Sex, Death, and Empire
The Roots of Violence Against Asian Women
PANTHEA LEE

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Cover illustration: Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya

The face of protest: A member of the Pataxo tribe at the Terra Livre Indigenous Camp in Brasília, Brazil, on April 7.
Russia's decision to wage a war in Ukraine, and to continue that war even after the International Court of Justice in The Hague has ordered a halt, is manifestly illegal. Under international law, Russia's invasion has no justification: It is not self-defense, has not been authorized by the UN Security Council, and serves no humanitarian purpose. Quite the opposite. It is a war that gives rise to individual criminal responsibility for those who are prosecuting it: Vladimir Putin, his inner circle, the financiers, and all others who have contributed materially to the direction taken.

This crime entered the lexicon of international law at the Nuremberg trials, introduced by a Soviet jurist, Aron Trainin, who described “crimes against peace.” The Nuremberg judges called it “the universal crime,” from which all others flowed. Today it is called the crime of aggression. It can be prosecuted under the national law of many countries, including Russia and Ukraine. It cannot, however, currently be addressed by the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose jurisdiction in relation to Ukraine covers only war crimes (the manner in which the war is conducted, including the targeting of civilians); crimes against humanity (the systematic destruction of civilians); and genocide (the intentional destruction of groups). No other international tribunal has the power to investigate the crime of aggression in Ukraine.

This is why a month ago I proposed that this serious gap be filled. After all, the crime of aggression is the only one that can target with certainty those who are most responsible for the horrors being heaped on millions of human beings. Perhaps it can be proved that Putin and those in his inner circle are personally responsible for the war crimes and crimes against humanity that appear to have been committed in Bucha, Mariupol, and across Ukraine, which are being investigated by national prosecutors and the ICC prosecutor. But it is far from certain that the evidence will lead all the way to the top. There is a real possibility that, some years down the line, the ICC will find itself prosecuting individuals alleged to have done terrible things, but not those individuals who have done the most terrible things.

On April 5, President Volodymyr Zelensky called for the creation of a special international criminal tribunal, to which should be delegated powers under the laws of Ukraine to investigate those who have waged this terrible war. The call is supported by dozens of former prime ministers and presidents, and a petition sponsored by the nonprofit organization Avaaz has attracted nearly 2 million supporters. Several European governments are now considering how such a tribunal could be created. The idea offers hope and solidarity to Ukraine and its people, a boost to morale. It would further delegitimize Putin. It might create an incentive for some within his circle to peel off, as some senior Nazis did in the spring of 1945. It would also offer leverage in future negotiations. It would signal that values and principles matter, that impunity at the top is not an option.

The Biden administration is hesitant to unleash a process that could actually ensnare Putin and his team—not because of any legal or operational concerns, or as a matter of principle, but because, like Britain and France, it worries about the precedent. Russia today, perhaps the US tomorrow. Similar concerns have long kept the US from joining the ICC—and that was before the shadow of Iraq, also an illegal war, lingered over such questions.

The international rule of law is a fragile creature. Those who have a semidetached relationship to it, including the United States, are perhaps not best placed to invoke it for the crimes of others. Yet the law has a force and authority distinct from economic, military, or other instruments of power. Our failure to address this crime of aggression, especially when perpetrated on so horrific a scale, lets Putin off the hook and undermines the very idea of accountability. The crime of aggression gave rise to all the other crimes that have followed. Those at the top of the chain of command must be pursued.

Philippe Sands, QC, is the author of East West Street, which traces the origin of the concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity to the Ukrainian city of Lviv.
Amazon Win?
The historic victory in Staten Island was the easy part.

The Amazon Labor Union will go down in history for its vote to unionize Amazon’s JFK8 warehouse on April 1.

But now the real fight begins. Under byzantine US labor law, winning the union election is only step one. At present, the ALU is not even legally certified by the National Labor Relations Board. Without a legally certified union, the employer does not have to commence negotiations. On April 8, Amazon filed objections. This is the standard union buster’s playbook: to delay and outlast the workers, to prevent certification and the ability to get to contract negotiations.

To see how an employer uses the objection process to destroy the hopes and dreams of workers, consider Smithfield Foods in North Carolina. Beginning in 1992, the company waged a stalling strategy that played out for 16 years, until the workers finally won certification in 2008. Amazon will also likely delay getting to negotiations by appealing every ruling within the NLRB process. With an underfunded agency, that could take years. At Smithfield, once these internal appeals were exhausted—meaning that the NLRB found in favor of the workers at every level—the company moved from the NLRB’s internal judicial process to the courts. Given the Supreme Court’s anti-worker bias, you can bet Amazon is counting on this strategy.

In the objections it filed with the NLRB, Amazon requested additional time to gather evidence—remarkable for a business that surveils its workers more than Orwell could ever have imagined. Amazon alleges what employers always allege: that the union intimidated workers to vote yes. Given the massive fearmongering campaign that Amazon has conducted inside JFK8, those claims are a joke. But there’s nothing funny about the salvo Jeff Bezos has launched.

Even so, the ALU can still win on this battlefield. Better organized than many older unions, it understands that the workers on the inside need to be the focus of its efforts.

First, the ALU must consolidate and build on the power it has amassed. This starts with it going all out to win a second election, at LDJ5, a nearby Amazon sorting facility. The vote to unionize LDJ5 begins on April 25 and lasts for four days. If the ALU wins a second time—and with Amazon bosses now increasing their intimidation there, there’s no guarantee of victory—it will gain additional leverage to get to a contract fight. After that second election is in the rearview, the focus shifts to how to force Amazon to the negotiations table.

If the workers can build to a supermajority strike by walking off the job, there is no Prime Delivery. There is no delivery, period.

If Amazon workers can build to a supermajority strike by walking off the job, there is no Prime Delivery. There is no delivery, period.

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Regulate Platforms

Elon Musk may not be sitting on Twitter’s board, but he remains its largest shareholder—and that’s bad news.

Elon Musk, the billionaire Tesla CEO notorious for posting asinine tweets to his 80 million-plus Twitter followers, has purchased himself a position of power within the platform itself by becoming the company’s largest shareholder.

For a few tumultuous days, it seemed he’d also become a vocal board member, promising to help implement “significant improvements.” That decision was reversed, but even without an explicit advisory role, Musk can still exert his agenda by shaping the discourse around Twitter’s future. As if to underscore this point, Twitter’s chief executive, Parag Agrawal, made clear following Musk’s sudden reversal that “We have and will always value input from our shareholders whether they are on our Board or not. Elon is our biggest shareholder and we will remain open to his input.”

It’s difficult to predict what influence Musk could wield with his “input,” especially since he’s now no longer prevented from purchasing more than 14.9 percent of Twitter’s stock and could increase his holdings, even to the point of owning a controlling stake in the company. And at the very least, he will likely continue to use Twitter to attack his enemies and broadcast his views about the company.

Indeed, Musk’s tweets contain troubling clues about his hopes for Twitter. Beyond advocating for creating an edit button on individual posts and other, more eccentric proposals, Musk has implied that Twitter should amend or abandon its content moderation policies and follow his preferred version of free speech, which should give us pause.

While Musk has described himself as a “free speech absolutist,” it’s clear that this commitment doesn’t apply to those in his employ. Under Musk’s rule, Tesla has worked to stifle dissent, including trying to silence a Black employee for coming forward with allegations of racial discrimination and firing a female engineer after she detailed a culture of “pervasive harassment” at the company. It appears that Musk’s allegiance to free speech applies only to powerful people like himself, while those working under him are forced to settle for quiet obedience.

Regardless of Musk’s dubious principles, any move to relax content moderation standards warrants legitimate concern. For example, changing the policies by which Twitter restricts or suspends accounts that cause social harm could yield more harassment, hate speech, incitement to violence, and dangerous misinformation about voting and vaccines. Twitter’s uneven adherence to its own rules has been rightly criticized, but having no rules would be a troll’s paradise—a Hobbesian hellscape of all against all, with the most vulnerable having the most to lose.

Meanwhile, the policy changes that some anticipated would result from Musk’s appointment elicited gleeful triumphalism within the conservative media sphere, especially regarding the prospects of reinstating Donald Trump’s Twitter account. Representative Lauren Boebert tweeted, “Now that @ElonMusk is Twitter’s largest shareholder, it’s time to lift the political censorship. Oh… and BRING BACK TRUMP!”

Despite such alarming scenarios, too much focus on Musk’s antics misses the bigger picture: Core communications systems like Twitter shouldn’t be left to the whims of billionaires and profit-driven monopolies in the first place. Until we radically democratize such platforms and treat them as the essential public infrastructures they are—shared resources that shouldn’t be governed by market forces alone—Musk, Trump, or some other petulant billionaire can come along and make them their playthings.

What would such radically democratized platforms look like? Ideas for structural reform are flourishing, though you wouldn’t know it from the narrowed parameters of mainstream policy debates. Some analysts and activists have argued for transitioning the platforms into public utilities, or devolving their ownership and control to tech workers and users as cooperatives, or breaking up platform monopolies into smaller firms. Others have suggested creating an entire public stack in which each layer of our digital media—from the platforms to the pipes that carry the Internet into your home—is democratized.

Many variations of these proposals exist, but the key point here is to broaden our conversations about how platforms should be designed, financed, and governed. Given Twitter’s outsized role in political discourse, more public scrutiny of its governance is necessary.

And more radical reforms should be on the table. For too many liberals and conservatives alike, the horizons of our imagination about what’s politically possible are dictated by market imperatives. But if we allow the marketplace of ideas to be conflated with the capitalist market, wealthy white men like Musk will continue to have much louder voices—amplified by their tens of millions of Twitter followers, their obscene wealth, and their unquestioned fealty to market libertarianism.

Another social media is possible, but we must fight to make it so. Just as, according to the bumper sticker adage, “every billionaire is a policy failure,” so is every unregulated platform monopoly. We must reframe policy debates and radically democratize our media infrastructures to prevent their capture by billionaires. Otherwise we’re reduced to hurling angry tweets at run-amok oligarchs.

Victor Pickard is a professor of media policy and political economy at the Annenberg School for Communication.
Objection!
Elie Mystal

Getting Away With It

There is ample evidence that Donald Trump has committed numerous crimes, yet somehow he remains a free man.

The evidence that Donald Trump committed crimes is all around us. We have evidence that the Trump Organization manipulated financial disclosures to inflate or deflate his assets as needed, because his former “fixer,” Michael Cohen, testified to that scheme. We have evidence that his company engaged in financial crimes, because his company’s chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg, has been indicted on those charges. We have evidence that he tried to tamper with a federal election, because Trump is on tape asking Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to “find” the votes to put him over the top. We have evidence that he engaged in a conspiracy to obstruct Congress on January 6, 2021, because he urged people to do so on live television and spent weeks beforehand trying to overturn the results of the presidential election. We have evidence that Trump knew what he did was wrong, because he and his lawyers ordered his collaborators to not cooperate with congressional investigators.

And yet Trump remains a free man. He has not been arrested; he has not been indicted. We don’t even know whether he is being investigated by federal authorities for his apparent crimes against the country. Trump grudgingly left the White House on January 20, 2021, but has churlishly continued to proclaim himself the victor of an election he lost. Millions of Republicans wait for Trump to return and finish the job of permanently smashing democracy and installing one-party white supremacist rule, much like millions of French authoritarians waited for Napoleon to return from exile on Elba to reconquer Europe.

There are some investigations into Trump’s behavior that seem to be advancing. New York Attorney General Letitia James appears to be committed to unraveling the tangled and shady financial web of the Trump Organization. Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis looks to be on track to convene a grand jury in the Georgia election fraud case. Neither case is likely to land Trump in jail, but these officials are determined to hold him accountable.

Unfortunately, Black women aren’t allowed to run everything. In Manhattan, newly elected District Attorney Alvin Bragg appears to have decided not to bring charges against Trump at this time. His decision so dismayed the prosecutors working on the case, Carey Dunne and Mark Pomerantz, that they both quit. Pomerantz’s leaked resignation letter reveals that he thinks they have sufficient evidence to charge Trump with “numerous felony violations” and says his team “harbors no doubt about whether [Trump] committed crimes.”

Bragg could always change his mind, but at this point he looks more like a coward who misled the people of New York City about his willingness to hold powerful people accountable than a defender of the rule of law.

Then there’s US Attorney General Merrick Garland. So far, the Department of Justice has busied itself with 800 or so of the people who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, including the leaders of white supremacist organizations who appear to have been part of the conspiracy. But there’s been no hint of charges, or even investigations, into the Republican members of Congress who supported the insurrection or the president who encouraged it. It appears that Garland has ceded that part of the investigation to the House Select Committee on January 6, which has mere oversight authority, instead of putting it in the hands of the FBI, where it belongs. Even there, Garland has been so slow to enforce the lawful subpoenas issued by the House of Representatives that his recalcitrance borders on sabotage.

Trump’s continued liberty is an affront to the rule of law and a threat to democratic self-government, but every time I bring up Garland’s crucial and thus far absent role in defending these ideals, I am told to wait. The wheels of justice turn slowly, but the institutionalists assure me that those wheels are turning and Trump will eventually be held accountable.

The people telling me to wait for Garland are the same people who told me to put my faith in Robert Mueller and his no-nonsense, by-the-book approach to bringing Trump and his cabal to justice. But at least the Mueller argument was believable. The case for Garland is starting to sound less like sober analysis and more like pleasing fan fiction.

Here is the story that Garland’s defenders would have me believe: The attorney general is working in secret but in parallel to the House investigation, building a case against Trump by pressuring the people who physically stormed the Capitol. He’s been getting secret wiretaps approved by judges, poring over documents obtained via the investigation into Rudolph Giuliani’s failure to register as a lobbyist for foreign interests, and is synthesizing this information with (also still secret) Southern District of New York investigations into Trump’s finances. He hasn’t exposed any of the key witnesses in Trump’s inner circle or seen the hands of the FBI, where it belongs. Even there, Garland has been so slow to enforce the lawful subpoenas issued by the House of Representatives that his recalcitrance borders on sabotage.

Trump’s continued liberty is an affront to the rule of law and a threat to democratic self-government, but I am told to wait.
any of the key documents, because Trumpappeals to the Supreme Court every time somebody asks for a piece of paper he for-got to eat. But we shouldn’t worry, becauseGarland has got this, and criminal chargesagainst Trump are totally going to spill out ofthe Justice Department.

Like Fox Mulder in The X-Files, I want tobelieve, and there is some evidence forthis complicated theory. The WashingtonPost reported that a federal grand jury hasbeen looking into the planning and financingof the January 6 rally and may have issuedsubpoenas to some people in “Trump’s orbit.” It’s possible that Garland is on top ofthis. It’s possible that Bragg is buildingmore evidence against Trump. It’s possiblealiens exist and have been visiting this planetfor centuries and built Puma Punku, as the“ancient astronaut” theorists believe.

