How I Stopped Being Gay

When I came out, I steeled myself to join a minority—only to find that my identity had become a marketing niche.

BENJAMIN MOSER
I’m a composer, citizen of the Stockbridge Munsee Community, American . . . and an atheist.

I’m one of more than 75 million secular Americans who are not religious. The “Nones” (those of us unaffiliated with religion) are now 29 percent of the U.S. population. We’re the largest “denomination” by religious identification!

As a secular voter, I trust in reason, science and America’s secular Constitution.

I want Congress, my state legislature, my public officials and our courts to:

- Keep religion out of government and social policy.
- Keep religion out of public schools.
- Keep religion out of bedrooms, personal lives and health care decisions, including when or whether to have children, and whom to love or marry.
- Use my tax dollars only for evidence-based, not faith-based, purposes.

**IF YOU AGREE WITH ME, PLEASE VOTE YOUR SECULAR VALUES!**

And, please, join the Freedom From Religion Foundation.  
ffrf.us/nation  1.800.335.4021

or request a complimentary issue of FFRF’s newspaper Freethought Today, ffrf.us/newspaper

FFRF.ORG  FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
turned back on...

praying for the lights to be

stuffy Bayonne rumpus rooms,

After playing spin the bottle in

figure came out... To Barney's relief, the reaction

Still, back then, it was big news when a public

It turned out that for most

voters, his being gay didn’t

matter any more than his

his shoes...

Time for everyone

enough of that,

till. I'm hoping they don’t give a

voter says get the bridges built.

Stop nukes. Find shelter for the

homeless, and don’t steal from the

Good for you,

I think the average

d a n i e l l e r e n w i c k

were happy to cut

politics, they were happy to cut

And on the bullshitty side of

DAVID M

C

NEW / GETTY IMAGES

“He fights on issues

him overwhelmingly.

Mirror/Stage

Kendrick Lamar’s

Mr. Morale and the

Big Steppers.

v i c t o r i a l aw

Childbirth in Chains

VICTORIA LAW

COMMENT

Real Representation

Democrats need to stop

electing millionaires.

J O H N N I C H O L S

26

Deadline Poet

Election Night at the

Trump White House

C A L V I N T R I L L I N

Cover illustration: JOE CIARDIELLO

“Destroying Roe is about

restoring men’s perceived loss of

control not only over their own lives

but over women’s lives, too.”
T he system worked; the guardrails held. Except they almost didn’t. But thanks to a cadre of white Republican men, we still live in a free country. That was the ultimate message of the first three days of the January 6 Committee hearings. I know: The decision to rely on former Trump Republicans was a calculated one. And I am vastly underselling these hearings, on one level. We got photos, videos, and devastating testimony we hadn’t seen or heard before.

Clearly, the guardrails almost failed. The testimony of Capitol Police officer Caroline Edwards—“I was slipping in people’s blood”—will stay with me forever. President Donald Trump, who would soon be impeached for the second time, “summoned the mob, assembled the mob, and lit the flame of this attack,” in the words of the committee’s vice chair, Republican Liz Cheney. “Donald Trump and his allies and supporters are a clear and present danger to American democracy,” the archconservative lawyer J. Michael Luttig told the committee in the third hearing.

The real takeaway from the hearings so far is this: For at least two months, the “good” Trump staffers—lawyers and others in the inner circle, the so-called Team Normal—spent all their time fighting implausible theories about nonexistent voter fraud and nonexistent (at least legally) ways to overturn the Electoral College vote and hand the election to Trump. Yet none of them came to the American public and screamed, “Look at what’s happening here!” And given what we’ve learned in the hearings, everyone who testified absolutely should have.

Day 3 laid that out most clearly. It focused on how Trump and his allies tried to bludgeon Vice President Mike Pence into using his supposed power to somehow thwart what is historically the ceremonial counting of Electoral College votes, which would certify Joe Biden’s victory, on January 6. The hearing’s revelations were supposed to be shocking, but except for some new (and truly chilling) video footage of insurrectionists calling for Pence to be brought out and strung up, the effect was oddly numbing.

We learned how much time Pence staffers spent talking to John Eastman, a law professor at Chapman University with a couple of nothing ideas about how to overturn Biden’s election. The committee heard about day after day of meetings in which Pence and/or staffers listened to ideas that Eastman himself would, at times, disown. But why were so many of the people around Pence and Trump, even those on Team Normal, meeting with Eastman constantly? Hint: to appease Trump, their deranged boss.

And it wasn’t just Eastman. Trump’s and Pence’s staffers had to deal daily with the obviously lame claims of voter fraud from Rudy Giuliani and his band of should-be inmates. They’d shoot them down and come back to work the next day and do it again.

We’re supposed to be grateful that these staffers thwarted Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election and hold on to power. And, I guess, I am. But none of them went public. Sure, we remember the leaks to favored reporters at The Washington Post and The New York Times, some of whom undersold what they were told and saved the gory details for their books. We got leaks, but leaks are easily undermined. We needed whistleblowers, and we never got them.

If we’d seen a name and a face for one of these Republican heroes, the violence of January 6 might have been averted. Take Pence’s chief of staff, Marc Short. He said he alerted his boss’s Secret Service detail to the possibility that Trump’s escalating attacks on Pence, for refusing to reject Biden’s electoral vote majority on January 6, might put his boss in danger. But why not warn the whole country? Or at least the whole Capitol?

And then there’s Pence himself. Like so many other Republican men who were paraded before us as heroes at the hearings, Pence did, ultimately, act to save democracy. His counsel, Greg Jacob, insisted that his boss’s first impulse was to resist the efforts, especially by the farcical Eastman, to get him to reject the electoral votes he was supposed to preside over counting. But that doesn’t ring true: Pence ran around to various friends and advisers, including Luttig and former vice president Dan Quayle, among others, to see if he could find a way to follow Trump’s orders.

In the end, he did not. At his last meeting with Trump, where he rejected Trump’s efforts to blame voter fraud and find a way to overturn Biden’s election, Pence still tried to endorse Trump’s delusional views. “I’ve done everything I could” to back up his boss’s efforts to hold on to the White House, he reportedly told Trump. Let’s remember: They all did. Until they couldn’t anymore.
COMMENT/DWAYNE MONROE

You Talking to Me?

What the latest AI hype is really about.

IN RECENT WEEKS, AN UNLIKELY DRAMA HAS UNFOLDED in the media. The center of this drama isn’t a celebrity or a politician, but a sprawling computational system, created by Google, called LaMDA (Language Model for Dialogue Applications). A Google engineer, Blake Lemoine, was suspended for declaring on Medium that LaMDA, which he interacted with via text, was “sentient.” This declaration (and a subsequent Washington Post article) sparked a debate between people who think Lemoine is merely stating an obvious truth—that machines can now, or soon will, show the qualities of intelligence, autonomy, and sentience—and those who reject this claim as naive at best and deliberate misinformation at worst. Before explaining why I think those who oppose the sentience narrative are right, and why that narrative serves the power and deliberate misinformation at worst. Before explaining why I think those who oppose the sentience narrative are right, and why that narrative serves the power interests of the tech industry, let’s define what we’re talking about.

LaMDA is a Large Language Model (LLM). LLMs ingest vast amounts of text—almost always from Internet sources such as Wikipedia and Reddit—and, by iteratively applying statistical and probabilistic analysis, identify patterns in that text. This is the input. These patterns, once “learned”—a loaded word in artificial intelligence (AI)—can be used to produce plausible text as output. The ELIZA program, created in the mid-1960s by the MIT computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum, was a famous early example. ELIZA didn’t have access to a vast ocean of text or high-speed processing like LaMDA does, but the basic principle was the same. One way to get a better sense of LLMs is to note that AI researchers Emily M. Bender and Timnit Gebru call them “stochastic parrots.”

There are many troubling aspects to the growing use of LLMs. Computation on the scale of LLMs requires massive amounts of electrical power; most of this comes from fossil sources, adding to climate change. The supply chains that feed these systems and the human cost of mining the raw materials for computer components are also concerns. And there are urgent questions about what such systems are to be used for—and for whose benefit.

