as a magazine article about Oregon’s sand dunes; Herbert also read sociology, poetry, Marxism, the history of 19th-century wars in the Caucasus—and both the novel and film are studded with bits of culture from recent human history, familiar things sealed against the passage of time: bagpipes playing at a military ceremony, bullfighting, the name Duncan Idaho (Paul’s combat trainer, played by Jason Momoa), snippets of Christian verse, religious habits that echo those of medieval nuns worn by a mystical order called the Bene Gesserit. In one scene, Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), the powerful companion of Duke Leto Atreides (Oscar Isaac), wears an updated version of chopines, the 16th-century platform shoe that holds associations with nobles and courtésans. These details make the world of Dune feel more convincingly real: 20,000 years into the future, not everything has been replaced, and random artifacts of Earth’s history remain.

Beyond those details, the axiom at the center of the story is relatively simple in its pessimism. People will do incredible things and commit incredible acts of destruction for a charismatic leader; such leaders will use their followers to consolidate power. The political system of Dune, an exponentially more technologically advanced society than our own, is space feudalism built on extractive colonialism. Assassination attempts are common, oppression is an acceptable tool, and dinners matter a great deal. The film ends with Paul pursuing a path that will not fundamentally alter the system that destroyed his family, that instead will merely give him a better place in its hierarchy, while visions of a bloody religious war to be waged in his name loom in the future. (Vilneuve’s adaptation leaves this conflict for a sequel, which will be released in 2023.)

Still, the story takes place at a moment when its motivating axiom and the structures that reinforce it begin to lose their soundness. In an early scene, an elder of the Bene Gesserit, having put Paul through a potentially fatal test to see if he might be the messianic figure the order has worked to produce, rebukes Jessica for her concern about her son’s fate: “Our plans are measured in centuries,” she says, a scale that makes the life of any person other than the predestined leader insignificant. But the film soon contradicts this longer view: Once Paul and Jessica flee and join the Fremen in the desert, every unit of time matters, and no life is insignificant, even after death—bodies are recovered to preserve the water they retain, essential for survival on the desert planet. Fate is not abstract but an immediate existential problem—a familiar shift in perspective for those living in a time of historic floods, storms, droughts, and fires. This aspect of Dune reminds me of a line from an essay by Garry Wills on a new translation of the Bible, in which he argues that from the rushed, “traffic-jam” prose of the Gospels, one can glean how “every aspect of the New Testament should be read in light of [the] ‘good news’ that the world will shortly be wiped out.” Paul’s arrival on Arrakis bears the same apocalyptic assurance for the Fremen.

Perhaps this is what makes Dune still feel relevant: It offers a view from inside a planetwide cataclysm, when tenets that seemed unshakable fall, and their alternatives—some terrible, some utopian—become newly tangible. “When you have lived with prophecy for so long, the moment of revelation is a shock,” one character tells Jessica. Paul’s arrival signals to Dr. Liet Kynes (Sharon Duncan-Brewster), a state official who secretly occupies an influential position in Fremen society, that her dreams of terraforming the desert planet might become reality: “Arrakis could have been a paradise…but then the spice was discovered. And suddenly no one wanted the desert to go away,” she tells Paul and Jessica. Under the current imperial government, the undertaking was considered too costly and endangered a lucrative market; with the disruption the Atreides bring, altering the planet’s climate becomes conceivable.

For all its futuristic technology and sandworms, Dune is deeply humanistic, which does not mean it necessarily celebrates humanity, but rather in the sense that Greek tragedies of hubris and self-annihilation are humanistic. Its contribution to the sci-fi canon is the idea that the new order that replaces the old is never purely liberatory; it cannot be indifferent to its revolutionaries’ self-interest. The ideals that orient change are human inventions and always, on some level, are made in the image of their creators. Jessica describes the messianic figure her order seeks as one transcending biological limitations, possessing “a mind powerful enough to bridge space and time, past and future. Who can help us into a better future.” Villeneuve’s Dune shows its protagonist before he assumes that power, and it maintains a sense of ambivalence, an outlook that asks how the future a revolution produces will be better than what came before.
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