But it’s morelikely that Garland is asleep, Bragg is acoward, and aliens fly past Earth withtheir windows rolled up so we don’t infectthem with any of our stupid.

Then again, maybe Garland is just savingus from a future where President RonDeSantis or President Josh Hawley pardonsTrump. As Dana Scully says, “The truth isout there, but so are lies.” The truth hasn’tcaught up with Trump’s lies yet, and I’mstarting to doubt it ever will.

The case for Garland is starting to sounds less like sober analysis and more like pleasing fanfiction.

Subject to Debate
Katha Pollitt

Cancel Culture Exists

It’s fashionable to claim there are no real consequences for online callouts. The truth is, there very often are.

ANCEL CULTURE—which I’m loosely defining here as a climate that encourages disproportionate social and/or work-related punishment for speech—doesn’t exist. Well, OK, it exists on the right: Look at what happened to the Dixie Chicks and Colin Kaepernick and that assistant principal in Mississippi who read the picture book I Need a New Butt to his students. Conservatives are always canceling people. But on the left? That’s just people holding you accountable for some awful thing you said. What could be wrong with that? Besides, no one is seriously, irreparably hurt. Look at J.K. Rowling: Despite the best efforts of Twitter, she’s still a billionaire and one of the most popular writers ever.

Those who argue that cancel culture is a myth claim that no one has really been injured by it. A few people might lose their jobs, but they get new ones.

Bari Weiss claimed she was bullied out of The New York Times, and now she’s the Queen of Substack. The columnist Suzanne Moore, who left The Guardian after 338 of her colleagues signed a letter clearly aimed at her, accusing the paper of producing “transphobic content,” soon surfaced at The Telegraph. Yes, someone might lose a prize or an opportunity to give a talk or be on a panel, but no one has a right to those things. After the lesbian memoirist Lauren Hough praised her friend’s forthcoming novel, which some tweeters accused of tranphobia, and then got into an expletive-filled Twitter fight about it, she was either not nominated or de-nominated for a Lambda Award. But hey, she can always write another book.

The journalist Adam Davidson responded to a rather woolly New York Times editorial decriing cancel culture: “Can one of you believers in cancel culture just write one piece that gives evidence and doesn’t just speak to a feeling you have? Maybe some data that helps your readers know the size and scale of this problem? Also, some examples of people actually fired?”

It’s true that numerous writers have published pieces about “a feeling they have,” i.e., a fear of dire consequences for expressing themselves freely. A lot of people responded to Davidson with specific examples, though, including me. His response: The supposedly canceled are doing fine, and anyway there aren’t very many of them. But in fact, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has documented hundreds of cases across the political spectrum in academia alone—firings, demotions, lengthy investigations, and so on—which is more than enough to make others wary. And pace Davidson, not everyone sails happily on. Here’s a small sampling.

Donald McNeil Jr., a prizewinning science journalist with a long career at The New York Times, took some high school students to Peru on a Times-
Scientific Discovery Stuns Doctors

Biblical Bush Shuts Down Joint Discomfort in 5 Days

Amazing plant “prescription” gives new life to old joints without clobbering you. So safe you can take it every day without worry.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 54 million Americans are suffering from joint discomfort.

This epidemic rise in aching joints has led to a search for alternative treatments—as many sufferers want relief without the harmful side effects of conventional “solutions.”

Leading the way from nature’s pharmacy is the new “King of Oils” that pioneering Florida MD and anti-aging specialist Dr. Al Sears calls “the most significant breakthrough I’ve ever found for easing joint discomfort.”

Biblical scholars treasured this “holy oil.” Ancient healers valued it more than gold for its medicinal properties. Marco Polo prized it as he blazed the Silk Road. And Ayurvedic practitioners, to this day, rely on it for healing and detoxification.

Yet what really caught Dr. Sears’ attention is how modern medical findings now prove this “King of Oils” can powerfully...

Deactivate 400 Agony-Causing Genes

If you want genuine, long-lasting relief for joint discomfort, you must address inflammation. Too much inflammation will wreak havoc on joints, break down cartilage and causing unending discomfort. This is why so many natural joint relief solutions try to stop one of the main inflammatory genes called COX-2.

But the truth is, there are hundreds of agony-causing genes like COX-2, 5-LOX, iNOS, TNK, Interleukin 1,6,8 and many more—and stopping just one of them won’t give you all the relief you need.

Doctors and scientists now confirm the “King of Oils”—Indian Frankincense—deactivates not one but 400 agony-causing genes. It does so by shutting down the inflammation command center called Nuclear Factor Kappa Beta.

NK-Kappa B is like a switch that can turn 400 inflammatory genes “on” or “off.” A study in Journal of Food Lipids reports that Indian Frankincense powerfully deactivates NF-Kappa B. This journal adds that Indian Frankincense is “so powerful it shuts down the pathway triggering aching joints.”

Relief That’s 10 Times Faster…

and in Just 5 Days

Many joint sufferers prefer natural solutions but say they work too slowly. Take the best-seller glucosamine. Good as it is, the National Institutes of Health reports that glucosamine takes as long as eight weeks to work.

Yet in a study published in the International Journal of Medical Sciences, 60 patients with stiff knees took 100 mg of Indian Frankincense or a placebo daily for 30 days. Remarkably, Indian Frankincense “significantly improved joint function and relieved discomfort as early as five days.” That’s relief that 10 times faster than glucosamine.

78% Better Relief Than the Most Popular Joint Solution

In another study, people suffering from discomfort took a formula containing Indian Frankincense and another natural substance or a popular man-made joint solution every day for 12 weeks.

The results? Stunning! At the end of the study, 64% of those taking the Indian Frankincense formula saw their joint discomfort go from moderate or severe to mild or no discomfort. Only 28% of those taking the placebo to the relief they wanted. So Indian Frankincense delivered relief at a 78% better clip than the popular man-made formula.

In addition, in a randomized, double blind, placebo controlled study, patients suffering from knee discomfort took Indian Frankincense or a placebo daily for eight weeks. Then the groups switched and got the opposite intervention. Every one of the patients taking Indian Frankincense got relief. That’s a 100% success rate—numbers unseen in by typical solutions.

In addition, BMJ (formerly the British Medical Journal) reports that Indian Frankincense is safe for joint relief — so safe and natural you can take it every day.

Because of clinically proven results like this, Dr. Sears has made Indian Frankincense the centerpiece of a new natural joint relief formula called Mobilify.

Great Results for Knees, Hips, Shoulders and Joints

Joni D. says, “Mobilify really helps with soreness, stiffness and mild temporary pain. The day after taking it, I was completely back to normal—so fast.” Shirley M. adds, “Two week after taking Mobilify, I had no knee discomfort and could go up and down the staircase.” Larry M. says, “After a week and a half of taking Mobilify, the discomfort, stiffness and minor aches went away... it’s almost like being reborn.” And avid golfer Dennis H. says, “I can attest to Mobilify easing discomfort to enable me to pursue my golfing days. Definitely one pill that works for me out of the many I have tried.”

How to Get Mobilify

Right now, the only way to get this powerful, unique formula that clobbers creaking joints in five days without clobbering you is with Dr. Sears’ breakthrough Mobilify formula. It is not available in stores.

To secure bottle of this breakthrough natural joint discomfort reliever, buyers should call with Sears Health Hotline at 1-800-491-2012 within the next 48 hours. “The Hotline allows us to ship the product directly to customers.”

Dr. Sears believes in this product so much, he offers a 100% money-back guarantee on ever order. “Just send me back the bottle and any unused product within 90 days, and I’ll send you your money back,” he says.

The Hotline will be open for the next 48 hours. After that, the phone number will be shut down to allow them to restock. Call 1-800-491-2012 to secure your limited supply of Mobilify. You don’t need a prescription, and those who call in the first 24 hours qualify for a significant discount. Use promo code NATMB0422 when you call.

These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease. Results may vary from person to person. No individual result should be seen as typical. Offer not available to residents of Iowa.
connected summer trip. When a student asked his opinion about a classmate’s use of the N-word in a video, McNeil uttered the word. He says he was asking if the classmate had said the word as a slur or was quoting a rap song or similar. The use/mention distinction beloved of analytic philosophers cut no ice with management. He is now writing the occasional piece on Medium, where he recently described himself as retired.

Gillian Philip, one of a group of writers producing popular children’s books under the pseudonym Erin Hunter, put #Istandwith-jkrowling in her Twitter bio, for which she was subjected to a storm of online abuse and fired by her publisher. Whatever you may think of Rowling, Philip isn’t her. Without the security that comes with unparalleled wealth and celebrity, she’s just a person with an opinion—right or wrong, that’s what cost her her job. She now works as a truck driver.

Don Share, the editor of Poetry magazine, made its prestigious pages more inclusive and diverse. But that didn’t help in 2020, when he was attacked for publishing a long poem by Matthew Dickman that included a racial slur uttered by the poet’s demented grandmother. (That pesky use/mention distinction again!) Share issued a self-abasing apology and left. I’ve been unable to find out what he’s doing now.

Gary Garrels, the top curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, led the sale of a Rothko to raise funds to buy the work of women and artists of color. He resigned in 2020, after an uproar kicked off when he said, “Don’t worry, we will definitely still continue to collect white artists” and that to not collect work by white men would be “reverse discrimination.” He is now an independent curator.

David Edelstein, a veteran film critic, was fired from his longtime job with NPR’s Fresh Air after he made a tasteless joke on his Facebook page referring to the butter scene in Last Tango in Paris. Furloughed by New York magazine at the start of the pandemic, he is now a freelancer.

April Powers, a management specialist, resigned as equity and inclusion chief at the Society for Children’s Book Writers and Editors after being furiously attacked for a statement condemning anti-Semitism because it did not also mention Islamophobia. She’s trying to make a go of consulting now.

These are just a few of the better-known cases. But then there are the ones you don’t hear about, because the person on the receiving end isn’t well-known, or no journalist picks up the story, or the cancellation is more subtle: the offer never extended, the assignment that doesn’t come through.

The role of social media is crucial. Without the lightning speed of Twitter campaigns, of which so many employers seem deathly afraid, there would be time to step back and think. Instead, from allegation to punishment is often a matter of days. There are hardly ever consequences to calling someone out, especially anonymously, and the Internet makes any claim prone to virality.

You can say these people—and there are many more like them—got what was coming to them. You can say, and many do, that a cancellation was a convenient opportunity to get rid of a problematic boss or colleague. You can say it was a proxy for other problems in the institution: underpaid young staff, overprivileged higher-ups, hidebound ideas and practices, racism. You can say these incidents are part of a general social transformation that will leave us better off in the long run, and that might even be true.

What you can’t say is that no lasting, measurable damage was done to individuals. You can argue that the damage is worth it, but you should at least admit it’s there.
Before Russia’s criminal invasion of Ukraine in February, the argument that NATO expansion over the previous 30 years had been a policy failure and a provocation was neither new nor partisan. It had been put forward by right-leaning realists in the US foreign policy mainstream, including George Kennan, William Burns, Fiona Hill, and John Mearsheimer, and it was also a common position among doves on the left, including me. Among Russia experts, it’s become conventional wisdom that President George W. Bush erred in 2008 when he insisted on an open-ended commitment to someday bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, likely triggering Russia’s war with Georgia a few months later and eventually its conflict with Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated this year. And among left-wing critics of US foreign policy, it’s conventional wisdom that NATO is a Cold War relic—a defense industry boondoggle that sucks up resources that could be invested in the social safety net.

All of the above positions remain defensible. But it’s incumbent on those of us who have criticized NATO to consider the events of 2022 in our assessment of the US-led military alliance. At the very least, we should acknowledge that NATO expansion has never been simply a unilateral exercise of American imperialism. Many of expansion’s most vocal critics have been leading Cold Warriors, while its most committed advocates have been the democratically elected governments of the Eastern European states that have joined NATO since the end of the Cold War. And in the context of Eastern Europe, Russia’s conduct over the past two months indicates that the word “defense” is not always a cynical euphemism for warmongering.

At the risk of banality, it’s worth reiterating: Russia has mounted an unprovoked full-scale invasion of a neighboring country based on the ludicrous pretext of “denazification.” Many critics of NATO expansion failed to predict this up until the moment it happened, and many have since acknowledged this with mea culpas but without any reconsideration of their underlying analysis. We don’t know the scale of the casualties yet, and the war is ongoing, but what we do know is horrific: Cities leveled by shelling, mass atrocities against unarmed civilians, and at least 10 million Ukrainians (a quarter of the population) displaced from their homes.

Meanwhile, however reckless Vladimir Putin’s war has been, he has been careful not to fire on neighboring countries up to Ukraine’s 1,400-mile border with Russia. Beyond its expansion from 12 initial members...
like Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. The reason is straightforward: Those countries are in NATO, and thus under a binding defensive commitment from the US and other Western powers. And given Russia's atrocities to date in Ukraine—which are not unprecedented, as anyone familiar with the Russian wars in Chechnya and Syria knows—it's hard to blame the Eastern European countries that successfully sought NATO membership for having done so, or to fault Ukraine or other former Soviet republics for wanting to follow suit.

In the long run, perhaps NATO should be broken up, and the case for eventually downsizing the US role and increasing Europe's responsibility for its own security is compelling. But it is an odd moment for the Western left to prioritize its critique of NATO. Far from spreading militarism across Europe, NATO's function now is to contain a war it did not start. It is no exaggeration to say NATO is why Russia's assault on civilian populations has yet to spill into a wider regional war.

To be sure, critics of NATO are broadly correct that the alliance's role must remain defensive in nature. While it's understandable that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has demanded that NATO establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine, such a policy would be dangerously escalatory, effectively licensing direct military engagement between nuclear-armed belligerents that could produce apocalyptic consequences—for Ukrainians above all.

But to fixate on NATO is at best a distraction and at worst a perverse reinforcement of Russian propaganda. In the lead-up to the invasion, Putin repeatedly cited NATO expansion as part of his justification for war, even though NATO had done nothing to indicate it had any imminent plans to bring Ukraine into the alliance in the eight years since Russia annexed Crimea. To treat NATO as having directly provoked this war is to grant Russia a good-faith casus belli where none is warranted.

If the Western left wants to engage constructively on Ukraine, there are many ways it can do so that are consistent with its core values: by urging a shift to green energy and away from the fossil fuels that prop up Putin's regime; by prioritizing the well-being of refugees from Ukraine as well as other war zones; by demanding that Western critics of Russia's military occupation hold US-backed abuses in places like Yemen and Palestine to a consistent standard; and by cracking down on the Western financial instruments that oligarchs from Russia and other countries have used to store their pilage. Railing against NATO, meanwhile, is tone-deaf when Russia is committing war crimes against Ukrainian civilians simply because they have the misfortune not to already be under the alliance's umbrella.
Students in Sri Lanka scuffle with police near the parliament building in Colombo on April 8, during a demonstration against the deepening economic crisis. Anti-government protests have risen in recent days over economic mismanagement. Since January, the Sri Lankan rupee has fallen 32 percent. Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana, speaker of the parliament, has warned of “very acute food shortages and starvation.”