The goal of most AI (which began as a pure research aspiration announced at a Dartmouth conference in 1956 but is now dominated by the directives of Silicon Valley) is to replace human effort and skill with thinking machines. So, every time you hear about self-driving trucks or cars, instead of marveling at the technical feat, you should detect the outlines of an anti-labor program.

The futuristic promises about thinking machines don’t hold up. This is hype, yes—but also a propaganda campaign waged by the tech industry to convince us that they’ve created, or are very close to creating, systems that can be doctors, chefs, and even life companions.

A simple Google search for the phrase “AI will...” returns millions of results, usually accompanied by images of ominous sci-fi-style robots, suggesting that AI will soon replace human beings in a dizzying array of areas. What’s missing is any examination of how these systems might actually work and what their limitations are. Once you part the curtain and see the wizard pulling levers, straining to keep the illusion going, you’re left wondering: Why are we being told this?

Consider the case of radiologists. In 2016, the computer scientist Geoffrey Hinton, confident that automated analysis had surpassed human insight, declared that “we should stop training radiologists now.” Extensive research has shown his statement to have been wildly premature. And while it’s tempting to see it as a temporarily embarrassing bit of overreach, I think we need to ask questions about the political economy underpinning such declarations.

Radiologists are expensive and, in the US, very much in demand—creating what some call a labor aristocracy. In the past, the resulting shortages were addressed by providing incentives to workers. If this could be remedied instead with automation, it would devalue the skilled labor performed by radiologists, solving the scarcity problem while increasing the power of owners over the remaining staff.

The promotion of the idea of automated radiology, regardless of existing capabilities, is attractive to the ownership class because it holds the promise of weakening labor’s power and increasing—via workforce cost reduction and greater scalability—profitability. Who wants robot taxis more than the owner of a taxi company?

I say promotion, because there is a large gap between marketing hype and reality. This gap is unimportant to the larger goal of convincing the general population that their work can be replaced by machines. The most important AI outcome isn’t thinking machines—still a remote goal—but a demoralized population, subjected to a maze of brittle automated systems sold as being better than the people who are forced to navigate life through these systems.

The AI debate may seem remote from everyday life. But the stakes are extraordinarily high. Such systems already determine who gets hired and fired, who receives benefits, and who’s making their way onto our roads—despite being untrustworthy, error prone, and no replacement for human judgment.

And there is one additional peril: though inherently unreliable, such systems are being used, step by step, to obscure the culpability of the corporations that deploy them through the claim of “sentience.”

This escape hatch from corporate responsibility may represent their greatest danger.

Dwayne Monroe is an Amsterdam-based Marxist tech analyst. He is writing a book, Attack Mannequins, exploring the use of AI as propaganda.
Childbirth in Chains

Tennessee is the latest state to ban shackling—the practice of forcing incarcerated pregnant women to wear handcuffs, a belly chain, and leg irons during labor—but 11 states still allow it. (Though the data are limited, medical advocates estimate that more than 3,000 pregnant people are incarcerated each year.)

3,000

Number of pregnant people in prison

Eleven states allow shackling during labor:
Alaska, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming

It's time for every state to end this cruel practice.
Real Representation

Progressive Senate hopefuls say voters must stop sending millionaires to Congress “who sell out working families.”

When Elizabeth Warren recently stumped in Wisconsin for the progressive US Senate candidate Mandela Barnes, she reminded crowds that Barnes is not a billionaire who can “just write a check” to pay for his campaign. The Massachusetts senator was picking up on a major theme for Wisconsin’s 35-year-old lieutenant governor in his bid for the Democratic nomination, in one of the highest-profile Senate races of 2022. With Warren at his side, Barnes told supporters in Madison, “I don’t have millions and personal wealth.”

Unlike a pair of wealthy rivals in the August 9 Democratic primary—Milwaukee Bucks executive Alex Lasry and Wisconsin State Treasurer Sarah Godlewski—and the Republican incumbent, Ron Johnson, Barnes can’t fund his own campaign. Raised in one of Milwaukee’s most economically depressed neighborhoods, he is the son of a United Auto Workers member and a public school teacher. His latest financial disclosure form listed assets of less than $75,000.

As a front-running contender in the primary race, however, Barnes argues that his background is an asset. He says Democrats need a nominee who is clearly distinguished from Johnson, whom the challenger dismisses as “a multimillionaire who sells out working families while giving his wealthiest donors $215 million in tax breaks.”

“It is important for people to make a real choice at the ballot box, and honestly, I feel that my contrast with Senator Johnson cannot be more apparent,” Barnes told me. “I would plunge the median income in the Senate if I was elected. It would free-fall.” The Democrats’ best hope for connecting with frustrated voters in a midterm election year characterized by economic volatility and high inflation is to nominate “more people with a real-world, working-class experience,” he explained.

Barnes is not the only Democrat this year who’s arguing that the party needs to elevate more working-class Senate candidates. In Missouri, when Trudy Busch Valentine, the granddaughter of the beer baron August Anheuser Busch Sr., entered the race for that state’s open Senate seat, she got immediate pushback from her top rival. “Missouri deserves a warrior for working people, a proven patriot who’s served his country, who has the courage to stand up to criminal capitalists,” declared the campaign of Lucas Kunce, a Marine Corps veteran and a former director of national security policy at the American Economic Liberties Project. Kunce has called out political compromises that see “bipartisan majorities vote for Wall Street bailouts, bad trade deals, Big Oil subsidies, forever wars, and overseas nation building,” and has promised not just to flip the seat from Republican to Democrat but to upend a political status quo in which “billionaires get to call all the shots in our economy.”

Barnes raises similarly populist themes. “You’ve got to look at politicians and their financial interests—especially when you are talking about ultra-wealthy politicians. They are not going to take votes that make them less rich,” the lieutenant governor said. “If the decision is to take a vote that helps to uplift the community or increases their wealth, the community is going to get left behind every time.” The candidate is so certain this message will resonate that he’s made it central to a campaign ad in which he tells voters, “I’m not like most senators, or any of the other millionaires running for Senate. My mom was a teacher; my dad worked third shift. I know how hard you’re working, and I know that by bringing manufacturing home, we create jobs and we lower costs. If we want to change Washington, we’ve got to change the people we send there.”

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel noted the ad’s “reference to multimillionaires Lasry, Godlewski and Johnson.” The Republican incumbent spent $9 million of his own funds to finance his initial Senate bid in 2010. This year, Johnson—who famously objected that the 2017 Republican tax cuts didn’t go far enough to help the owners of corporations—is relying on large donations and corporate PAC money to fund a campaign that has already spent $6.9 million and has benefited from more than $5 million in outside spending.

At the same time, Lasry is writing substantial checks to pay for a campaign that has already spent more than $8 million—64 percent of which was self-financed by the candidate, according to the independent nonprofit OpenSecrets. Of the more than $5 million that Godlewski has raised, almost 65 percent is self-financed. In contrast, Barnes’s self-financing figure is zero, as is that of Outagamie County Executive Tom Nelson, a progressive populist who has ranked fourth in recent polling.

Barnes, whose campaign is based on donations averaging less than $40, is at or near the top in recent polls. He’ll be outspent, but he’s confident that he has the winning message for a fall campaign against a millionaire Republican. “Not being a millionaire gives me a better perspective,” said Barnes, who argues that voters will respond to a candidate who recognizes that “the reason the Senate is so broken is because these people do not share the experience of everyday Americans.”

“If we want to change Washington, we’ve got to change the people we send there.”

—Mandela Barnes
Freeze Your Eggs

The right isn’t just gunning for abortion rights, but for any procedure that allows women to control their destiny.

IN NOVEMBER OF LAST YEAR, I FROZE 16 EGGS. I HAD met the man I now plan to marry a few months earlier, but if the relationship hadn’t worked out, I was prepared to become a solo parent. I was tired of feeling like I’d fucked up by failing to find a suitable romantic partner during my peak childbearing years. The women of my generation have more education and workforce participation (pre-pandemic) than at any time in history, but none of the social affirmation or infrastructure to support our ambitions. Even the heterosexual millennial men who are our peers aren’t necessarily interested in a financially or professionally successful partner if she doesn’t put his career first. And I wasn’t terribly interested in doing that.

The prime reason women elect to freeze our eggs, according to a Yale anthropologist who was the lead author for the largest study on the topic so far, involves their “lack of stable partnerships with men committed to marriage and parenting.” The 2018 study found that “most of the women had already pursued and completed their educational and career goals, but by their late 30s had been unable to find a lasting reproductive relationship with a stable partner.” Rather than partnering with the wrong person or resigning ourselves to permanent PANK (“professional aunt, no kids”) status, women—with money—who want children now have options outside of traditional relationships. Having committed the sin of staring down 40 without a mate, I decided to reject pity, self-imposed or otherwise, and proceed anyway.

This is exactly what the misogynists on the Supreme Court don’t want: elective parenthood that defies biology and traditional gender norms. Justice Samuel Alito’s leaked decision makes clear that the right is bent not only on overturning Roe v. Wade but on eliminating any exceptions to the most normative possible reproductive pathways—including the perverted one pursued by women like me, who dare to delay parenthood, remain competitive in the workforce against men, and have our baby too. It’s what so infuriates the incels and men’s rights crusaders: Without the threat of becoming shriveled-up old maids, it’s hard to convince women to settle for them. Ross Douthat said the quiet part out loud when he tweeted: “Worth noting that in the 50 yrs since Roe, men have become less likely to find a spouse, less likely to father kids or live with the kids they father, and less likely to participate in the workforce.” Destroying Roe is about restoring men’s perceived loss of control not only over their own lives but over women’s lives too. That’s why we don’t see any supposedly pro-life Christians rallying for my right to make a baby at 38 by mandating insurance coverage for egg freezing or in-vitro fertilization (IVF).

Indeed, the pending loss of abortion rights has set off an eager round of frenzied efforts across the states to limit those options. In Michigan, Attorney General Dana Nessel, who’s running for reelection, released a mash-up video of her male opponents declaring that the legality of birth control—settled by the Supreme Court in 1965—is now a matter for the states to decide. Lawmakers in Missouri and Louisiana have introduced bills defining Plan B and even IUDs as abortifacients, since they violate the fundamentalist Christian definition of life (the instant sperm meets an egg). Louisiana nearly criminalized IVF with a bill that would have granted full rights to “all unborn children from the moment of fertilization.” Since IVF entails creating multiple embryos from extracted eggs in the hope that just one will be viable enough to implant in the womb, hard-liners regard the discarding of nonviable embryos as murder. The bill was later amended out of concern for couples struggling with infertility—a crime against innocents—as opposed to women who willfully reject their rightful role as caregivers by pursuing a technological solution outside their God-given reproductive capability. We are, as Matt Gaetz put it, “over-educated, under-loved millennials who sadly return from protests to a lonely microwave dinner with their cats.” The cries of “Just breastfeed!” in response to the baby formula shortage made the same point: Women who do not or cannot give over their entire bodies in service to others merit scorn.

I felt so much shame for so long thinking that I hadn’t accomplished parenthood the fun and free way, forcing me to pay a $20,000 tax—still, a luxury I was lucky to afford. It cost me time, mulling over what felt like an expensive admission of failure, as well as frustration that I should be considered a failure at all. No wonder. Egg freezing has been available as
GLOBAL HEALTH PARTNERS is launching a broad-based, urgent drive to supply Cuba with desperately needed medical equipment. Havana’s Calixto Garcia Hospital, Cuba’s main trauma center, has 23 operating rooms but only two working anesthesia machines. We’re committed to raising $125,000 this month to start rushing urgently needed anesthesia machines, sutures and surgical supplies to Cuba.

Founded in 1896, Calixto Garcia was the first teaching institution in Cuba, and has trained thousands of Cuban doctors, nurses, and health care technicians. Calixto Garcia needs to perform some 50 lifesaving surgeries every day, but under the U.S. embargo, the hospital cannot purchase anesthesia machines, or desperately needed sutures and surgical tools.

“Imagine the anguish of having to wait for an operation that will save the life of your loved one.”
—Dr. Guillermo Sanchez, Chief of Maxillofacial Surgery, Calixto Garcia Hospital, Havana

Please show your solidarity now with a country that has done so much for the health of its own people, and for struggling communities around the world. Help supply the Calixto Garcia Hospital with the equipment they need to provide urgent care to the Cuban people.

You helped us send six million Covid vaccination syringes to Cuba; now please join us to supply Calixto Garcia’s dedicated doctors with the tools they need to save lives every day.

Global Health Partners has a U.S. Commerce Department license to send these medical supplies to Cuba. You can make an immediate tax-deductible donation to GHP at www.ghpartners.org or use the QR code.
an “elective” procedure only since 2012, when the American Society for Reproductive Medicine removed the “experimental” label. I knew one person who’d done it outside of medical necessity, and her advice to me at 35 was full of urgency: Get it done. When I finally did, I felt so proud of myself. Proud for prioritizing my happiness and holding out for it rather than settling for someone and something I didn’t want.

I was sitting in a café with a friend recently—a professional woman in her mid-30s who was at the start of a new relationship—when she broached the topic of egg freezing. I rushed to reassure her that this is now just what we do. Not out of urgency, not as a last-ditch effort, and not because we’ve failed at any test of worthiness. The pill was the revolutionary event of the late 20th century, and now it’s freezing our eggs. And just as the pill was prescribed only for married women before becoming available to single women and eventually teenage girls, it should become standard for women to freeze their eggs at 25. Set it and forget it unless and until the time is right. Women deserve the security and freedom that come from not living life like we’re up against an outdated countdown clock, just as men have. Oh, and cats. Lots of cats.

The pill was the revolutionary event of the 20th century. Now it’s freezing our eggs.

Caught in a Bipartisan Trap

The January 6 hearings show the dangers of trying to hold the GOP accountable while working across the aisle.

S PRESIDENT, JOE BIDEN HAS SET FOR HIMSELF TWO tasks that are, if not totally contradictory, at the very least in tension with each other: He’s been eager to work across the aisle to restore bipartisan comity, while also promising to defend American democracy from the existential threat of Trumpian authoritarianism. In the first 18 months of his presidency, he’s scored some successes on the bipartisan front (getting GOP support for an infrastructure bill and a few other measures, such as Postal Service reform and the establishment of Juneteenth as a national holiday). But these measures amount to—as even the most enthusiastic Biden fan would admit—far less than the New Deal– or Great Society–size presidency that many had hoped for. More to the point, there’s been little success in shoring up American democracy. The push for a new voting rights act has stalled, and Trumpist candidates openly promising to sabotage the next presidential election continue to win Republican primaries.

Biden’s dual program of bipartisanship and democratic restoration is supported by the Democratic Party establishment. It was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in remarks made in early May at the Aspen Ideas Climate Conference in Miami, who articulated this agenda with great clarity, saying action on the environment needed bipartisan cooperation and a “strong Republican Party.” Pelosi explained: “So rather than saying ‘Well, we have to defeat them,’ no, let’s just try to persuade them. I want the Republican Party to take back the party, take it back to where you cared about a woman’s right to choose, you cared about the environment.” She added, “Here I am, Nancy Pelosi, saying this country needs a strong Republican Party. Not a cult.”

It’s clear that by “a strong Republican Party,” what Pelosi means is a party that is not beholden to the radical right or figures like Donald Trump. More cynically, she’s perhaps boasting about the fact that the Democrats have disciplined the left wing of their party in order to govern from the center and would like to see the Republicans do the same.