**By the Numbers**

- **26%** Rise in beef prices since before the pandemic began in early 2020
- **9.5%** Rise in fuel oil prices in January 2022
- **5.1%** Rise in private sector employees’ wages in 2021
- **$0.13** Amount that hourly earnings have grown this year
- **1,000%** Rise in Elon Musk’s wealth since the beginning of the pandemic
- **140k** Number of US workers who participated in strikes and work stoppages in 2021

**Tom Cotton, Legal Scholar**

Tom Cotton, a man with two Harvard degrees, attacked Ketanji Brown Jackson for representing a defendant accused of terrorism. —news reports

Tom Cotton doesn’t seem to be aware
That right to counsel’s needed to be fair.
To teach him, Harvard wasn’t the solution.
So maybe he should read the Constitution.
Sex, Death, and Empire

The Roots of Violence Against Asian Women

PANTHEA LEE

On March 11, a man with a football player’s build assaulted a 67-year-old Asian woman in Yonkers, N.Y. As she walked past him, he called out, “Asian bitch!” She ignored him. He followed her into her building and punched her from behind, knocking her to the ground. Then, over the course of one minute and 12 seconds, Tammel Esco roundhoused his fists into her—mechanically, unwaveringly—pummeling her over 125 times. He then stomped on her seven times and spat on her before walking away. The victim, whose name has not been released, was hospitalized with broken bones in her face, bleeding in her brain, and cuts and bruises across her head. Esco has been charged with attempted murder.

Four weeks before that, in the early hours of February 13, Christina Yuna Lee, a 35-year-old Korean American woman, was murdered in her apartment in New York City’s Chinatown after returning from a party. Someone had followed Lee into the building and forced his way into her apartment. One hour and 20 minutes later, she was found dead in her bathtub by police, naked from the waist up, with 40 stab wounds to her body. Her attacker, 25-year-old Assamad Nash, an unhoused man, had tried to sexually assault her. Lee died fighting back.

One hundred and twenty-five blows. Forty stabs.

I can’t get these numbers out of my head, yet I struggle to process their implications. How can a person hammer their fist into an elder—into flesh, through bone—over and over and over again, 125 times? How can a person plunge a knife into another human being 40 times, until all life has bled out? Did these men understand their victims to be human—or did they think of them as somehow subhuman? These are not rhetorical questions.

Lee’s murder hit home. I had been in Chinatown just hours earlier, on the first warm, sunny day of the year. It was Super Saturday, a Lunar New Year tradition in which lion dancers roam the streets to drive away evil spirits and bring good luck. After two punishing years for New York’s Asian American community—2021 saw a 361 percent increase in anti-Asian attacks, along with staggering economic hits from the Covid-bias-related avoidance of Asian-owned businesses—this celebration was a much-needed balm. The air vibrated with firecrackers, marching bands, confetti, laughter. Spring was coming.

The next morning, I woke to the headline: “Woman Followed and Fatally Stabbed in Her Chinatown Apartment.” I looked up Lee’s address and realized I had walked right by her apartment the day before. I read news reports. She had been three years younger than me, loved art and music. She sounded like me.

The New York Post had obtained security camera footage from the night of Lee’s death. The paper stitched together grainy clips from her building’s four cameras and put them side by side. Camera 1 shows a woman walking up to the building and then pausing, likely to fish for keys. A shadowy figure shuffles up behind her, then hovers a few feet back. Camera 2 then shows her walking through the building door. Before the door fully shuts, the figure vanishes from Camera 1 and appears on Camera 2, slipping in behind her. Lee then appears on Camera 3, walking toward her.

Panthea Lee is an ethnographer, activist, writer, and facilitator.

Christina Yuna Lee’s murder hit home. I looked up her address and realized I’d walked right by her apartment the day before.
“In US bases all over Southeast Asia, street vendors display T-shirts emblazoned with the long phrase—or simply: LBFM.”

—Celine Parreñas Shimizu

Rock and ruin:
This banner (below) from Pattaya on the Gulf of Thailand dates from 1991. Similar receptions have greeted US forces for over a century.

“...she had just won the lotto, to tell me about the sweetest strawberry she had from a nearby farmer's market.”

“She saved people seats at meetings, had lunches with people on completely opposite and random teams, Slacked people while on a Zoom call telling them ‘your honey. I read these friends’ tributes:

“She rarely walked, she danced.... She would randomly call me, SUPER excited, like she had just won the lotto, to tell me about the sweetest strawberry she had from a nearby farmer's market.”

“She saved people seats at meetings, had lunches with people on completely opposite and random teams, Slacked people while on a Zoom call telling them ‘your lipstick is absolutely perfect today.’”

“For my Sisdude, who liked to search through the sand for pretty pebbles and sprinkle them on her head to be a little closer to mother nature.”

For once, I was grateful for the social media rabbit hole. My voyeurism enabled me to see her as a woman with agency, history, joyous quirks, a memorable shorey— not as another dead Asian woman. Because especially in the last two years, we have had too many.

From March 2020 to December 2021, 6,506 hate incidents against Asian American and Pacific Islander women were reported to Stop AAPI Hate; the actual number is likely far greater. This is almost double the incidents reported by men. Yet media coverage of Lee’s death relegated the question of racism to a single sentence about what unnamed authorities did or did not know.

CNN: “It’s not clear whether Lee’s race or ethnicity played a role in the attack.”

The New York Times: “The authorities have not determined that Ms. Lee was targeted because of her ethnicity.”

As a journalist, I understand why the media are reluctant to go beyond what police say. And for police, hate crimes require a higher burden of proof—though some have used their increase to advocate for higher police budgets. As an activist, I also know that hate crimes carry heavier sentences, condemning many who are themselves the victims of a broken society to face an inhumane system of incarceration that fails to address the root causes of crime.

Yet as an Asian woman in America, the who-knows-if-race-played-a-role reporting feels like cultural gaslighting, denying both our experience and America’s history.

The Long Phrase

The Long Phrase

In rest and recreation spots such as Angeles, Olongapo, and other US military bases scattered all over Southeast Asia, street vendors display hats and T-shirts emblazoned with the long phrase or simply the abbreviation LBFM as souvenirs of wild times, wild women, and wild places,” writes Celine Parreñas Shimizu, a Filipina American filmmaker and cultural scholar, in The Hypersexuality of Race.

The Long Phrase is “little brown fucking machines powered by rice,” an expression that can be traced back at least to the Philippine-American War. In 1898, despite telling Filipinos that Americans were eager to help them defeat their Spanish colonizers, the US cut a deal with Spain to buy the Philippines for $20 million. When the Filipinos took up arms in a bid for independence, the US deployed 125,000 troops to persuade them otherwise. The war lasted more than three years and devastated the country. Filipinos who had never considered sex work were forced into it as a matter of survival. And American men who had not previously known any Asian women now found themselves in a country where most women they met worked in the sex industry.

In the Philippines, a soldier could have “a girl for the price of a burger,” the legal scholar Sunny Woan writes. Filipinas were viewed as so subservient that American GIs sexually denigrated them in ways they would never consider for their wives or women back home: “Filipina sex workers frequently report being treated like a toy or a pig by the American [soldiers] and being required to do ‘three holes’—oral, vaginal, and anal sex.”

The US military registered sex workers, regularly tested them for venereal diseases, and tagged them, like pets, reinforcing their status as less than human. The military justified this system as a matter of imperial necessity. “The idea
was that the soldiers are aggressively sexual and need a sexual outlet in the military theater. And if we don’t set up a system and inspect women, then they’re going to get sick and then we can’t fight,” says Paul Kramer, a historian of US empire. “It presumes all of these things about men’s sexuality and then essentially says: This is a pragmatic matter of manpower. We need men to be healthy and fit.”

By the end of the American colonization of the Philippines a half century later, this ideology had spread across Asia, laying the foundation for the region’s notorious sex entertainment and trafficking industries. At the end of World War II, to prevent Allied troops from raping civilians, Japan established a network of brothels and recruited 55,000 women to service up to 60 GIs a day each. Many women committed suicide, particularly in the network’s opening days; after the brothels closed, the Japanese saw as many as 330 rapes a day.

Though Japan had a history of exploitative prostitution, the conscription of women as a military necessity was based on studying Western tactics of empire building. Since the 1930s, it had provided “comfort stations” for Japanese troops deployed overseas; the postwar Allied occupation, however, was the first time Japan offered its own women as sexual slaves for a foreign force.

In 1950, months after it had entered the Korean War, the US military introduced a program called R&R (rest and recuperation) that gave GIs a break from active duty by shuttling them to Japan. Soldiers’ slang for R&R—“rock and ruin” and “rape and run”—illustrate their view of the program. By the time US troops entered Vietnam in 1965, this network of comfort stations had spread to the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, and 85 percent of the GIs surveyed reported having been with a prostitute. One year later, US Senator J. William Fulbright declared, “Saigon has become an American brothel.” By the time the US withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, there were 500,000 prostitutes in the country.

Other Western countries, such as Great Britain and Australia, developed their own military R&R programs. Kramer calls this system of sexual exploitation the military-sexual complex. One Australian Navy officer recalls his R&R time in Thailand in the 1960s on a nostalgic website: “There was nothing that wasn’t for sale. I guess this had something to do with providing for R&R grunts fresh from the killing grounds of Vietnam, their every conceivable wish was catered for. . . . There were plenty of good cheap hotels and certainly no shortage of massage parlours. A 24 hour escort and tour guide would cost around 400–500 Baht [US $20–$25], with an option to extend.”

R&R is not a relic of the past. In a 2018 thread titled “R&R info?” in the US Army Reddit forum, a GI asked about the program today. The response that got the most votes was: “My cousin went to Thailand and spent his 14 days fucking whores, drinking, and eating. I spent my R&R going home to see my son’s 2nd birthday. Go fuck whores in Thailand.”

The United Nations and many international nongovernmental organizations provide R&R to staff serving in hardship posts or humanitarian settings. While many use R&R to see families or to quietly decompress, the breaks have become notorious for contributing to the sexual assaults of other aid workers and local populations. There is a distinct Western male swagger—brazen, almost sneering—that comes from being on the winning end of global inequality and strutting and dangling that privilege in front of those on the losing end. While working in the Global South, I’ve seen men grab women as they please, and many let them—the money these men spend in an hour can feed their families for a month. In response, I chopped my hair off and started wearing shapeless, baggy clothes. I wanted to hide my gender. I wanted to shield my body. I wanted to look like anything but another Asian plaything for Western men.

She’s Fun, and So Uncomplicated

But I was battling a long tradition. In 1887, the French writer Pierre Loti published Madame Chrysanthème, a semi-autobiographical novel about a naval officer who travels to Japan and seeks a temporary wife: a “little, cream-skinned woman with black hair and cat’s eyes. She must be pretty and not much bigger than a doll.” Once he marries Chrysanthème, he reflects: “It is a hundred to one that she has no thoughts whatever. And even if she had, what do I care?”

She was simply another Oriental artifact, beautiful and inanimate, for his collection. The book was wildly successful—it was reprinted over 200 times during Loti’s life alone—and inspired the opera Madame Butterfly (1904, set in Japan), which in turn
appeal of the great Western male fantasy”:

When you get home from another hard day on the planet, she comes into existence, removes your clothing, bathes you, and walks naked on your back to relax you. And then there is sex.... She’s fun you see, and so uncomplicated. She doesn’t go to assertiveness-training classes, insist on being treated like a person, fret about career moves, wield her orgasm as a non-negotiable demand.

When not a fantasy, the Asian woman is a punch line. Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 film Full Metal Jacket, about US Marines in the Vietnam War, made famous the line “Me so horny. Me love you long time,” spoken by a Vietnamese prostitute. The line was sampled by 2 Live Crew in their 1989 hit “Me So Horny,” which reached No. 1 on the US Billboard Rap Songs chart, and by Sir Mix-A-Lot in “Baby Got Back,” which became the second-best-selling song in America in 1992. These songs helped entrench “Me so horny” as cultural catchphrase and meme—and as a nightmare for Asian women, who continue to be haunted by this racist catcall.

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Unable to avoid such pick-up lines, some women have resigned themselves to rolling their eyes. Yet we rarely examine the roots of “yellow fever”—slang for the fetish for Asian women—or its implications. The term itself suggests that Asian women’s bodies are the sites of disease. This notion has deep roots: J. Marion Sims, the father of modern gynecology, insisted there was a unique strain of syphilis in Asian women. In 1876, at the American Medical Association’s centennial jubilee, Sims used his presidential address to sound the alarm on this deadly “Chinese tocsin.” For the next century, in its brothels across Asia, the American military would screen women for venereal diseases to prevent yellow fever from spreading from its soldiers’ minds to their bodies.

The notion that yellow fever is problematic but treatable persists today. “Never been with an Asian before so banging you would be a dream come true,” writes one man in The Fleshlight Chronicles. “I need my yellow fever cured.” This idea has deadly implications.

On March 16, 2021, a 21-year-old man went on a shooting spree at three massage parlors in Atlanta. He killed eight people, six of them Asian women: Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng. The shooter, Robert Aaron Long, cited his sex addiction as the reason for his actions—to him, these women were temptations to be purged. Most men try to “cure” their so-called yellow fever by dating Asian women; Long opted to kill them.

At a press conference, Capt. Jay Baker of the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office summarized Long’s motives: “It was a really bad day for him and this is what he did.” The media seized on this flippant remark, and social media was flooded with hot takes. One year later, a Google search for “Atlanta spa shooting ‘bad day’” returns
Mental Illness as Red Herring

When asked for comment about Lee’s murder, New York Mayor Eric Adams replied that the city must do more to address mental illness. In recent vigils for slain Asian women, officials dutifully line up to lament yet another tragedy, exclaim “This must stop!,” point the finger at mental illness, then hang around for photo ops.

But mental illness is a red herring. Treating perpetrators as bizarre deviants from the norm misses the point. Mental illness operates within specific cultural contexts. The mentally ill still draw on existing cultural templates, which they may distort or act on in more extreme ways. And when it comes to Asian women, the cultural template has long been sexual denigration: three holes, rape and run, “Me so horny.” Nash and Long, among so many others, simply took these messages to fatal conclusions.

On January 15, Michelle Alyssa Go, a 40-year-old Chinese American woman, was pushed to her death in front of a subway train at Times Square. The attacker, Martial Simon, was an unhoused man who was schizophrenic. Authorities said there was no indication that Go had been targeted because of her ethnicity.