The project of creating “a strong Republican Party” is a strange one. The history over many decades—not just during the Trump years, but going back to Barry Goldwater’s winning of the nomination in 1964—is of moderate Republicans being easily vanquished by the far right. After all, it’s hardly the case that the GOP in recent decades, even before Trump became the party’s standard-bearer in 2016, was strong on environmentalism or reproductive freedom.
But the plain fact that the Republicans aren’t willing to moderate hasn’t stopped the Democratic establishment from constantly trying to prop up the small number of Republicans who, if you are willing to make allowances for some egregious actions, might be mistaken for moderates. Biden, Pelosi, and other Democratic leaders are thus engaged in an impossible juggling act: They are simultaneously trying to govern as Democrats and pushing to reform their rival party (rather than, as is normal in a democracy, to defeat it).

The hearings into the January 6, 2021, attempted insurrection vividly illustrate the confusion of this conflicted agenda. On the one hand, under the able stewardship of Mississippi Representative Bennie Thompson, the hearings did a superb job of laying out the essential case: that Trump and his cronies egged on a mob to attack the Capitol, with the intent of overturning the results of the election. In making this case, the committee was careful to do everything possible to get Republican buy-in, even though Republican congressional bigwigs like Kevin McCarthy, the House minority leader, repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of the panel. The committee included two Republicans: Wyoming Representative Liz Cheney (who is vice chair) and Illinois Representative Adam Kinzinger. Cheney in particular was given pride of place, with Johnson describing her as “a patriot, a public servant of profound courage, of devotion to her oath and the Constitution.”

The hearings were largely aimed at sorting out good Republicans from bad, with much praise being lavished on former attorney general William Barr and former vice president Mike Pence. One of Pence’s assistants, attorney Greg Jacob, talked in the hearings about how on January 6 he turned to the story of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. The implication here is that Pence was like Daniel, a hero who stayed true even in the lions’ den.

But, on the other hand, this valorization of Barr and Pence is absurd. To be sure, there is value in having Barr state that Trump’s claims of election fraud are “bullshit.” And Pence has to be honored for resisting Trump’s threats and certifying the election results (although it’s worth noting that in so doing, he merely followed the example of every previous American vice president).

Yet both Barr and Pence were thoroughly complicit in the Trump presidency before January 6. Barr has said that he would vote for Trump if he were the party’s nominee in 2024. Pence has been extremely gingerly in his criticism of Trump, gesturing toward a need for the GOP and the country to move on. This is a position that serves Pence’s presidential ambitions but is not, to put it mildly, a profile in courage.

The big story of American politics is the increasing authoritarianism of the GOP. The January 6 hearings do nothing to counteract this trend. In her capacity as vice chair, Cheney has reportedly worked to shield top Republicans like Ginni Thomas, the wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, from investigation. It’s no surprise that Cheney is eager for a whitewash that targets only Trump and a few of his cronies while protecting the GOP. Less obvious is why Democrats are so eager to protect the good name of a party holding a knife to the neck of democracy.

Why are Democrats so eager to protect the good name of a party holding a knife to the neck of democracy?
hen people are asked what is the number one problem facing the economy, they overwhelmingly say it’s inflation—and they aren’t wrong. Inflation has been higher, broader, and more persistent than most experts predicted last year. The US annual inflation rate in May was 8.6 percent—the highest since 1981. Even before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine sent energy and food prices soaring, inflation had been higher than economists and lawmakers should have been comfortable with. Combating it requires an all-of-the-above approach, from investments in infrastructure to alleviate supply chain problems to public funding of care work to help with the labor supply. The Federal Reserve will need to tamp down demand, but it is not the solution. If the Fed raises interest rates too high too fast, it could trigger another recession. Only the government can provide the industrial policy that we need to ensure stability in food and energy prices.

Yet amid the rising prices, there are positive signs in the economy, ones that matter for everyday people. Right now, the labor market is stronger, more dynamic, and more equitable than nearly anyone following the economy foresaw. As we consider how to move the pandemic recovery into the next stage, these developments need to be not only acknowledged but protected.

First, the labor market has not been this strong for workers this early in a recovery in generations. And that is most likely due to the effects of the American Rescue Plan. There are between 1.75 million and 3 million more jobs than the Congressional Budget Office projected without the ARP, and labor force participation is 0.3 percent higher and unemployment 1.5 percent lower. This has left the United States in a much better position, both in terms of overall growth and wages, than Europe, which is facing similar inflation challenges.

The second strength is labor market dynamism. Over the past decade, economists and popular commentators have argued, correctly, that labor markets were too cold—meaning there were too few people switching jobs, starting businesses, or otherwise moving to find better and more productive places to work. This wasn’t just bad for workers; it was bad for the whole economy, which lost productivity and growth and became more sclerotic.

This problem has been solved by the white-hot labor market. Workers are upgrading their jobs at a record pace, with strong wage growth as a result. Though inflation has taken a bite out of workers’ paychecks, wages have been increasing for those at the bottom of the income distribution. As the economist Arindrajit Dube has found, while workers in the middle of the income distribution have seen a slight drop in their wages in inflation-adjusted terms, those in the bottom 10 percent have seen a 5 percent increase. This is unlike what happened in previous recoveries, in which benefits went to the wealthy first before trickling down to anyone else.

Which leads to a third strength: the numerous ways this economic recovery has been uniquely equitable. As Joelle Gamble, the chief economist at the Department of Labor, recently observed, Black men have a higher employment rate now than they did before the pandemic. More generally, increases in employment have been broadly shared, especially when compared with the recovery that followed the Great Recession.

Economists have found that the recovery in the labor market is running eight years faster than the previous one. And the rebound after the Great Recession was especially slow for those traditionally excluded from the job market, but during this one, people across genders, ages, and education levels have seen significant and swift gains. Though there is a long way to go in alleviating underlying inequities—Black men, for instance, still face an unemployment rate 2.1 percentage points higher than the overall rate—a strong labor market can ensure that the recovery isn’t isolated to those who were already well-off. An economic slowdown, however, would likely harm workers of color and other vulnerable groups disproportionately.

As policy-makers move to drive inflation down, it is essential that they don’t lose sight of these important developments. There’s room to land a soft recovery and keep what’s working in our economy. But to do that, we need to recognize that, in addition to the problems, there are encouraging trends that we must fight to preserve.

Mike Konczal
Visitors walk among the panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park on June 11. Marking the quilt’s 35th anniversary, the display of more than 3,000 panels was the largest exhibition of the memorial in the city’s history. Conceived by the San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones, it first appeared in 1987 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

By the Numbers

1.6% Portion of US adults who are transgender or nonbinary

11M Number of LGBTQ people in the United States

22% Portion of LGBTQ people who live in poverty

36% Portion of trans people of color who are experiencing food insecurity

100+ Number of bills introduced across the country in 2022 targeting trans people

23% Portion of abortion clinics that offer care specifically designed for trans patients

31 Number of states that prohibit workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

Election Night at the Trump White House

’Twas said that finding wise advice
Was something Donald Trump had mastered.
So who’d he listen to that night?
Just Rudy Giuliani, plastered.
When I came out, I steeled myself to join a minority—only to find that my identity had become a marketing niche.

BENJAMIN MOSER

Through some chemical quirk, I was born gay. Though inborn, this characteristic did not appear at birth. Sexuality is like height rather than eye color: I was born with blue eyes, but my height and sexuality did not reveal themselves immediately. I was meant to be tall, and meant to be attracted to other boys; but when I was a child, I was no more gay than I was tall. Since children of my generation were assumed to be heterosexual, you had to challenge the assumption—become gay in the eyes of others—and it was not until I told people, in late adolescence (around the same time I became tall), that others began to perceive me as a member of a minority.

For most of the first two decades of my life, I had not, therefore, been seen as a member of a minority. In a way this was lucky, since this was not a group anyone in my generation was rushing to join. Membership, for many people, was dangerous. For young people, it could mean being subjected to bullying, or being kicked out of your house, or being subjected to abusive “therapies.” For adults, it could mean workplace and housing discrimination, as well as other associated risks: depression, drug abuse, suicide.