Repeatedly denying the role of race while pointing the finger at mental illness relieves the state of culpability. The message: These attacks are strange coincidences, the actions of crazy people. So let’s just lock them up, then keep on keeping on.

Yet in terms of acknowledging and managing these risks, our governments have repeatedly come up short. For years before pushing Go to her death, Simon had been in and out of hospitals. In 2017 a psychiatrist working at a state mental institution noted that Simon had said it was “just a matter of time” before he would push a woman onto a train track. He was nevertheless discharged.

To make sense of how our society fails men like Simon, and thus their victims, I contacted Jason Wu, a seasoned public defender with the Legal Aid Society. Wu criticizes dominant analyses of anti-Asian violence, which draw on a traditional criminal framework: There are bad people who do bad things. “But it takes out of context that their prejudice was stoked in our current political environment, that’s tied to a racializing of a virus, that’s tied to geopolitical tensions that play out on the bodies of Asian Americans,” Wu says. “That political move is not new. But who we hold responsible in this moment should be bigger than the person taking the bait—it should include our government.”

In the long shadow of state-sanctioned violence against Asian women—violence reinforced through culture and distorted by mental illnesses that this country stokes but refuses to treat—Asian American women are constantly told we must find individual solutions for our safety. My group texts are filled with chatter about where to buy mace and coupon codes for personal safety alarms. At rallies, workers for well-meaning nonprofits hand me flyers with self-defense strategies. I stare blankly back at them. I imagine how to teach my parents to do a palm-heel strike; the thought alone is too much to bear.

Meanwhile, authorities continue to investigate whether these recent victims, my sisters, were targeted because of their race.

(continued on page 31)
Music was his weapon: Guthrie’s indelible influence as a folk singer turns out to be just the most visible legacy of his incredible creativity.
When he wasn’t playing around with random chords or teasing sentence fragments into full-bore choruses, Woody Guthrie was using whatever pieces of paper he could find to draw cartoons, pastoral scenes, and anything else that could usefully occupy a blank space. And when he wasn’t drawing pictures or playing his guitar, he was pounding typewriters to distill the ideas, memories, and impressions he collected like rare stones from railroad tracks and prairie roads, street corners and boarding houses, political rallies and kitchen tables, labor camps and radio stations. As magnetic and diligent a performer as he was, Guthrie was also a rapt and empathetic observer of the human condition, and he collected swatches of life from what he read, heard, and saw from one end of the country to the other.

He wove these swatches into more than 3,000 songs with a breathtaking range of subject, tone, and lyricism; some were as intimate as a love ballad, others as astringently funny as a dark farce; still others were as playful as a game of hopscotch, as comprehensive in their accounts of injustice as an investigative news story, or as rapturous as a twilight reverie. To borrow from one of his guiding spirits, Guthrie contained multitudes: young and old, women and men. White, Black, and brown people. Whatever the topic, whoever his audience was, no one within earshot of his music forgot what they heard—and nobody I know is tired of hearing, or of singing along with, “This Land Is Your Land.”

Decades after Guthrie’s death at 55 from Huntington’s disease in 1967, generations of new listeners rediscover the abiding truth in what Guthrie’s most famous acolyte asserted: “You could listen to his songs,” Bob Dylan said, “and actually learn how to live.”

Only it’s not just the songs. Mostly,
yes, but there's more. Guthrie's impulsive creativity, his keenness for experience, and his will to express it in any form available to him can be felt with near-overpowering intensity in "Woody Guthrie: People Are the Song," an exhibit encompassing Guthrie's life, work, and legacy on view through May 22 at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City. Its astonishments begin with the size of the space. It's not that the second-floor room set aside for the exhibit is small. But you imagine that only a grander, wider venue would be large enough to contain the memorabilia, artwork, musical instruments, recordings, and relics of a sensibility that continues to inspire waves of musicians and activists while evoking the similarly daring visions of edgy romantics of the past. The sense of possibility Charles Baudelaire conjured in describing genius as "childhood recaptured" was echoed and broadened by Woody Guthrie when he said, "I don't want the kids to be adults. I want to see the grown folks be kids."

Nora Guthrie, Woody's 72-year-old daughter and a co-curator of the Morgan exhibit, recalled in a recent phone interview assembling an exhibit of her father's work a decade ago for the Smithsonian Institution as part of the 100th anniversary of his birth. "That was a 5,000-square-foot exhibit," she said. "And even that was a challenge to put together because there's just so much to go through. My father led a jam-packed life, and he wrote about it all. So you're trying to find one or two pieces in each phase or aspect of that life that doesn't say everything but says enough."

The act of saying a lot with just a few words is close to the core of American folk music—and, for that matter, its art. And there's something about injecting 139 pieces of Guthrie's corpus into 1,737 square feet of Morgan Library space that's evocative of how folk music can convey multiple levels of experience and emotion with the most basic chords and the simplest language.

Entering the exhibit, you are flanked by walls that steer you directly into Guthrie's teeming brain. To your right is a wall loaded with doodles, sketches, and fragments from his letters, along with autographs and epigrams, such as "Good books put songs in my head, ants in my pants, and my feet to itchin'... for the Big People's Highway," and, nearby, one of his trademark salutations, which I first came across in a book signed some years back by Guthrie's old friend Studs Terkel: "Take it easy, but take it." Keep moving to the right and you're walking into the pages of a biography that begins with Woodrow Wilson Guthrie's birth on July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Okla. Handwritten lyrics to "In the Oklahoma Hills Where I Was Born" are posted on a wall, as is a 1926 photo of a teenage Woody, his parents, Nora Belle and Charley, and his younger brother, George, on their Okemah porch. The wall itself is a photo depicting an alarmingly massive dust cloud bearing down on houses in Stratford, Tex., on August 14, 1935, or "Black Sunday," the worst, most paradigmatic disaster of the Dust Bowl that plagued the Southwest during the Great Depression.

Guthrie, by that time, was living in the small North Texas town of Pampa, already collecting folk songs and writing some of his own, notably his "Dust Bowl Ballads," including "Dusty Old Dusty," better known by its mordant refrain, "So long, it's been good to know you," in reference to the Okies, who left for California without looking back (except maybe to say goodbye). Two years after Black Sunday, Guthrie himself would be in California, with paint brushes and writing tools in his pockets, notebooks and school composition tablets for sketching out songs, and a guitar slung across his back.

Later, as the overreaching of murderous despots in Europe and Asia would set World War II in motion, he'd carry a guitar brandishing the following warning: "THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS!" That blunt and unconstrained use of the word "fascist" seems anachronistic in a time when social media and information overload conspire against such plain speaking—even with machinery available that's more sophisticated than a six-string Gibson.
Questions Please:

Where will I get my ideas to write my songs and ballads?

Answer to that is: Everywhere you look, out of books, magazines, daily papers, at the movies, along the streets, riding busses or trains, even flying along in an airplane. Or in bed at night. Anywhere.

Always keep your pencil and paper handy to jot down little + big ideas.

One corner of the exhibit is devoted to “This Land Is Your Land,” which Guthrie wrote on February 23, 1940. Guthrie signed all his songs and included the date and location, in this case the Hanover House, a flophouse at 43rd Street and Sixth Avenue, a few blocks northwest of the Morgan Library. According to Robert Santelli, he wrote it as a gimlet-eyed response to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America”; in the original, the refrain ends with “God blessed America for you and me,” and there are verses alluding to private property, hungry people waiting in line for relief “in the shadow of a steeple” along with the “endless skyway” and “golden valley” that remained in the song, even though other lyrics were revised or amended to accommodate fresh triumphs and enduring injustices. The exhibit includes a statement by the Cherokee Nation contending that Guthrie’s lyrics to “This Land” “omit mention of the U.S. government’s policies that dispossessed tribes across the United States of their original homelands”—along with a video performance of the Cherokee National Youth Choir singing the song in their native language.

Still more to absorb: lyrics to “All You Fascists Bound to Lose,” dated a year to the day after the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, and to “Pretty Boy Floyd,” a ballad about a fellow Oklahoman and outlaw that juxtaposed his crimes and those of Depression-era bankers:

Yes, as through this world I’ve wandered / I’ve seen lots of funny men; / Some will rob you with a six-gun, / And some with a fountain pen. / And as through your life you travel, / Yes, as through your life you roam, / You won’t never see an outlaw / Drive a family from their home.

Words and pictures about being alone on the road, finding communion with others as deep in wayward solitude as he was:

Now as I look around, it’s mighty plain to see / This world is such a great and a funny place to be; / Oh, the gamblin’ man is rich an’ the workin’ man is poor, / And I ain’t got no home in this world anymore.

He found a home, as close to one as would satisfy him, in November 1943 when he moved to 3520 Mermaid Avenue in Brooklyn’s Coney Island. By then, he’d fallen in love with Marjorie Mazia, a dancer with the Martha Graham Company, who became the second of his three wives two years later while Woody was on furlough from wartime duty. There isn’t much in the exhibit about his military service. But there is a significant portion of two sections devoted to Mazia, who inspired many of Guthrie’s songs, poems, and sketches about love. Among the (subtly erotic) choruses to a 1947 song, “You and I”:

You be my sea lanes, I’ll kiss your wild waves / You kiss my salt spray, I’ll drink your foam / You be my homing pigeon, I’ll be your true religion / You be my house here, I’ll be your home.

Mazia also influenced his visual artistry; the lines of his paintings and drawings inspired by her are less antic than the political cartoons, but just as clean and elemental.

In a boisterous paean to his neighborhood written in 1950 ("Mermaid Avenue, that’s the street / Where all colors of good folks meet"), Guthrie alludes to the “five long years” he and his family have lived in Coney Island. Three years before that song was written, Woody and Marjorie’s eldest daughter, Cathy Ann, died in an electrical fire. She was 4 years old. By that time, she had helped inspire her father to write several songs for children ("Riding in My Car," "Why Oh Why?," “Goodnight, Little Darling"), making up another enduring dimension of his art.

In 1952, Guthrie was diagnosed with Huntington’s disease, which he feared he’d inherited from his mother. Though the disease would eventually immobilize him, he continued to write and draw as well as he could until his writing became illegible.

His fight is our fight:
The world is still with us, and so are hunger, poverty, white supremacy, and the kind of fascism against which Guthrie wielded his guitar 80 years ago.

"I Ain’t Dead Yet!":
Guthrie’s Martin guitar, which he bought in the 1940s, surrounded by other relics from his later years.
I never dread the day that I will die
Cause my sunset is
Somebody's morning sky
—Guthrie's journal, April 17, 1942

On your way out of the Morgan exhibit, there's little left to discuss or display except Guthrie's inheritance and how it has been shared and passed along, both by his contemporaries, notably Pete Seeger, and by disciples as diverse as John Lennon, Ani DiFranco, Steve Earle, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Rosanne Cash, Billy Bragg, Chuck D, and, always and forever, Dylan, whose quote about learning how to live from Guthrie's music is one of the last things you see before leaving the exhibit—and Guthrie's fount of creativity—behind to face the world.

And as the world is still with us, so are hunger, poverty, labor strife, voter suppression, excessive force from police, white supremacy, totalitarian threats overseas, and the kind of fascism against which Guthrie weaponized his guitar about 80 years ago. The songs have always been plentiful, their examples always available for learning and empowering, whether urging you to take action, encouraging you to make "vroom vroom" noises like a car (just because), or embracing the promise and paradox of America as “This Land Is Your Land” continues to exhort us to do.

“People Are the Song” does a fine job of convincing visitors that everything in Guthrie's life—the serious and the silly, the romantic and the rollicking, the drawing paper and the typewriting—empowers them not to do better but to be better or, at least, to seek your best self. Progressives sometimes claim that left-wing activists like Guthrie were mostly intent on promoting specific programs and ideologies. But it occurred to me after immersing myself in Guthrie's personality that, at bottom, what he wished for all men and women was simply a society that would give them what he had: enough space and time to think, to talk, to write, to draw, to wander, and to somehow retain what Baudelaire meant by the genius of childhood. The intensity of his vision, the confidence of his voice, the breadth of his concern for all who suffer and struggle—no matter who they are or where they came from—are all rooted in something at once larger and simpler than conviction: curiosity. Larger and simpler, just like a folk song.

Nora Guthrie compares her dad to a compass. I know what she means, and the needle isn’t necessarily pointing north, but stuck in a position that, instead of a capital letter or a specific direction, has only two words: Pay attention.
California’s colonias and the fight to access the most basic human resource.

By David Bacon

Cattered across California’s San Joaquin Valley, one of the richest agricultural areas in the world, are colonias—unincorporated communities that are home to some of the Valley’s poorest residents. These communities are overwhelmingly the products of a long history of racism and housing discrimination. And the legacy of racial exclusion that led to their existence, far from being safely buried in the past, continues to manifest itself in daily life. Every time a resident of a colonia goes to a faucet for a drink, the contaminated water that emerges—if any water comes out at all—is a living reminder of that history.

These communities are not passive victims of past discrimination, however. They have organized to demand redress in the form of a clean and adequate water supply, sewer service, and even street lighting, forcing the state’s politicians to listen up. Though it has taken three-quarters of a century, the colonias are now celebrating a victory in their long effort to address inequality.

Access to water is a critical question in California. In 2014, then-Governor Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency in the state. California today is even drier, and the drought declaration is back in force. Teviston, a tiny colonia established by African Americans in the 1940s, went without running water for a month last summer when its only well stopped working. Last year the water table below Teviston dropped 48.9 feet. An hour north in Tombstone Territory outside Sanger, three wells went dry.

Summer temperatures in the valley, always fierce, can rise to over 115 degrees. Without water, crops would die, and so access to water obeys a hierarchy of power that prioritizes agriculture. Most of California’s water goes to growers, who annually irrigate 9 million acres with 30 million acre feet of water, or 79 percent of all the water in California that’s directly used by people. Residences and businesses come next, consuming 8 million acre feet, mostly in the big cities. Since the early 20th century, taxpayers have funded huge dam and canal systems to service those needs, including the Trinity River Dam, the Central Valley Project, the State Water Project, and the Colorado River Aqueduct.

The colonias hardly count in this calculation. Until recently, their water came entirely from whatever shallow wells their impoverished residents could afford to dig. The wells in some of these communities are now running dry. Tooleville, for instance, depends on two wells that function for only a few hours each day in the summer. It sits next to the huge Friant-Kern irrigation canal that funnels water to growers, but it can’t touch a drop. Growers have pumped so much water from the surrounding soil that the canal has actually sunk, cutting its delivery capacity considerably.

Every time a resident goes to the faucet for a drink, the contaminated water that emerges is a living reminder of a history of racism.