I was lucky not to have these problems. Growing up gay was terrible for many, but for some

Benjamin Moser’s most recent book, Sontag: Her Life and Work, won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 2020.
I stopped being gay
Being part of a minority that nobody knew I belonged to made me naughty. It gave me a glint in my eye.

And in 1994, gayness was considered far less novel than it had been even a few years before. There was still no lack of haters, but in the social and educational world that I was brought up in, people had gotten the memo that it was no longer cool to say derogatory things about homosexuals. Old attitudes persisted, of course. But the old language used to express them was on its way out, and those who hated homosexuals knew to say “religious freedom” or “family values” instead of plain old “faggot.”

Even before I graduated from high school, I had seen the radical change in attitudes toward homosexuals. My earliest memories of gay people came from watching a neighborhood. Montrose was developed just west of downtown Houston in the 1910s. Unlike my own, more homogeneous community, inhabited by people like my parents—straight white professionals with a couple of kids—Montrose was what we would later call “diverse.” Ratty apartment complexes stood alongside old mansions. Most houses were brick bungalows. The people who lived in them were often referred to as “artistic”—a word which, I later figured out, meant gay. Montrose was seedy; the houses were cheap; and it had tattoo parlors and “adult bookstores,” which I later figured out were different from bookstores for adults. Long before I ever set foot in a bar, I knew that Montrose was where the bars were.

And then, in the middle of the ’80s, when I was 9 or 10, weeds and for-sale signs sprouted on the lawns of Montrose. The quirky shops closed; the neighborhood emptied out. Its inhabitants were dying off, one by one, in a mass-death event that, at least at first, went largely unseen by society at large—which was to say by heterosexual society. A neighborhood that had been associated with dodgy fun was starting to disappear. And the people who were dying were people like me.

When I was a child, I knew only one person who died of AIDS. His name was John; his sister was a friend of my mother’s. I saw him just once, when he came to our house in the hills between Houston and Austin. I can see him now. He had a mustache, and sat on some puffy Edwardian chairs my mother later reupholstered. That’s how I know I was very young, since the house was renovated when I was in third grade, and everything slightly shopworn, including those chairs, got a fresh lease on life.

John’s death was presented as something of a mystery. He had, my mother explained, been “celibate” for several years. This was the first time I encountered that word, and she told me what it meant. I understood that celibacy made his death seem like a fluke—bad luck—like dying of lung cancer decades after you quit smoking. The implication was that gay sex was like cigarettes, something that could kill you. I don’t recall John’s name ever coming up again, but AIDS turned a previously unspeakable mystery into a constant topic of conversation.

I remember only two articles I read in childhood that featured gay protagonists who were not dying. One was about a man named Terry. His mother asked if he was gay; he had to admit he was; she wept. The second was about gay life at Rice University, a few minutes from our house. A student named Alex said that he and his straight girlfriends checked out guys’ butts. Rated them. John’s story equated gayness with death. Terry’s equated it with shame, with horrifying your parents. Alex’s—well, I must have remembered it because it was such a thrill. A guy only a little bit older—right down the street—checking out other guys. That was extremely exciting—all the more so because there was a picture of Alex, and he was cute. I, too, wanted nothing more than to look at men. But the message that looking at other guys was dangerous was everywhere. The thing you
wanted more than anything else was also the most forbidden. This prohibition destroyed many people. It could get you killed; it could force you to live in hiding and shame.

I, on the other hand, discovered a perversion in my character. This wasn’t my sexual orientation. I don’t know where I found the self-confidence to know that any difficulties I was experiencing on that front were temporary. I always knew that, like Alex, I would eventually go to college. And I started to like being gay because it seemed like a way off the ladder of “achievement” followed by consumption—an opportunity to do something different with my life. It allowed me to inhabit a vast zone of privacy, a place nobody else could enter. The perversion was that the secrecy turned me on. This was distinct from being turned on by men. I enjoyed being part of a minority that nobody knew I belonged to. Knowing that nobody knew made me naughty. It gave me a glint in my eye.

I had seen magazines with naked women, furtive glimpses of someone’s dad’s Playboy, but it wasn’t until high school that I saw magazines with naked men. I’m not sure how I found out about a bookshop in Montrose called Lobo. Alongside a wide selection of respectable gay and lesbian literature—“respectable” was a relative term, since at that time even the most polite gay literature was considered little better than pornography—it sold real porn.

It’s hard to explain what an event this bookshop was for me—and for others, too. “It’s an act of liberation, and an act of liberation that we at the turn of the century take for granted,” an activist, Gene Harrington, said in a 1999 article from OutSmart, now archived on a website, Houston LGBT History, that preserves the memories of such places. They were “our only source of gay and lesbian literature. If you wanted a book by a gay author or on a gay issue, you either went to a store like Lobo, or you didn’t get it.”

Founded in Dallas in 1973 by a man named Larry Lingle, who was married to a woman for eight years and who only came out at age 37, Lobo opened in Houston in 1986. An article from This Week in Texas in 1987 shows just how subversive a gay bookstore was around the time I was coming to identify with that minority. When I was 11, the vice squad raided the Dallas branch and arrested Lingle for a “class B misdemeanor for possession of sexual materials, namely dildos.” In 1973, Texas had passed a statute forbidding the sale of “obscene devices...including a dildo or artificial vagina.” (This law is apparently still on the books.)

“We aren’t worried about guns in Texas,” Lingle is quoted as saying, “but you can’t sell a concealed dildo.” Fourteen months of legal maneuvers followed, and the next year, he and his partner, Bill White, moved to Houston. White died of AIDS in 1995. He was 39. Lingle’s life, and the bookstore’s, shared features with other gay institutions of that time. There was police harassment, death by AIDS, and then—just after the business had finally become socially acceptable—death by Internet.

But when I was in high school, Lobo loomed fascinatingly. “A lot of people come to the door of the bookstore and don’t even come in,” Lingle said in the OutSmart article. I knew the feeling: I had never felt so bold walking into a store. I knew that walking in meant walking into something from which I could never again walk out. Once inside, I ought to have gravitated to works of gay literature. But being a teenage boy, I gravitated toward the porn instead. No straight person can understand the thrill of a gay boy’s first encounter with a magazine made for boys like him. Has anybody ever properly sung the praises of the gay pornographers?

If I were to try, I would start by saying that gay porn is entirely different from straight porn. It’s not even a close cousin. To use the same word implies an equation, implies that they were the same. They were not the same. There should have been another word for it.

Boys of my generation—of every generation before mine—were assumed to be interested in girls. There were limits to how this interest could be expressed, which depended on region and religion, and which changed as we grew. The ways 7-year-old boys were meant to interact with girls was different from the ways 16-year-olds could, and the role of teachers and parents was, in large part, to teach us to express this interest appropriately. At the same time, we were aggressively discouraged from looking at boys. The ridicule that surrounded homosexuality, the aura of weakness and inferiority and perversion and disease, was often more powerful than the outright violence that, we understood, awaited anyone who didn’t get the message.

That message arrived long before we quite understood what it was about. Long before boys had any idea what sex or sexuality was, other children understood that there was something...
different about certain boys, and often bullied them. Long before we knew which sexual interests were acceptable, or even what sexual interests were, we knew not to look at other boys. Later, realizing that we were the intended recipients of this unspoken message, we trained ourselves to avert our eyes. This required unrelenting vigilance. Wanting to look at other boys was the most natural, and most forbidden, thing in the world. Eyes could betray us, endanger us.

(How do you recognize gay men? To this day, I can spot them by their eyes.)

Heterosexual couplings, romanticized and celebrated, were the plot of every book, every movie. And so, although I was lucky to be spared outright prejudice, bullying, or rejection, I shared with every other gay boy that knowledge that I wasn’t supposed to look. The cops that were always on duty in the outside world were on duty inside of me, too. If I was going to keep my secret, I needed to be unrelentingly vigilant. It helped that, when I was growing up, any images of men that were even slightly sexually suggestive appeared in a heterosexual frame. When we grew a bit more sophisticated, when we learned a bit more about how to look at them, we saw that, despite this frame, many of these images were—actually, secretly—intended for us. A magazine called *Playgirl* preserved the frame even in its title.

Gay porn’s contribution was to strip away the frame. I don’t think a naked woman could ever look as good to a straight man as those guys looked to us. Here, at last, were men who didn’t want me to look away; who, instead, had done everything possible to get me to look. They had put incredible effort into making themselves as attractive as possible. They had spent years working out. Some had left the hair on their faces or bodies; some had removed it. Great care had gone into lighting them, dressing them, styling them, photographing them, so we could see everything they had to show. These were not men for women. These, finally, were men for us. Their appeal was not akin to pictures of women for straight boys, merely sexual. It was existential.

These men’s appeal was their invitation to look. *Check us out. Take all the time you want*, they said, knowing this was what we wanted most. They were looking at us, daring us to look back; and though their bodies were undeniable attractive, the real appeal was their eyes. In almost every one of the gay sex stories I devoured as a teenager, a glance gave something away. “What are you looking at?” an unattainable jock said to a boy caught peeping. I knew about wanting to look a slight split second longer—and forcing myself to look away. I knew what it was like to wonder about every guy I met: friend or foe? In gay porn, there was always a happy ending.

When I was growing up, any images of men that were slightly suggestive appeared in a heterosexual frame. Gay porn stripped away the frame. In the outside world, there were starting to be more images of gay men. In 1992, when I was 16, I saw *Les Nuits Fauves*, a French movie by a director named Cyril Collard. It included some sex scenes; I don’t remember how explicit they were, but in a world in which such images were almost entirely absent, they were there, among the first I had ever seen. The next year came *Philadelphia*, starring the heterosexual actor Tom Hanks, whose “courage” in portraying a gay man was often praised as an indication that times were changing; for a straight man to play a gay man would once have meant career suicide. Hanks’s
character died of AIDS—and so, a few months after Les Nuits Fauves was released, did Collard. Now we were allowed to see a few gay men—but only with the assurance that, in the movie and even in real life, they would die at the end.

There were no such deaths in gay porn. There were no high school bullies. There was no AIDS and no vice squad, no Republicans and no religious right, nobody’s hateful family kicking them out, nobody getting arrested for the possession of dildos. It was a paradise exclusively inhabited by attractive men fucking as many other hot men as they wanted—and living happily ever after. It was a bright vision of an alternative future. And from the time I discovered these magazines, I understood clearly that—marginal as they were, invisible as they were to heterosexuals, and even to the many gay people who had no access to them—the right wing was correct to worry.

What was the threat that led the cops to bust down the door of a place like Lobo? To grow up gay in the era of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush was to understand that the GOP’s attacks on “obscenity,” their obnoxious jokes about AIDS, their efforts to regulate women’s sexual activity through restrictions on abortion and birth control, were not merely a footnote, as their supporters in neighborhoods like mine told themselves. These people were “fiscal conservatives” or “tough on crime” but saw nothing wrong with contraception or dirty movies. In the posh enclaves of Houston and many similar places, Republican voters viewed these policies as unsavory compromises inevitable in politics.

But to be gay was to understand that certain people had decided that to look at other men was to reject our society more thrillingly than any other way I knew. These men were showing me other possibilities. And knowing these possibilities existed, even though I didn’t yet know which ones, allowed me to bide my time. I’d keep pretending to be the perfect American boy. I became an Eagle Scout. I smiled at the thought that the people around me had no idea—the right wing was correct to worry.

But that didn’t solve the problem of what to do with myself. If I wasn’t going to be the person I was brought up to be, what else was I to do? A life spent poolside with Brad Stone and Chase Hunter and Jake Andrews was not realistic. (Where are they now? Do they know how much they were loved?) Unlike virtually everyone I knew, these guys weren’t trying to get into an Ivy League school, or dreaming of becoming an investment banker. (Although maybe they, too, dreamed of Princeton and Morgan Stanley, as far as I knew; in the days before the Internet, it was impossible to know anything of these men beyond a few carefully edited images.) But it was harder for me to let go of the values—not to mention the privileges—with which I grew up. It’s not that I didn’t want to. It was that I couldn’t see many viable alternatives.

I knew, however, that to take off your clothes for the eyes of other men was to reject our society more thrillingly than any other way I knew. These men were showing me other possibilities. And knowing these possibilities existed, even though I didn’t yet know which ones, allowed me to bide my time. I’d keep pretending to be the perfect American boy. I became an Eagle Scout. I smiled at the thought that the people around me had no idea, and the thought gave me that glint in my eye. I’d look at guys in secret for now—knowing that the minute I got to college they’d start to look back.

As soon as I stopped averting my eyes, I knew that I would be disqualifying myself from whole areas of the society that made me. The perverse part of me was looking forward to it. If I dreaded exclusion, I also wanted to be freed from the jail of societal expectations and allowed to make a life of my own—but then, right as I went to college, the outside world changed. Not everywhere. Not for everyone. Not entirely. But it changed, and with astounding speed. It felt that suddenly, lots of people—not everyone, by all means, but lots of people—stopped caring if you were gay. Decades of activism by thousands of unsung Larry Lingles had led the way. To come of age as a gay man in those years, in the 1990s and 2000s, was like being there when a glacier that had sat quietly for thousands of years suddenly lurched seaward and split into icebergs. Right as I was entering adulthood, victory started to feel foreordained, and though we still faced innumerable problems, we thought that the momentum we had witnessed would continue. We thought—as we would not later—that these problems would be solved.
We had come so far, so fast. In 1977, the year after I was born, John Rechy wrote in The Sexual Outlaw that “every male homosexual lives under the constant threat of arbitrary arrest and a wrecked life.” The year I left home, 1994, there were still weeds on Montrose lawns. We were seven years from Lingle’s arrest for selling dildos; two years from a Republican National Convention, in Houston, that denounced gay people with a fervor once reserved for communists and race-mixers. The speed of the change, at least in my world, seemed stunning.

It was true that, for a while, people went through the motions. Barack Obama might not have been able to win the Democratic nomination in 2008 if he hadn’t pretended to be against gay marriage. But the change happened so quickly that it was hard to remember how total the revolution had been. AIDS became a treatable long-term health issue—akin to diabetes—at least if you could afford that treatment; like all health issues, this one, in our country, was brutally divided by class. In a few short years, gay people went from a diseased enemy of the American family to the fun sidekicks in Will & Grace. This new homosexual (abs; BFF) was a considerable improvement over previous incarnations. But it was still condescending, still a caricature, still something less than full equality. And it was uncomfortably compatible with the consumerist values of the very empire that—it was only fair that they be a little bit afraid of homosexuals, too.

The fact was, though, I was incredibly lucky. I couldn’t complain. I was fully aware that it was easier to be born gay where and when I was than at any other place or time in history. Only a few years before I came into adulthood, a gay person of identical background would have been much more marginal. The old taboo lost its electricity with a speed that was a mystery, and the result was a great human achievement. Prejudice was eroding. Effective treatments for AIDS were emerging. And—if we needed any more convincing that things were getting better—the Internet came along to offer an unlimited supply of sex. No gay people in history had it as good.

Through no effort of my own, my life had been wondrously easy. The larger effort had been made for me by others; and as I inherited other things, I inherited the fruits of someone else’s struggle. The biggest risk I had ever taken was sneaking into a bookshop to buy dirty magazines. Compared to the obstacles someone like Larry Lingle had confronted, or that the models and the staff of those magazines had faced, this was pretty pathetic. Unlike Lingle, I stood zero risk of being raided by the vice squad. My partner would not, like his, die of AIDS. I would never lose my job, home, friends, or family because I was gay. I had lucked into my life, into the broader circumstances of my life, and in this I was typical of a specific social class, in a specific generation: allowed to retreat into our own world, to pursue whatever relationships and careers and hobbies we chose, secure in the knowledge that nobody outside would ever bother us.