David Bacon’s most recent book is In the Fields of the North / En los Campos del Norte (University of California Press / Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2017).
Ongoing battle: A home in Lanare, where residents still struggle to access potable water.

Dividing line: Matheny Tract community leader Javier Medina points to the ditch that split the colonia into Black and white sections during segregation.
"We’d complain, and the county would tell us to boil the water. But you can’t boil arsenic from the water.”

—Lanare, Calif., resident Sam White

The water crisis reflects a legacy of inequality that took hold during the Great Migration of African Americans from the South at the beginning of the 20th century. As they sought places to live, they were confronted with exclusionary real estate practices, formal and informal, in the urban areas of the San Joaquin Valley.

According to Paul Dictos, Fresno County’s assessor-recorder, the original land deeds were filled with racial restrictions. “I searched the archives and identified thousands of racially restrictive covenants that acted as the mechanism that enabled the people in authority to maintain residential segregation,” he wrote. African Americans arriving from Arkansas settled in Lanare, for instance, because they could not rent or buy homes in Riverdale, two miles up Mount Whitney Avenue. One covenant recorded for a Riverdale development stated, “Neither said real property nor any part thereof, nor any lot nor part thereof, shall be used or occupied in any manner whatsoever by any Negro, Chinese, Japanese, Hindu, Malayan, Asiatic or any descendant.”

That covenant was later voided, and the California legislature passed the Rumford Fair Housing Act in 1963, which outlawed racial covenants and housing discrimination. By then the damage had been done, however, as people had already been excluded from Riverdale and other urban areas and forced to build or rent homes in the colonias on their periphery. Counties and nearby cities provided no water mains, sewer lines, lighting, or, for decades, paved streets. “Being excluded isn’t just about where you can’t live, but where you can,” Dictos says.

Wardell Young’s parents came from Arkansas in the early 1950s. “They worked in the cotton, and I was born in Lanare in 1955,” he says. “They couldn’t live in Riverdale. They’d hang you there and no one would even know.” Sam White, another resident of Lanare, was brought there from Arkansas by his parents in 1952. At first there were no wells, and through the 1960s residents carried water home in buckets and milk cans.

Riverdale had deep wells that produced clean water, but the water under Lanare contains arsenic, which occurs naturally in the San Joaquin Valley’s arid, alkaline soil. When Lanare residents dug wells, White says, county authorities minimized the danger. “We’d complain, and the county would tell us to boil the water,” he recalls. “But you can’t boil arsenic from the water. They say this cuts your lifespan down by two years, and in small doses it can cause Alzheimer’s and rashes. My mother had all that.”

Matheny Tract, just outside Tulare, had toxic levels of arsenic in its water for decades. The community was originally a set of ramshackle houses that a local rancher rented out to his workers. At a time when Tulare wouldn’t allow African Americans to buy homes, grower and developer Edwin Matheny sold them, first to his workers and then to other Black families.

“My dad came from Arkansas and found there was work out here,” says Vance McKinney, a truck driver who grew up in the colonia. He was 2 when his father decided to move the family there, and they stole away in the night. “He was a sharecropper, and probably owed money and was afraid of what might happen if the landowner knew he was leaving,” McKinney explains. “When we got here, we lived in a shack. You could climb under the floorboards and go into the house that way.”

Living in the city of Tulare was not possible. “My mom said that the city refused to allow them to have any kind of property,” McKinney says. “The city was fighting them at every turn. You’d try to buy a house, but you had to have papers to prove where you were born, that it was legal for you to be here. But when you left Arkansas, you didn’t bring those documents with you, because you didn’t know what was going to happen.”

There was no running water or sewers for the homes on the dirt streets of Matheny Tract. “We didn’t have those services,” McKinney says, “because we were African American. The county was fighting Mr. Matheny for selling us property.”

Matheny Tract was also segregated. A dry ditch still divides the tiny community. Blacks lived on one side and whites on the other. They were all former sharecroppers who had become farmworkers in California. But as the cotton crop was mechanized, white workers were the first to get jobs driving the picking machines, while Black workers dragged the heavy bags behind them down the rows. Even the kids worked.

Black kids couldn’t walk to the store through the white neighborhood. Their parents, who’d fled lynching and other forms of racial terror in Arkansas, taught their children not to walk alone. “White kids would beat up Black kids,” McKinney recalls. “It wasn’t just the kids—it was the parents too. If you walked across the ditch they’d shout, ‘Little nigger, what you doing over this side? You know you not supposed to be here.’”

Once Black people owned homes, they began organizing, initially to get running water. “Now they had a voice,” McKinney says. “The Blacks got people together in the church here and started a committee. That’s how Pratt Mutual Water Company came into being. Because you can’t speak if you’ve got nothing.”

Four decades ago Tulare County’s general plan stated that colonias like Matheny Tract had “little or no authentic future.” After the Matheny Tract Committee organized to pressure the state with the help of California Rural...
Legal Assistance, the Water Resources Control Board issued an order for the voluntary consolidation of Tulare’s and Matheny’s water systems. When the city dragged its feet, the state issued a mandatory order, and on May 31, 2016, community activist Reinalda Palma turned the tap, and city water began flowing through Matheny’s water pipes. “It’s been seven years of fighting,” she told the Visalia Times Delta. It was the first time the state had exercised this power.

But the city still refused to connect its sewer system. When it rains, the septic tanks of many homes can’t absorb the water, and sewage bubbles up in the yards. That’s particularly bitter, since Tulare’s water treatment plant is right next to Matheny Tract. “When we complained about the stink, the city said they were using the waste to irrigate nearby pistachio orchards,” says Javier Medina, a member of the Matheny committee.


Lanare has had less success getting Riverdale to extend its water lines to the colonia. In response, people pooled their resources, dug wells, and built a water treatment facility to remove the arsenic contamination. A few months later, however, the town, short on funds, had to shut it down. Nearly 40 percent of Lanare’s residents live below the poverty line. According to Veronica Garibay, codirector of the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, “It cost $3.7 million, and running it would have meant people paying bills of more than $120 a month. No one in Lanare can do that. So the plant became a symbol, a reminder of what could have been.”

Isabel Solorio, Angel Hernandez, Juventino Gonzalez, and others organized to put pressure on the state to provide some help. They were hopeful, since then-Governor Brown had signed AB 685 in 2012, a bill recognizing that access to drinking water is a human right in California. The state drilled two new wells, installed new pipes and meters, and supplied free bottled water to residents during the construction.

After a year, the water was declared free of arsenic, but it still smells and leaves a residue on sinks and toilets. Residents won’t drink it, and since the state stopped providing bottled water, they’re paying $50 to $70 a month for drinking water. The local water company went into receivership, leaving people on the hook for a system that provides water they can’t drink. “Really, the only solution is a connection to Riverdale, but Riverdale won’t agree,” Solorio says. “The ranchers have pumped the aquifer out. The water table went down to 300 feet in August.”

Tooleville is facing the same problem. Farmers on either side of the community have sunk 400-foot wells, twice as deep as Tooleville’s two wells, one of which has already gone dry. According to Jose Luz Mendoza, a board member of
"You didn’t need to be a social scientist to realize the inequality between urban areas and these colonias."
—former California Senate majority leader Bill Monning

DIY solutions:
Irrigator Jose Luis Mora of the Five Points colonia joins community efforts to combat water inequity.

Facing with the refusal of cities to redress the human costs of the long history of racial exclusion, unincorporated communities in the San Joaquin Valley began organizing a decade ago. Staff with California Rural Legal Assistance helped organize committees in many colonias and later independently formed the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability. The Community Water Center, based in Visalia, set up the Association of People United for Water. Their common goal was to move beyond the declaration that water is a human right and begin implementing it on the ground. They demanded legislation to force cities and counties to provide the water, sewer connections, and other services that the colonias had historically been denied.

In April 2017 Solorio and Lanare’s water activists began meeting every few weeks at 4 am in front of the dilapidated community center. They’d pile into a car and head down Mount Whitney Highway to Fresno. In front of Garibay’s office, they boarded buses with people who’d driven up from Matheny Tract, Okeville, Toleville, Poplar, and other excluded communities. Then they’d head up Route 99 to Sacramento.

Unlike many towns of its size in the Valley, Exeter has a predominately white population, while almost all of Toleville’s residents are Mexican. Exeter refused. According to Blanca Escobedo, a former organizer for the Leadership Counsel, “In one meeting the mayor said consolidation was a waste of money and he wished Santa Claus was real.” When Toleville residents attended a meeting in 2019, she says, city council members asked to be escorted to their cars by security. When the community invited Exeter’s mayor and city council to tour the colonia, they wouldn’t speak to residents. “They see us as a community of poor Mexicans,” Mendoza says. “It’s a form of racism.”

There, they rallied outside the ornate capitol building and then marched inside to testify in hearing after hearing. Water warriors walked the halls of the legislature, demanding meetings with Assembly and Senate members. They found an ally in Bill Monning, a former lawyer for the United Farm Workers and California Rural Legal Assistance, who was elected to the legislature in 2008 and became Senate majority leader in 2014. “Year after year, these caravans came to Sacramento and demonstrated in front of the capitol in the scorching heat,” he recalls. “It was a force that could no longer be ignored.”

In 2019 they finally won what they’d fought for: a law to protect them against drought. SB 200 provides $1.3 billion over 10 years to provide safe, affordable drinking water, prioritizing communities with contaminated or insufficient water, by subsidizing improvements to community water systems or connections to nearby urban areas. Early versions of the bill would have put a small surcharge on water rates to foot the cost, but a ratepayer backlash led to a different funding solution. The bill now uses money collected from polluters in California’s cap-and-trade abatement system to fund what was presented as water cleanup.

According to Monning, about a million Californians in 130 communities lack access to safe, clean drinking water. The vast majority are in rural areas where farmworker families make up most of the population. “In the farmworkers’ union, I’d drive around and find these pockets of workers,” he remembers. “You didn’t need to be a social scientist to realize the inequality between urban areas and these colonias. The difference was clearly racial. The elite suburbs populated by professionals and white people had good water systems. The farmworker communities didn’t have drinking water.”

Monning retired after SB 200 was passed, but activists saw they needed still more legislation to force cities like Exeter to agree to consolidation. “The most cost-effective solution is consolidation, but there’s no will to make the connection,” Garibay says. SB 403, written by state Senator Lena Gonzalez of Long Beach, provides that the Water Resources Control Board doesn’t have to wait until a small water system fails completely before mandating consolidation with a larger one. The board can proactively respond to a community in danger and order the larger community to comply.

The caravans and the debate they prompted strengthened the effort to come to grips with the history of housing racism. Three state legislators—Kevin McCarty, Rob Bonta, and David Chiu—wrote AB 1466, which “require[s] the county recorder of each
county to establish a program to assist in the redaction of unlawfully restrictive covenants.” Paul Dictos was already doing this in Fresno, and the rest of the state’s recorders now have until July to set their programs up.

The combination of bills is a start in addressing historical racism, Monning believes. “One reason for taking care of the water and sewage problems of unincorporated communities is to redress the racism that was at the bottom of the reason why they exist to begin with,” he says. “The racist implementation of property laws put at risk disenfranchised communities and has been the cause of cancers, birth defects, and other environmentally caused illnesses—it’s not theoretical.”

The Leadership Counsel plans to introduce more legislation to address these historical inequities, Garibay says. “There’s a racial impact from overpumping, for instance. The groundwater resource plans filed by the counties fail to protect unincorporated communities. Our idea is a bill that can send a message to growers: You can’t continue business as usual. This is our response to the harsh reality of the history of the Valley.”

Because of climate change, the amount of water in California that’s available for human use is shrinking, and the question of priorities remains unresolved. Small communities continue to be at the bottom in the hierarchy of water distribution, and consolidation brings them into larger urban systems with their own problems of rising contamination and falling water tables.

“How do you build equity in a capitalist system into sound land-use planning?” Monning asks. “Planning the strategic use of limited resources and minimizing the use of chemicals makes perfect sense, but the blowback on any such proposal would be phenomenal. They’d say the free enterprise system itself is being threatened.”

In the meantime, Lanare, Tombstone Territory, and Tooleville are still waiting for water from the tap that people can drink.

(continued from page 19)

Contemplating the Third Rail

I now rarely listen to music or read books while waiting for the subway train to arrive. Instead I stand hypervigilant in the middle of the platform, equidistant from both edges, wishing the space were wider.

My partner and I have walked through what I would do if I were ever pushed onto the tracks, from the best to the worst option. Plan A is to crouch under the ledge of the platform away from the tracks. Some stations have human-size vestibules at track level, intended for service workers. Before Go’s death, I never noticed them; now I scan for them whenever I enter a station. Plan B is to outrun the train, on the track, until I reach the far end of the station, in front of where the trains stop, so that I can get the train operator’s attention.

Plan C, only to be used if I’ve been pushed right in front of an oncoming train and there is no time for Plan A or B, is to lie between the two rails of the track and turn my head to the side as the train passes over me. I have nightmares about Plan C: lying amid wet garbage and rats as a string of 85,200-pound metal cars screech over me, inches from my face.

In all of these scenarios, my partner stresses, I must not touch the third rail, the metal railing from which the trains draw electricity. Touch that, he warns, and you’re done.

“How long would that take?” I ask.

“It’d probably be instantaneous. There is so much voltage going through that thing, you probably wouldn’t even feel it.”

I imagine the circumstances under which I might go for the third rail. A quick touch of death seems better than being mangled by a train. There are worse ways to go.

As I contemplate options for my death and try to make sense of Christina’s, I feel called to honor her memory. In Chinatown, I lay flowers and a note at her memorial. On Instagram, I gather the tributes I find into a post. I feel disoriented, yet clear in my need to know and remember her.

The next day, I find a comment on my post, from someone claiming to be my neighbor. I click on the profile—it is indeed the guy next door, whom I’ve waved hi to but never met. He found my post via the #ChristinaYunaLee hashtag and wrote: “Christina and I would have drinks on my stoop regularly in the summer of 2020. I remember her smiling and cheering at you and your boyfriend as you were doing the same. Your instinct was right, you actually shared a lot with her unknowingly.”

His message stopped me cold. One night flooded into my mind, like a folder of forgotten images spilling from a filing cabinet. It had been a muggy Brooklyn evening. A friend had just gotten a new job, and we were celebrating. My partner and I sat on our stoop toast ing her, waving at the couple the next stoop over. As we prepared to head to dinner, my partner was seized by a need to send us off with vintage Robbie Williams. With “Angels” blasting on the speaker, he began an over-the-top rendition of the 1997 hit, complete with interpretive dance.

I can see the scene so clearly. I grab my phone, go to my Photos app, sort my photos by places, and zoom in to the map until I find our apartment. I scroll to 2020 and then down: June, July, August, September. Nothing. One more time, scrolling up: September, August, July.

There.

It’s a 38-second video from July 24, 2020, taken at 8:39 pm, of my partner singing and dancing in front of our building. I hear laughter coming from off-screen, one stoop over.

“Wherever it may take me / I know that life won’t break me / When I come to call…” he belts out.

I hear a woman laughing. Bright. Carefree.

“My boyfriend loves Robbie Williams!” I shout, choking back laughter.

“Love it!” Christina shouts back. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve played this video, just to hear her laughter and those two words. Love it!

He turns to serenade them with the final lines: “She won’t forsake me… I’m lovin’ angels instead.” They cheer.

“I’m Panthea, and this is Troels!” I yell and wave to them, for the first and last time.

The video ends.
On the morning of December 17, 1979, several Miami police officers stopped Arthur McDuffie on a 1973 Kawasaki. The initial police report said McDuffie had run a red light, forcing officers on a high-speed chase through Miami, and falsely characterized the incident as a bike accident and a scuffle with officers. McDuffie was taken to the hospital with multiple skull fractures; four days later, he was dead.

In a turn of events that could have happened last year or last week, an internal investigation revealed that the officers’ version of events was almost entirely fabricated. There was a chase but no scuffle. McDuffie had already surrendered when the officers surrounded...
him, removed his helmet, and beat him lifeless. They allegedly ran over his motorcycle to make it look as though it had been in an accident. These details were enough to lead to charges against the officers, but not enough to convict them. After a speedy trial, prosecuted by state attorney (and future US attorney general) Janet Reno, an all-white-male jury exonerated the officers.

By nightfall on the day the verdict was announced, the city was in flames. As the historian Manning Marable put it in the pages of *The Black Scholar* at the time, “the streets belonged to the poor people of Liberty City.” As insurrection ruled the night, calls for order grew louder from state and local officials. Bob Graham, Florida’s Democratic governor, took to the press to tell residents that “we have come too far, worked too hard, to see that everything is lost in one more night of needless violence and rage.” Such declarations, of course, rang hollow for most of the people in the streets on those bitter nights, considering that state and local governments had done far more to ravage this community, gutting the social safety net and leaving the poor and vulnerable with no place to go but the prisons and the cooling boards built for them. Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré invited Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson to the city to help quell the rebellion, but it was too late: Miami was consumed by an uprising that had been produced by not just one act of police violence and corruption but a whole system of racial enclosure and exploitation.

Miami set the tone for a decade of relentless domestic warfare in which the police, state prosecutors, and elected officials attempted to crush the very people they were supposed to serve. As disinvestment intensified in deindustrialized urban centers, so too did the carceral state. Yet the strategy also generated resistance. Rebellious responses to disinvestment and brutal acts of “law and order” were, as Marable and other radicals noted at the time, living evidence that deceit, insult, humiliation, removal, and violence had not sucked the life out of a people subjected to a brutal racial contract; it had enlivened them. As Marable put it, “the uprising can only be understood as a ‘twentieth century slave revolt.’” The uprisings in the cities were acts not just of desperation but of collective politics—efforts to jam the gears of continued capitalist and state violence and subjugation.

A young political theorist and contemporary of Manning by the name of Cedric Robinson made a similar point in the pages of Paul Gilroy’s London-based *Emergency,* “For the ever-growing numbers of Blacks forced to come to terms with the deteriorating situation in Britain,” he wrote, “the ever-growing numbers of Blacks forced to come to terms with the deteriorating situation in Britain,” he wrote, against the backdrop of the Brixton uprising that rocked the United Kingdom in 1981, “the historical record of Black collective resistance to political and economic oppression is rich and suggestive.” The uprisings were a form of democratic politics too—perhaps more democratic than the legislative systems that appeared so determined to maintain an order of racial partition in Western society.

Rejecting the resignation that was beginning to emerge in many corners of Black life after the civil rights movement, Robinson—much like Manning, Gilroy, and other Black contemporaries—found in the disinvested ruins of the city a new radical and egalitarian form of democracy. “The pursuit of justice is dialectically embedded in the very tapestry of injustice,” Robinson later noted. For him, the urban rebellions offered a vision of collective action in the face of a society that favored atomization, profit and property, and racial domination. The state might have cast these rebellions as incompatible with democratic aims, inconsistent because of their offense to civility and order. But Robinson insisted that they were the very expression of democracy. Just as Marx and Engels had maintained that the most exploited classes of modern society would become the agents of revolutionary change, Robinson asked who could understand democracy’s true moral and ethical demands better than those rebellious people farthest from justice.

In 1983, Robinson outlined the historical antecedents of this Black and urban radical democratic tradition in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition.* He departed from Marx and Engels by uncovering forms of radicalism that couldn’t be confined to the grammar and logic of the European working class and linked this tradition to the long struggle for decolonization. The rebellions of the 1970s and ’80s could thus be understood as forms of Black resistance within a longer inventory of resistance to capitalism’s order of racial and economic domination. The ordinary men and women in Miami and London were not unlike those Black workers who resisted earlier forms of racial and economic domination, forms that Robinson went to great lengths to highlight in *Black Marxism.* Slave resistance was an early antecedent of this tradition of radical democratic struggle, and it clarified for him the idea that something about justice could be discerned from those farthest from it. Drawing from the writings of Amilcar Cabral, W.E.B. Du Bois, and C.L.R. James, Robinson saw Black insurgencies as challenging the race-based structure of capitalism and the state by illuminating resistance as the basis of moral authority. In response to the question of who sets the agenda for Black struggle, Robinson answered in the plural: As he suggested in *Emergency,* Black liberation rested on “the maximum of the human resources contained in our communities.”

Robinson, who had long been the director of the Center for Black Studies Research at UC Santa Barbara, died in 2016. His insight into how Black mass movements have helped to reconfigure the nature of democratic authority and political activity in the modern era can be found in today’s movements struggling to free the country from its brutal confluence of state-sanctioned violence and capitalism. As Robin Kelley noted in 2017, “Today’s insurgent black movements against state violence and mass incarceration call for an end to ‘racial capitalism.’” It was a term that Robinson did not invent, but it was central to his analysis of domination in modern society. The insurgents today have sought to take the battle to the streets; theirs is a politics from below, not from above. The work of building new forms of life can happen nowhere else.

Over the past several years, organizers of these movements have drawn from and directed attention to Robinson’s work, particularly in the context of political education workshops...
building the bridge between theory and practice. Now, thanks to Pluto Press and to the dedicated work of his partner and long-time collaborator, Elizabeth Robinson, along with others like H.L.T. Quan and Kofi Buenor Hadjor, we have a new book that collects his published and unpublished work both before and after Black Marxism. These essays, we see further evidence of Robinson’s profound faith in the ability of ordinary people to fight against the corruptions of a world that routinely mocks the logic and practice of democracy. In them, we get a clear sense of what Robinson insisted in his work from the outset: that Black freedom struggles are a central part of resisting today’s violent racial and capitalist order.

Over the past several years, new left movements have drawn on Robinson’s work.

Cedric Robinson was born in 1940 in Oakland, Calif. His family was part of the wave of African Americans who had moved from the South to escape the specter of racial domination. Often it was more than a specter: in one of the rare moments of biographical detail he shared, Robinson recounted, in a 1999 interview, why his family had left Alabama in the 1920s—his grandfather had beaten nearly to death the white manager of a luxury hotel in Mobile who’d tried to rape his wife, Robinson’s grandmother, who worked there as a housekeeper.

In Oakland, the Robinsons became part of a small but intrepid Black working-class community that was mostly confined to East and West Oakland. That fledgling community grew with the influx of manufacturing and industrial workers in the Bay Area in the early postwar years. East and West Oakland were almost entirely Black because of racist federal housing policies and redlining, and it was there that Robinson witnessed the forms of care, education, and mutual aid found in Black communities under the Jim Crow racial order. As Robin Kelley notes, “He attended public schools where he learned from Black women and men who held advanced degrees but could not break the professional color bar. He took great pride in his teachers and the challenging intellectual environment they created.”

In 1959, Robinson enrolled at UC Berkeley to study anthropology and discovered a radical world of rebellion on campus. Falling in with a group of students that included J. Herman Blake, the cochair of the campus NAACP chapter, he initially got involved in a number of student protests against US involvement in Cuba. For Robinson and Blake, the struggle against the apartheid conditions of Blacks in the United States was linked to the struggle against colonial occupation across the Global South. In 1962, just after serving a suspension at Berkeley for protesting the Bay of Pigs invasion, Robinson traveled to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) under the auspices of Operation Crossroads Africa. The organization was itself an artifact of a Cold War “scramble for Africa” in which NGOs flocked to the continent to jumpstart what were effectively neocolonial development projects under the guise of humanitarianism. But the experience only further radicalized him, as he discovered a profound sense of connection to those living under the weight of colonialism and underdevelopment. For Robinson, internationalism was both ideology and practice. “Africa understands, Asia understands, you and I and the millions of blacks in the U.S., Brazil, and the West Indies understand,” he wrote, “not because we are black or brown but because we have lived it and are living it now.” Already in 1962, as a young man still finding his way, Robinson could perceive the links between the forced enclosure and immiseration of colonial violence and the racial and capitalist order under which he grew up. Returning to Berkeley, he continued his work in anthropology so as to better understand the history of this social order and those that existed elsewhere.

At Berkeley, Robinson proved to be a ferocious intellect as well as an activist. He and his comrades read Marx, Ralph Ellison, Malcolm X, Melville Herskovits, and many others who were themselves struggling to understand the class and racial dynamics of their societies. Robinson’s interest in anthropology partly explains why these figures appealed to him. Yet for him and his friends, intellectual discovery served another purpose as well: political education. Education was not a mere scholastic endeavor for them; it was the study of what had gone wrong in the world and a search for affirmative acts of political struggle against anti-democratic forces.

Robinson continued his studies at San Francisco State, working on a master’s thesis critiquing the Stanford political scientist Gabriel Almond, whose account of “political culture,” he argued, too easily accepted the idea that the masses—their beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes—provided order to political society. It was exactly the other way around, Robinson insisted, and this argument turned out to be the beginning of his long-standing ambivalence toward the state as a means for achieving human flourishing, something neither to celebrate nor to simply cast aside. His work at San Francisco State earned him the attention of Stanford’s political science department, which in 1967 recruited him to join its PhD program. Despite his criticism of Almond, Robinson wound up working closely with him, as well as with the political scientists Charles Drekeimeir and Alexander George. In fact, Drekmeier chaired his doctoral committee and became an important voice in defending Robinson’s work during his time there.

Robinson’s dissertation, called Leadership: A Mythic Paradigm, proved to need a lot of defending from the faculty. Largely completed while he was visiting England as a Leverhulme Fellow with Elizabeth in 1970, it argued that the apparent naturalness of a political order was a myth exposed by the constancy of violence and repression that almost all such orders relied on; with only rare exceptions, political leadership as practiced in Western societies was top-down, institutionally unaccountable, and fearful of the kind of authority that comes from below. Even when these political orders called themselves democratic, they were in fact afraid of a truly democratic system. “To contrast these Western political orders with more democratic forms, Robinson turned back to his training in anthropology, citing communities like the Tonga people in Zambia as examples of societies that have more effectively constructed order rooted in maximum human flourishing. He acknowledged these forms of kinship and community even as he recognized the tendency in the field of anthropology
to minimize contributions of non-Western societies as primitive. But what he saw in the Tonga people challenged a foundational belief, as old as Aristotle, in which rule was seen as necessary to manage relations between human beings. In this way, the contribution of the Tonga people held practical and philosophical weight far beyond anthropology’s racist constraints.

In response to this challenge, Almond and George resigned from his dissertation committee: What was political science if not a “science” of states (or the state)? Robinson’s dissertation refused to confine human activity to this narrow frame of thinking, because by doing so, one recapitulated the state’s mythologies and reduced community to a means rather than an end in itself. Despite the controversy over his dissertation, Robinson eventually did get a PhD from Stanford, and his dissertation was published by SUNY Press as The Terms of Order in 1980. The book version was pretty much unaltered from the original. But the development of an expanding and solidifying neoliberal consensus—one that claimed to exist for the sake of those social forces (primarily the market) outside the state—only helped demonstrate Robinson’s point: Politics is everywhere, with or without the state. So, too, were forms of racial domination, economic dependence, underdevelopment, and violent repression.

Even before he completed his PhD and published his book, Robinson got a job as a lecturer in the political science department at the University of Michigan. In 1971, Black and Latino student activists had put tremendous pressure on the university administration to embrace a series of anti-discrimination policies and to hire more faculty of color, and Robinson joined a cohort of preeminent Black and feminist intellectuals that included Nancy Hartslock and Harold Cruse. At Michigan, he also began to develop the second part of his thesis: that politics happened outside the state as well as within it. He began to search for not only reactionary antecedents but also radical ones. As one of his former students recounted, “We read and debated classic, radical and contemporary books, articles and treatises, as well as each other’s research.Occasional guest lecturers included C.L.R. James, Robert Williams, James and Grace Boggs, as well as political and social activists from the area or further afield.” Robinson also paid close attention to the wave of urban rebellions sweeping the country in the 1970s and ’80s—the fonts of democratic action that he would later write about.

One of the first courses Robinson taught after joining the Michigan faculty was “Problems of Political Development: Black Radical Thought.” The course was noteworthy for a lot of reasons, one of which was that it was part of a constellation of courses and academic programs that were springing up across the country in response to a general failure to take Black radical thought seriously. “The purpose of this course is to reconstruct the historic relations between the Black Liberation movement (of the 20th century) and the various ‘Marxist’ oriented organizations, historic relations which have been of continuing concern among students of radical politics.” The readings that appeared in the syllabus were staples in many programs and organizing circles at the time: Robert Allen’s Black Awakening in Capitalist America, James Boggs’s Racism and the Class Struggle, George Padmore’s Pan-Africanism or Communism. The course may also have been among the first informal reading groups leading up to the publication of Black Marxism a decade later.

Walter Rodney’s 1972 book How Europe Underdeveloped Africa would mark an important development in Robinson’s thinking about radical democracy as well, and when he joined the faculty at SUNY Binghamton in 1973, it was a splendid coincidence that Rodney was there as a visiting lecturer. His book only further bolstered Robinson’s internationalism, helping him track the intersections between Black American resistance to racial partitioning and the resistance of postcolonial movements in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Rodney’s analysis of capitalist imperialism, he noted, also told the story of resistance, of “what African masses are doing and have done.” If one cared to look, Robinson insisted, the archive overflowed with examples of Black people refusing to resign themselves to the conditions they faced.

If one looked, Robinson argued, the archive overflowed with examples of Black people refusing to resign themselves to the conditions they faced.