We wouldn’t have to invent a new way to live after all. Those of us who grew up thinking that we would be expelled from the empire were welcomed back into its fold. I had been steeled to join a minority—and then, as soon as I did, everyone, at least in my small world, forgot it was a minority. I had no hangering for opprobrium. But it was the same story with so many of the struggles my generation inherited: The victories were in the past. Though we were their beneficiaries, they had happened without us. We would not storm Omaha Beach, or march with Martin Luther King in Alabama, or throw a brick at the Stonewall riot. We had no more played a role in these struggles than we had played a role in inventing the telephone. Like a superficial wound that healed without any effort on our part, so, it seemed, did society improve. Progress had happened without us in the past, and would in the future.

By the time I graduated, gayness had become fashionable in a way that had been impossible to imagine when I was buying Advocate Men in Montrose. Rather than hating us, more and more people wanted to join us—or at least
accessorize with us. Over the next decades, the group known as “gays and lesbians” expanded. We would be united with bisexuals, transgender people, and then a whole list of “sexual minorities”: intersex, asexuals, demisexuals, the gender fluid, the nonbinary, the polyamorous, and so forth, all of whom were knitted together by the word “queer.” I liked the word when it was used by radical AIDS groups, but I didn’t like it once it became generalized. It suggested weirdness, first of all, and I wasn’t weird; I was gay. And the word eventually began to be employed by anyone situated on the “spectrum of sexuality”—and that, by definition, was everyone.

I loved gay porn for the plot, the turn-on, the tension, the naughtiness, came from those forbidden glances, from that moment of wondering how this was going to turn out. Of course, if you bought the magazine or the video at a place like Lobo, you knew it was going to turn out. But you also knew how a Jane Austen novel was going to turn out, and that didn’t make the book any less exciting. Porn wasn’t real life. It was an aestheticization—and, like all successful aestheticizations, more real than real life. A novel set in a splendid 19th-century country estate could feel far more relevant than a contemporary novel: Its romance, its beauty, were all the more acute because the emotions behind its exotic setting were so intimately familiar. This kind of gay porn had the intensified immediacy, and the magic, of dreams. The romance novel was effective because we longed for perfect love. And gay porn was effective because anyone who bought these secret publications understood the experience of not being allowed to look, not looking, looking, and then—eventually, finally—having someone look back. This was to gay porn what the marriage plot was to Jane Austen. Once the ban on looking started to fade, this plot evaporated. Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay productions became celebrations of sex, of the body beautiful: pornography, but, though the models were all men, not quite what I thought of as gay pornography.

Herded into a minority by “coming out,” we were welcomed back into a bland everyone, a marketing niche with certain shared tastes. In a country in which the customer is always right, that meant prejudice was out. For people who grew up without seeing themselves represented except as controversies or problems, it was thrilling to see same-sex couples buying furniture, renting cars, visiting Disney World. It was a miracle how quickly hotel receptionists stopped looking askance when two men requested a king-size bed. It was nice to be treated as an individual, not as an issue.

This is what we thought we wanted most, and in this we were typical of the Americans of our time. We wanted our identity—but not all the time, not every day. We thought of ourselves as individuals; we didn’t like labels. We knew that too much identity could lead to the yellow stars or the whites-only water fountains, and so we preferred elective identities. We didn’t want race or religion or sexuality to be the only thing people saw when they looked at us. We wanted them to see “us”—whoever that was. I don’t think it occurred to us that these categories might be far too deeply rooted to be cast out by decree. I don’t think we wondered how much of “us” would be left once we removed religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, sexuality, from whatever it was we wanted other people to see. We looked back in bewilderment at the discrimination tolerated in earlier times, and felt happy to be alive at the moment when bigotry finally loosened its hold. We began to feel that progress was possible, that the arc of the moral universe was bending in the right direction. Yet I felt the ambivalence of a radical artist unexpectedly showered with prizes. I was happy with the money, the new apartment, the critical respect. But I was also aware that the work suddenly being celebrated had been created in opposition to money, to those bourgeois critics—to the kinds of people who lived in these kinds of apartments. The older I got, the more compatible homosexuality was with a career at Morgan Stanley or the State Department. It was a kind of progress, I suppose. And the only sacrifice it demanded was our special way of looking: our eyes.
I have been a working animation and comic strip artist since college. But when art failed to pay the bills, I went to law school, passed the bar, and moonlighted as a Capitol Hill aide. My Plan B included an extended stint as staff counsel and press secretary for Massachusetts Representative Barney Frank.

In *The Last Hurrah*, a great novel about Boston politics (and a Spencer Tracy movie), the newspaper cartoonist nephew of a big-city boss accompanies his uncle during a mayoral campaign. My work on Barney’s staff was a case of life imitating art—like the nephew, I was afforded a front-row seat to learn the stories that became *Smahtguy*.

In 1987, Barney became the first member of Congress to voluntarily come out as gay. Pretty routine stuff today, but at the time, his announcement seriously jolted America’s political landscape, as well as the folks back home in the not-quite-as-liberal-as-its-reputation Bay State.
What's going on, pal?

Tip, Bob Bauman wrote a book.
Hit the stores today.
He outs me as being gay.

Am, Bahney, is that all?

Don't pay no mind, my boy.
We're pols! People're always spreading shit about us!

Problem is, in this case.
Mr. Speaker, it's true. And I think it's time to say so publicly.

OH! Well damn, Bahney. I'm sorry to hear that. Was hoping you'd wind up being the first Jewish Speaker.
Now I guess I'll haft'a hope you'll be the first gay, Jewish Speaker.

Boston Globe reporters knew about Barney and had been angling to get him on the record.

Well well, if it isn't the Boring Broadsheet's best cowgirl.

In the flesh, mama. Is he ready?

Am I your first Texbian, honey?

Although Barney had first been elected in 1972, he'd been closeted. It was Elaine, in 1974, who was the first openly gay elected state official in the USA.

Jeanette, what's the deal? Do you gay?

Well, shove over, newbie, an' make some room for mah Trailblazer.

Fifteen years later, here was Kay staring intently at him across his messy desk. She flipped open a notebook and got right to the point.

Lesbian from Texas?
Yeah, actually.

Am I your first Texbian, honey?

So, Congressman, what's the deal?
Are you gay?

After all those years, after dating girls he wouldn't love, after baldly denying it to political allies, after lying about it under oath...

1974
At a Back Bay, Boston, house party / fundraiser

He agreed to an interview with one of them—Kay Longcope, an Austin-to-Boston transplant whom he knew from way back, as Elaine Noble's lover.

1974
At a Back Bay, Boston, house party / fundraiser

Hates whistling

At a Back Bay, Boston, house party / fundraiser

1974
At a Back Bay, Boston, house party / fundraiser
After playing spin the bottle in stuffy Bayonne rumpus rooms, praying for the lights to be turned back on...

Well, that's enough of that, ladies & gentlemen. Time for everyone to go on home.

After a fucking lifetime of all that, he found himself saying:

Yeah, I am. So what?

I think the average voter says get the bridges built. Stop nukes. Find shelter for the homeless, and don't steal from the till. I'm hoping they don't give a damn about who I care to love or have sex with.

Good for you, darlin'.

Remember to breathe!

Still, back then, it was big news when a public figure came out...

To Barney's relief, the reaction was positive.

Hey, whaddevah floats yer boat.

I should fix him up with my son.

...or to love kissing babies. Their bottom line seemed to be "He fights on issues that matter."

And on the bullshitty side of politics, they were happy to cut him some slack and reelect him overwhelmingly.

And another nice thing came of coming out...

It turned out that for most voters, his being gay didn't matter any more than his failure to ever shine his shoes...
Among the letters was one from a thirty-year-old guy named Herb.

A lot are from nice ladies in Brookline. But also from gay kids in Detroit and Orange County. And lesbians from upstate NY and queer men from just about everywhere else.

...hundreds of supportive letters from all across the country.