Lack radical politics is fundamentally about reaching out to others, identifying the sources of a shared condition, and demanding that the world be reordered accordingly. It is an imaginative enterprise that rejects the inherited assumptions about how power and society are divided under a system of racial capitalism, one that seeks to find new connections in the midst of this atomization. To this end, Robinson challenged contemporary notions of race as a fixed, transhistorical category consistent across time and space. Every state, he argued, deployed its own racial signs and myths to crush its disposable populations and create “order.” In some of his later work, such as Forgeries of Memory and Meaning, Robinson elaborated on this tendency: “Racial regimes,” he wrote, derive their authority in part from the meaning-making power of cultural institutions, so that circulated images of so-called savages and brutes become the basis for politically justifying racial violence and partitioning. (Those who wish to know more about Robinson’s account of racial regimes should look forward to Josh Myers’s new biography.) Yet the source of their power is also the source of their weakness: The people these regimes oppress create countercultures and thereby toss a wrench into the gears of a system that feeds on racist images in order to stay alive.

Robinson’s account of racial regimes and the counterhegemonies they help spawn also pointed to the democratic forms of resistance these countercultures might create. The social life we inhabit—one that for centuries held human beings in bondage and continues to leverage race to the benefit of capital—cannot necessarily be altered in one fell swoop. Yet the countercultures and the acts of urban resistance that this social life can inspire help keep open the door of possibility. Freedom is not inevitable—every struggle for liberation may well fall back.
toward slavery—but it is only through struggle with others that this freedom is made possible in the first place.

he new essay collection—which includes Robinson's reflections on Africa, US foreign policy, popular culture, and urban rebellion—tracks these struggles for liberation across the globe and wherever they can be found. At times, the search for radical democracy in these essays can appear to be too wide-ranging, but that is part of the point: If Black Marxism helped recover an alternative archive from which the left might draw in building a radical consciousness against racial capitalism, these essays expanded its scope and expression.

The essays that make up the first half of the volume explain why Robinson felt compelled to tell a different story about the meaning and true potential of democratic rebellion. “Bourgeois historiography,” he argues, has created a set of dominant Western historical narratives that are particularly contemptuous of the demos, depicting it as a body that needs to be governed from above. After examining the “Platonic origins of anti-democracy,” he then considers those expressions of politics that sought to resist it, including in Africa and the United States. In these communities, Robinson finds the ethos of emancipation: groups of people self-consciously building democratic culture by refusing colonial domination, capitalism, and enslavement. From the visions of African liberation he finds distorted in George Shepperson's writings to the novels of Pauline Hopkins, and from the anticolonial studies of George Washington Williams, Frantz Fanon, and Amilcar Cabral to the ambivalent Black responses to Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign, the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, and the misrepresentations of Black liberation in the blaxploitation film genre, Robinson tells the story of the Black radical tradition.

Robinson challenges Marxist historiography too. Again, readers will have to take note of the sheer audacity in reconstructing a historical archive with Black struggle at the center, particularly given the tendency even in left intellectual circles to do otherwise. Earlier in Black Marxism, he noted that neither Eric Hobsbawm nor E.P. Thompson—two leading historians of working-class radicalism in England—said much, if anything, about Black working-class struggles. Thompson's magisterial book The Making of the English Working Class mentions Black people only twice—one in a passing reference to an artisan and once in reference to a Black man who appeared as Satan in the dream of a dissident minister. Robinson's essays on the Black radical tradition and its misrepresentations seek to correct this record: By showing that there is much to recommend in the histories of Black struggle in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa, they attempt to provide new archives from which to envision the world. Robinson’s political thought challenges readers to turn to these histories not as an addendum to the dominant approach but as the approach from which to proceed. In the pages of Emergency, he quoted C.L.R. James in “The Making of the Caribbean People” to emphasize the point: “These are my ancestors, these are my people. They are yours too, if you want them.”

For as much energy as he put into challenging the limits of European radicalism and liberalism, Robinson also challenged the limits of what he called the “fictive radicalism” of Black nationalist thought. “I felt strongly that Black nationalism as it was being pursued by spokespersons like Stokely Carmichael and Louis Farrakhan was a failed enterprise,” he said in a 1999 interview. “As a peevish and perverse inversion of the political culture and racialism which had been used to justify the worst excesses of the exploitation and oppression of Black people, it served as a fictive radicalism, a surrogate mirage of the Black struggle.”

For Robinson, a truly emancipatory Black politics required transcending race. Radical black struggle, then, promised nothing less than total human emancipation from social domination in all its forms. Robinson was stubborn in his unwillingness to map out a concrete political program. But that was precisely because any grassroots, bottom-up expression of democracy was better understood as a constantly unfolding horizon of freedom and resistance. He refused the presumptuousness that is characteristic of political theory: Intellectuals, he insisted, can learn a great deal more by embedding themselves in the struggles of ordinary people than by trying to impose grandiose theories of change.

We can learn quite a bit from Robinson’s humility in this regard. His account, for example, of those Black struggles against fascism in the 1930s, led by the Negro World Alliance, the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, and the African Patriotic League, demonstrates the importance of paying careful attention to the front lines of struggle against racial capitalism and its fascist permutations.

If today we are bombarded with ideas about fascism as a threat external to American society, Robinson reminds us that Black struggle against fascism should be understood as a barometer of what racial capitalism has always been intrinsically capable of and what a movement against it should entail. Black Americans around the world responded to fascism the way they did because they were already victims of it, expressed in white supremacist longings for their partitioning and extermination. At the same time, Robinson understood the Black struggle against fascism as a global one, to be found among the dockworkers in southwestern Africa refusing to work on Italian ships or the hundreds of Black Cubans and Bahamians enlisting in the armies of Ethiopia. In one of his two essays on fascism, Robinson invoked the words of Milton Herndon, a Black steelworker who was killed while fighting fascists in Spain in 1937, to convey this point: “Yesterday, Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia—today, Spain—tomorrow, maybe America. Fascism won’t stop anywhere—until we stop it.”

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which appears at the end of the volume (in an essay cowritten by Elizabeth), might also be an opportunity to draw connections to the long and historic inventory of Black struggle that could trace many of its American roots to Black anti-fascist actions in the 1930s. The militarized response, too, was not unprecedented in the United States; nor was it unprecedented against the backdrop of the ongoing brutal racial partitioning in other parts of the world. From the United States to the occupied territories of Palestine, racial regimes sustain order by enforcing difference through violence. Yet again sounding a familiar theme, the Robinsons were clear that oppressed people would not simply accept these terms.

One of the remarkable things about Cedric Robinson is that he was a profoundly collaborative thinker—both in the sense of not assuming an authoritative posture over the archives he illuminated and in terms of his pedagogy. It is a common refrain among those who have written about him: Over the course of his life, he and Elizabeth would often invite students into their home to study and find ways to challenge the world from where they were.

But nowhere was Robinson’s ethic of collaboration more potent than when it came to his wife. Reading an interview recently between the two, I was struck by the “we” he used to describe the work that bears his name. “She shared her sense of the exact with me in work and in principle,” he wrote in Black Marxism, who first suggested the value of the book. “She shared her sense of the exact with me in work and in principle,” he wrote in Black Marxism, who first suggested the value of the book. “She shared her sense of the exact with me in work and in principle,” he wrote in Black Marxism, who first suggested the value of the book. “She shared her sense of the exact with me in work and in principle,” he wrote in Black Marxism, who first suggested the value of the book.

Robinson was once asked in an interview how he would characterize his political commitments. Riffing on the collaborative spirit that had defined so much of his work, he replied: “My only loyalties are to the morally just world; and my happiest and most stunning opportunity for raising hell with corruption and deceit are with other Black people. I suppose that makes me a part, an expression, of Black Radicalism.”

A Man in Transit

The many lives of Billy Wilder

BY NOAH ISENBERG

Among the many stories that Billy Wilder liked to tell late in his life was the one he recounted with great gusto the night he received the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award at the 1988 Academy Awards ceremony. Shortly after he arrived in Hollywood in 1934, Wilder had to cross the border into Mexico to renew his visa at the American consulate in Mexicali. He was particularly anxious about the procedure, since he had left behind nearly all supporting documents in his hasty departure from Nazi Germany and feared this might result in his automatic rejection. He explained his situation to the consular official, who seemed more concerned with enforcing US immigration policy than sympathizing with a foreigner’s plight. When asked what he did for a living, Wilder replied sheepishly, “I write movies.” After a tense moment of prolonged pacing, the official punched two stamps in his passport: “Write some good ones,” he said.

For the next 50-odd years, Wilder would write, and eventually direct and produce, quite a few good ones—more than 30 in all. In collaboration with his longtime writing partner Charles Brackett, he began with a string of highly successful, innuendo-laden screwball comedy scripts, including Ninotchka for Ernst Lubitsch, Wilder’s lifelong role model, and Ball of...
Fire for Howard Hawks. But he quickly turned to graver matters, using his experiences in that Mexican border town for the semi-autobiographical screenplay for Hold Back the Dawn, written in 1941, about a Romanian dancer, Georges Iscovescu, languishing in a shabby hotel with other Middle European refugees in the hopes of securing an entrance visa. Like Wilder himself, Iscovescu is “a man perpetually in transit.”

Wilder’s outsized talent for moving freely, almost effortlessly, from stories of joy to those of sorrow, indulging his audience with plenty of clever role play, masquerade, and subterfuge, became hallmarks of his career as a director. Starting in 1942 with The Major and the Minor, a screwball comedy starring Ginger Rogers and Ray Milland, he covered a dizzying variety of genres, from sex comedies and film noirs to melodramas, buddy movies, and musicals. He made pictures for the major studios and for independent outfits. He directed some of classic Hollywood’s most celebrated stars (Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Gloria Swanson, Shirley MacLaine, Gary Cooper, William Holden, Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon) and partnered with writing talents that included, along with Brackett, Raymond Chandler, George Axelrod, and his multi-decade collaborator I.A.L. (“Iz”) Diamond. The impetus to succeed, to entertain and dazzle his audience, to offer stories that were both true to life and brimming with acerbic wit, came early to Wilder. “I did not want to disappoint that dear man in Mexicali,” he explained.

Joseph McBride retells the anecdote from Wilder’s Thalberg Award speech in his absorbing study Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge. The author of several biographies of Hollywood directors, from Frank Capra and Orson Welles to John Ford, McBride offers a trenchant reappraisal of Wilder’s half-century-long career. Rather than present the director’s life and work chronologically, he organizes his book thematically: The first part is titled “The Phantoms of the Past,” the second “Write Some Good Ones,” and the third “Isn’t It Romantic?” (a title borrowed from the Rodgers and Hart song used to great effect in several of the pictures Wilder made at Paramount).

A former screenwriter and journalist who interviewed Wilder repeatedly in the 1970s, McBride has produced a book that “is drawn from more than fifty years of thinking, talking, reading, teaching and writing about Billy Wilder.” This synthetic approach makes for a deeply researched account, long on granular detail and frequently illuminating. Part of what makes McBride’s critical study distinctive is the sustained attention he devotes to the first phase of Wilder’s life and career, well before he arrived in the United States and embarked on a charmed career in Hollywood. Wilder’s European years, when he worked as a journalist and screenwriter in Vienna and Berlin, proved to be just as important for his unique vision and personal voice as his years in America. The intellectual historian Peter Gay famously likened the fragility of the Weimar Republic to “a dance on the edge of a volcano,” and that was how Wilder lived much of his early life—including, at one point, a memorable stint working as a dancer for hire at a posh Berlin hotel. “As a Jew who lived successively in several countries before finding refuge in Hollywood,” McBride observes, Wilder “often resembled a cabaret artist darkly amusing his audience by dancing on the edge of an abyss.”

Wilder was born in late June 1906 in the Galician town of Sucha, roughly 30 miles southwest of Kraków. He was given the name Samuel at birth, but his mother, Eugenia, a German-speaking Jew from a petit bourgeois Austro-Hungarian family, took to calling him “Billie” (the spelling was later Americanized) after Buffalo Bill, whose traveling Wild West show she purportedly saw when she was a young girl living with an uncle in New York City. Billie’s father, Max (né Hersh Mendel), ran a small chain of railway cafés along the Vienna-to-Lemberg line. The family soon relocated to Kraków, where Max managed the Hotel City, and then, during the first years of the Great War, moved on to Vienna, where Billie attended primary and secondary school.

In his teens, Wilder began contributing short pieces to the Viennese tabloid press. He filed crossword puzzles, covered sporting events, and wrote about the city’s night life and entertainment. Shortly before his 20th birthday, in June 1926, he met one of his early idols, the American jazz musician Paul Whiteman, during the Vienna leg of his European tour and followed him and his orchestra to Berlin. There Wilder worked for Whiteman as something of a press agent for the band and ended up staying in the city for the next seven years as a freelance reporter and budding screenwriter. Wilder took his cues as a stringer from the Prague-born veteran journalist Egon Erwin Kisch, whose notion of the “racing” or “roving reporter” he quickly made his own—in McBride’s apt formulation, Wilder was “always going somewhere in a hurry.”

As a young man, Wilder fashioned himself in the image of the American hard-boiled newspaperman with a ubiquitous snap-brim hat and a rhetorical brio, spit, and swagger. He often worked into his screenplays variations of this figure, beginning with Der T efelsreporter (Hell of a Reporter) in 1929, a yarn that features a hungry journalist on the hunt for a big scoop. The journalist was played by an American actor named Eddie Polo, and Wilder himself has a cameo in a crowd scene with other reporters. “Journalism played a key role in turning Wilder into the incisive, witty social commentator he would become as he moved into the world of screenwriting and directing,” McBride notes. It’s easy to trace the line from Der T efelsreporter to movies like Ace in the Hole (1951), Wilder’s scathing critique of sensationalism and the American public’s bottomless appetite for it, and The Front Page (1974), his adaptation of the classic Ben Hecht–Charles MacArthur play, cowritten with Diamond.

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**Billy Wilder**

Dancing on the Edge

By Joseph McBride

Columbia University Press. 680 pp. $40

In February 1933, shortly after the Reichstag fire, Wilder fled Berlin for Paris. There he lived amid an illustrious group of soon-to-be Hollywood...
transplants that included the actor Peter Lorre, the composer Friedrich Holländer, and the journalist Hans Lustig, all of them stateless refugees residing at the Hotel Ansonia. Wilder continued his work as a screenwriter, collaborating with several of his neighbors from the Ansonia and codirecting his first film, *Mauvaise Graine (Bad Seed)—*a frenetic picture made “out of sheer necessity,” he later recalled—about a wealthy young cad who gets mixed up with a gang of car thieves. By the time he boarded the S.S. *Aquitania* bound for America in January 1934, he had a short-term studio contract in hand and a smattering of English words at his command.

From the moment he arrived in North America, Wilder doggedly pursued his career as a screenwriter, mainly working with American-born counterparts as a means of balancing his subpar language skills. He liked to listen to the radio, especially sports broadcasts, to gain a better facility with the local idiom and sensibility. Although in many respects he would become a thoroughly American filmmaker—he was naturalized as a US citizen in August 1940—he never shed his European identity: He frequently returned to sources and to cast and crew members that he knew from the old country, and he also shot quite a few of his films in Europe. As a journalist in Weimar Berlin, he had profiled the Swiss French writer Claude Anet, whose 1920 novel *Ariane, Jeune Fille Russe* he and Diamand later adapted as *Love in the Afternoon,* starring Hepburn and Cooper and set in Paris, where Wilder shot exteriors for the film.

Wilder’s love for Berlin, the city in which he came of age professionally and otherwise, likewise never left him. McBride examines what he regards as Wilder’s Berlin trilogy, starting with *Menschen am Sonntag (People on Sunday),* the highly acclaimed late silent film that was nominally based on an earlier newspaper piece by Wilder, fleshed out on napkins at the Romanisches Café on Kurfürsten-damm. He then moves on to *A Foreign Affair,* Wilder’s 1948 tale of postwar political opportunism starring Marlene Dietrich as a nightclub chanteuse accompanied by Holländer, her standby pianist and Wilder’s former neighbor at the Hotel Ansonia, before concluding with *One, Two, Three,* a wicked political satire of the divided city and its competing ideologies, made in the fateful summer of 1961. Although not set in Berlin, *Stalag 17,* the 1953 prisoner-of-war dramedy in which Wilder cast his fellow émigré filmmaker Otto Preminger in the unforgettable role of camp commandant Colonel von Scherbach, similarly wrestled (or at least tangoed) with the past, as did his flashback to Germany after the war—with Dietrich once more cast as a nightclub singer belting out Holländer tunes—in *Witness for the Prosecution,* made four years later.

The recurrence of such European trappings were explainable in part because Wilder never fully let go of either the pleasure or the pain of his cultural heritage. As McBride notes, he had witnessed firsthand repeated instances of virulent anti-Semitism in Vienna and Berlin in the 1920s and ‘30s. Despite Wilder’s repeated attempts to secure safe passage for his mother and other family members, they perished in the Nazi death camps. Immediately after the war, he returned to Germany as a civilian in the US Army to help supervise the documentary *Todesmühlen (Death Mills),* directed by the Czech filmmaker Hanuš Burger, which aimed at the denazification and reeducation of the German public. But Wilder was less invested in didactic films like this than he was in movies with an explicit intention to entertain and tell good stories. For many years, he continued to be preoccupied with the “phantoms of the past,” as the lyric from Holländer’s “Ruins of Berlin” in *A Foreign Affair* goes, but he also wanted to make sure his audience was treated to a good laugh. “What I hate most about the Austrians,” he later remarked with his signature wit, “is that I cannot hate the Austrians.”

The ghosts of Wilder’s past occasionally haunt his American films as well. A movie like *Double Indemnity,* a pitch-perfect noir that luxuriates in its own potent cocktail of fatalism and existential dread, emerged at a moment when Wilder was searching in vain for the relatives he had left behind and was made to feel the hopelessness that defines the tenor of the picture, if not the entire genre. The same is true of *The Apartment,* the dark comedy in which C.C. Baxter (Jack Lemmon), a cog in the corporate machine, embodies a kind of exploitation that Wilder knew all too well from his days as a vulnerable freelancer. Even a raucous sex comedy like *Some Like It Hot* has hints of undigested trauma—for instance, its scene depicting the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre, though portrayed as the Chicago mob hit that it was, recalls the bloody violence inflicted by the Gestapo in the wake of the Nazi takeover.

From the moment he landed in the US, **Wilder pursued a career as a screenwriter.** Among the strengths of *Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge* are its efforts to brush Wilder against the grain and, in the process, debunk several of the prevailing myths surrounding his reception. McBride is especially keen on retiring the once pervasive idea of Wilder as a cynic. To that end, he re-casts him as “a closet romantic beneath his veneer of hard-boiled realism”—an argument that he returns to several times throughout the book—declaring it to be the filmmaker’s dominant narrative tone and existential mode. Likewise, McBride
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takes umbrage at the idea of Wilder as a sexist or a misogynist, pointing to a long list of strong, noble female characters, from Helen St. James (Jane Wyman) in *The Lost Weekend* and Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olson) in *Sunset Boulevard* to Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine) in *The Apartment* and Irma (MacLaine again) in *Irma la Douce*. “Wilder’s good women maintain their generosity of spirit,” McBride writes, “despite inhabiting crass worlds in which women are treated with utter contempt.” I’m not sure all readers will buy this argument, but McBride marshals his evidence to fairly persuasive effect.

In an industry in which the old adage that you’re only as good as your last picture continued to hold currency, Wilder’s later years were not always kind to him. Quite a few of his films were box office flops, and some, like *Kiss Me, Stupid* from 1964, a wild romp starring Dean Martin and Kim Novak that pushed (or, really, shoved) the envelope on puritanical social mores concerning sex and infidelity, were widely regarded as offensive, if not downright smutty, by audiences and critics alike. In her outlier review of the film in *Vogue*, Joan Didion called Wilder “a moralist, a recorder of human venality” and proclaimed *Kiss Me, Stupid* “a profoundly affecting picture, as witnessed by the number of people who walk out on it.” Wilder rarely responded to his critics, but in the case of Didion, he felt obliged to send her a thank-you note. “I read your piece in the beauty parlor while sitting under the hair dryer,” he wrote with a wink and a nudge, “and it sure did the old pornographer’s heart good.”

In McBride’s own 1974 profile and interview of Wilder during the shooting of *The Front Page*, he mentioned the filmmaker’s response to a question about “the Wilder touch,” a variation on the famous quality ascribed to his mentor, Ernst Lubitsch: “It’s just all about the writing in the story,” he insisted. Wilder remained a writer and a storyteller until the very end. He outlived nearly all his friends and collaborators and managed to rack up still more lifetime achievement awards until his death, at the ripe old age of 95, in 2002. “Medals, they’re like hemorrhoids,” quipped the six-time Academy Award winner as he neared the end. “Sooner or later every asshole gets one.”

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**Archetypes**

**Euphoria breaks the teen drama mold**

**BY ERIN SCHWARTZ**

The second season of *Euphoria*, the HBO show created by Sam Levinson and adapted from an Israeli show of the same name, resumes its story at a house party on New Year’s Eve. In separate rooms, self-contained dramas play out: a flirtation, a farce, a tragedy, a fight. In the living room, Lexi Howard (Maude Apatow) and Fez (Angus Cloud) shoot the shit about God; Lexi’s sister Cassie (Sydney Sweeney) hides in a bathtub, her hand clamped over her mouth, after nearly getting caught hooking up with the ex-boyfriend of her best friend Maddy (Alexa Demie). In the laundry room, Rue Bennett (Zendaya), the show’s narrator and protagonist, does an unidentified mix of drugs and feels her heart rate drop sharply, something she recognizes as a warning of cardiac arrest. Everyone’s looking for someone they can’t find—there are frenetic, disjointed shots of people dancing, drinking, just barely missing each other—until the party explodes in a sudden act of retribution and violence.

*Euphoria* is polarizing, and many of the common criticisms are hard to dispute. The show is unevenly paced, picking up and dropping subplots on a whim; central characters disappear for episodes; a jumble of narrators, interlocking timelines, and fourth-wall-breaking monologues immediately undermine any frame the story constructs for itself. The finale of the second season, which left a main plot arc unresolved, devoted three and a half minutes to an acoustic guitar ballad. The practical realities of being in high school—attending class, for example, or
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schoolwork getting in the way of hanging out—figure so tangentially in the lives of its characters that an online joke refers to the setting only as “Euphoria High School.” (The school does, in fact, have a name: East Highland High.) One of the earlier critiques of the show, that there is something perverse about the sheer frequency of teen sex scenes performed by a cast of twentysomething actors and written by a director in his thirties, doesn’t feel entirely unfounded. The Euphoria fandom is known for enthusiastically cataloging these shortcomings—with criticism often directed at Levinson specifically—while continuing to ardently follow the show.

Euphoria has enough moments of unusual insight that no matter how much it irks its audience, it’s hard to write off—like the party episode, where the overlapping scenes feel worthwhile despite not adding up to a neat, coherent whole. Writing in The Nation, Ellen Willis once described The Sopranos, another controversial HBO show, as “a postmodern Middlemarch,” and I’ve been thinking about Euphoria in similar terms, at first as a joke and then more seriously: a messy study of provincial life transposed as a teen soap opera. While the show can seem flat, superfluous, or ridiculous at times, it is distinguished less by its plot than by an ensemble that feels compellingly real despite being drawn from archetypes—cruel cheerleaders, burnouts, closeted football stars, sexually daring theater kids. It requires patience from its viewers, but at its best, Euphoria expands what we can expect from its genre.

Euphoria joins a well-established canon of gritty teen dramas (My So-Called Life, Skins, and the like) that depict sex, drug use, and other risky behavior within a particularly thorny narrative framework. Unlike the adjacent genre of teen sitcoms, which often deal with the same themes but facilitate, in most cases, neat and didactic resolutions (for example, the upbeat Netflix show Sex Education), the gritty teen drama is unsatisfying. It adopts the contradictory postures of nihilism and existential longing, the presumption of depicting harsh realities countered by the instinct to embellish, sentimentalize, and mythologize. You know you’re watching a gritty teen drama when a character does something embarrassing but relatable, like Rue binge-watching the reality show Love Island and then, in the next episode, threatening a classmate that she’ll “fucking burn your whole shit to the ground” by exploding at his family in a scene with the comedic beats of a Tim Robinson sketch, in which Cal pisses on the floor and delivers the exit line “I’ll see you assholes later.”

Still, there are places where Euphoria’s melodramatic instincts are put to better use. In the first season, a hazy, dim hallway begins to spin sickeningly after Rue gets high, an effect Levinson achieved with a rotating set that required the extras to be strapped to the ground while Zendaya stumbled from surface to surface. Backstories are cut together with the frenetic, free-associative style of editing pioneered on YouTube; fantasy sequences are washed in soft light and neon and costumed in aspirational luxury fashion. An expository scene in the first season, in which Maddy analyzes porn like an actor learning a new dialect, is one of the funniest depictions of performative sexuality I’ve seen. In the best of these moments, it feels like a character’s inner state takes over and the camera is just trying to keep up. “We established early on that each scene ought to be an interpretation of reality or a representation of an emotional reality,” Levinson told Vulture in a 2019 interview. He said a question asked frequently on set was “How can we create a world that reveals the hopes and wishes of the characters that exist within it?”

The second season concludes with a self-referential manifestation of Levinson’s theory of the show: Lexi Howard, a sup-

Couplets

I became myself.
I became myself.

No, I always was myself.
There’s no such person as myself.

I wouldn’t have to turn my eye
inward, I thought, if I could train my eye

on him—the one I loved.
But I was wrong. My eye loved

everything it fell upon.
And then one day it fell upon

a mirror. And he was nowhere
in the mirror. And she was everywhere.

MAGGIE MILLNER
porting character in the first season, is sick of living in her sister Cassie’s shadow and writes, produces, and stages a high school play about the lives of several of Euphoria’s main characters, told from her own perspective. Lexi’s play—the presentation of her own emotional reality—is the only break in Euphoria from Rue’s narration, and it’s interrupted when Cassie storms onstage and airs her grievances about her portrayal. (“If that makes me a villain, then so fucking be it,” she says, like a Real Housewives cast member.) A multi-person brawl ensues, the high school actors battling with their real-life counterparts, fighting for the version of reality that feels right to them.

When I was in high school, the gritty teen drama series of the moment was Skins, a British program that followed overlapping groups of teenage friends and classmates in Bristol. It felt taboo to admit that the show, and in particular a character named Cassie (no relation to Euphoria’s Cassie), played by Hannah Murray, provided me with a lush, tragic pathos I used to bolster an eating disorder I had developed around the time I began watching. I was thrilled to have Cassie; watching her drift through her days with gentle, tortured grace made what I was doing feel less mundane and incoherent. Even if both lives—my real one and Cassie’s fictional one—were unhappy, the show gave me a way to cast myself briefly in a more dramatic light, one that made things feel more dire and more important.

A cultural anxiety about gritty teen dramas is that they glamorize and thus facilitate dangerous behavior, or even call into existence and thus facilitate dangerous behavior, or even call into existence risk where there had previously been none. While there are certainly irresponsible and exploitative ways to portray themes of teen sex, substance use, and self-harm—the novel and Netflix show 13 Reasons Why, which involves sexual assault and suicide, comes to mind—I’m not sure Euphoria is so easy to categorize in those terms.

Many stubborn problems begin in young adulthood; many of their real-life counterparts, fighting for the version of reality that feels right to them.

In placing these conflicts into a framework that makes their circumstances behind them are, for the time being, out of your mind—I’m not sure Euphoria is so easy to categorize in those terms. Many stubborn problems begin in young adulthood; many of their real-life counterparts, fighting for the version of reality that feels right to them.

At its best, Euphoria expands what we can expect from its genre.
In the 1980s and ‘90s, groups like Operation Rescue staged massive blockades of abortion clinics. Those incidents mostly stopped after the 1994 FACE Act made it a crime to block a clinic’s entrance. But some clinics still face protests that attract hundreds of abortion opponents, and across the country, protesters still try to intercept patients on their way into clinics, as Lauren Rankin documents in her new book, *Bodies on the Line: At the Front Lines of the Fight to Protect Abortion in America*. Without volunteers to walk with patients, “access to safe, legal abortion would have disappeared long before the crisis moment in which America now finds itself,” Rankin writes. —Amy Littlefield

**AL:** Why did you decide to write about clinic escorts?

**LR:** So many of the books that come out about abortion focus on the legal side. But in my own experience as a clinic escort, I had come to understand that the law really only goes so far. I wrote the book that I needed to read in this moment of real crisis, which is [one that conveys the message]: People can do something. Volunteers saw a problem, and they found a way, however haphazard, to try to fix it.

**AL:** What does a clinic escort do?

**LR:** A clinic escort is a volunteer who walks with and supports a patient and possibly their companion past protesters into a clinic. Nearly every clinic escort I spoke with who is currently doing this work volunteers at a clinic where their team has a non-engagement policy. They won’t engage with anti-abortion protesters, so that their focus is on the patient and they’re not escalating the potential conflict. That’s not true everywhere. At the Pink House in Mississippi, they call themselves “clinic defenders.” They will talk back to the protesters, they will play music, they will engage in a way that they feel is trying to normalize abortion.

**AL:** How can people support those seeking an abortion?

**LR:** The thing I would tell people more than anything is: Google first, then act. Find the activists who are already doing this. Ask them, “What do you need?”
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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues. He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

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

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