Herb sounded nice. Barney closed his office door and called to ask him out for coffee.

And he did turn out to be nice. And nice looking, in a mensch-y sort of way...

Also kindly, low-key, and interested in politics. He was completing a graduate degree in economics.

They had plain old romantic sex like he knew from the movies.

They went on a proper date, and then on another.
The Fierce Hope of Ana María Archila

The Brooklyn-based organizer is running for New York lieutenant governor, but is the left ready to compete statewide?

By Liza Featherstone

When I arrived at the Kingsborough Houses in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights neighborhood on a warm day in May, motorcycles and cars were speeding recklessly along the paved areas that the public housing residents use as walkways. Pedestrians yelled at the young men as they raced by. To be sure, the youth were engaging in unneighborly behavior, but as Jamell Henderson, 36, a tenant organizer who has lived here since he aged out of foster care, told me, the problem is one of resources: to restrict vehicles to residents and delivery trucks would require either a guard or an electronic system. Both cost money, which the New York City Housing Authority is unlikely to provide.

These projects are across the street from the Weeksville Heritage Center, the site of a free Black community that thrived during the 19th century and was a refuge for people fleeing capture after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850. Today, Kingsborough residents, most of whom are Black, are doing their best to help their community and families flourish, while enduring the legacies of slavery: deprivation, discrimination, and violence.

I was on a tour of the Kingsborough Houses with Ana María Archila, 43, the left-wing candidate for lieutenant governor of New York. She wore a bright pink jacket and black jeans, a colorful beaded necklace, and gold earrings. Henderson, who serves as the regional board chair for Citizen Action New York and had just been to a tenants’ rights protest in Albany with Archila, was excited about her campaign and wanted her to get to know his community. Before she arrived, Henderson told me, “She is completely authentic. And that’s rare.” As we walked with her, I began to see what he meant.

As residents detailed their problems, Archila listened closely, responding not with talking points but with curiosity and a commitment to try to change things. Parents told her they have nowhere to take their kids to play. One woman said she’s afraid to go outside because of recent shootings in the area. Other residents showed her playgrounds inside the projects that haven’t been repaired and aren’t safe. Archila asked where they go when they want to be outside with their children, and most men mentioned green spaces that are far away: Prospect Park, Brooklyn Bridge Park.

“We take our kids elsewhere to enjoy the good scenery,” said Derrick Brown, who was planning to take his three kids—along with some other Kingsborough families—to Central Park that weekend.

“The most they can do is paint the benches,” Brown said of the New York City Housing Authority. “They don’t care about the projects.” He complained of overpolicing: “We can’t even have a cookout for the kids,” because the police will break it up. The Weeksville Heritage
Center is given permits to shut down the street for its events, he said, but “if we do it, it’s a criminal offense. We don’t get no respect in the projects.” Archila was so focused on what he was saying that when the two shook hands, Henderson had to remind her that she was campaigning and then told Brown, “You just shook hands with the next lieutenant governor!”

The residents took us to a child care center in one of the buildings. It’s lovingly supplied with books and toys, but now it’s unusable due to an unbearable stink—a sewer problem. The day care teacher said they do their best to ventilate it and keep the windows open when the kids are there.

New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who is running for governor and asked Archila to be his running mate, joined us, along with a reporter for The New York Times. The sewage problem in the day care center got their attention: Both took notes and said they would follow up.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Archila told the residents. “There is so much wealth in New York state, but it’s so unequal.” There is plenty of money in the state to address these problems, she explained, but we need politicians willing to tax the rich more. That’s why Archila is running for lieutenant governor. Talking with residents, she pointed out that the current governor, Kathy Hochul, just spent $850 million on a football stadium, even though one in five children in the state live in poverty. This does not represent what Archila calls “a culture of care.”

Realizing, with a bit of panic, that she was late to go pick up her kids, Archila had to leave abruptly. Later, in a café near City Hall, we discussed motherhood and how it changes your politics. She said she now looks at everyone and realizes “that someone took care of that person. We are all here because someone took care of us. That is actually what allows us to be. So let’s have politics that invite people into care.”

Initially, given Hochul’s popularity, Archila’s campaign seemed merely symbolic. But that began to change in April, when Hochul’s handpicked lieutenant governor, Brian Benjamin, was forced out of office after the federal government indicted him on numerous corruption charges, including bribery, wire fraud, and conspiracy.

Hochul then pushed the legislature to rewrite the election laws to allow her to choose a new running mate. Showing a shocking disregard for the fortunes of the national Democratic Party, she selected Antonio Delgado, a US representative from an upstate purple district. Delgado had been in a tight race to hold on to his seat in the 19th District, which includes parts of Hudson Valley and the Capital Region, against Republican Marc Molinaro. Even before Hochul tapped Delgado, the vote was expected to be tight in a year in which the Democrats’ House majority is in peril. As
the August primary looms, there is still no well-known Democrat in that race.

With centrist Democrats disgracing themselves, Archila’s campaign suddenly looked winnable. In many ways, she is the right person for this opportunity. Archila is beloved in the immigrant labor rights community, and she has political connections in the Brooklyn neighborhoods where she’s worked as an organizer for Make the Road, the immigrant advocacy group she cofounded in 2007. Williams, her running mate, came close to winning the lieutenant governor seat in 2018, suggesting that a progressive candidate could succeed. Unabashedly on the side of the working class, she is magnetic and charming.

Still, Archila faces an uphill climb in these remaining days before the primary. New Yorkers have not elected someone so solidly on the left to statewide office since Franklin D. Roosevelt became governor in 1928. She has little name recognition outside of New York City. Going against big money—especially New York’s real estate and finance sectors—takes people power. And Archila may not have the statewide relationships and organization to pull it off, a gap that reflects the state of the left rather than any shortcomings of the candidate.

**Archila’s politics were formed amid intense violence and conflict.** She grew up in the 1980s and ’90s in Bogotá, Colombia, a war zone of competing drug cartels and political bloodshed. During the country’s 1990 presidential race, when she was 11, three of the candidates were assassinated. Her father was a human rights activist; many of his friends were killed. One day, he told her he was leaving for the United States, as the country had become too dangerous for political activists. “Anyone who was in Colombia at that time was shaped by the war,” she said.

Yet despite the traumatic situation in Bogotá, it was also a time of democratic experimentation, and Archila, who stayed behind with her mother for a few years before joining her father in Brooklyn, was able to glean valuable political lessons.

Growing up, she was influenced by Antanas Mockus, a philosopher who became Bogotá’s mayor, who ran for office “proposing that to make Bogotá safe, we needed to build a new culture, a culture of care,” she said. “He did all sorts of unusual, extravagant things.” Archila, who was 12 at the time, recalled Mockus donning a superhero cape to meet with the Colombian president. As mayor, instead of hiring police to patrol crosswalks, he recruited mimes to mock people who disregarded traffic rules. He introduced games to promote the idea that in every society, Archila said, “everyone gives, and everyone takes. The question is whether we each give our fair share.”

At 17, Archila joined her father in New York City, where her aunt, who had been a lawyer in Colombia, was cleaning houses because her English wasn’t good enough to allow her to practice law. The aunt, Sara María Archila, found that immigrants like herself faced terrible conditions and lacked labor rights. Seeking to change that, she became an organizer—and a mentor to Ana María. When Sara María started the Latin American Integration Center, an immigrant workers’ nonprofit, Archila joined her at its Staten Island branch, thinking to run the LAIC after her death, from raising money to creating “spaces of respect.” Archila became its executive director in 2003. “She died, and the next day I was holding her legacy in my hands,” Archila said. “I was 22 years old.”

In 2007, the LAIC merged with another immigrant rights organization, Make the Road by Walking, to form Make the Road New York, and Archila became a codirector of the new organization. Make the Road’s membership grew from 2,000 people to some 23,000 today, and it expanded its focus from pressuring employers on wage theft and working conditions to helping immigrant workers form unions and secure their organizing rights. In a 2013 article for *The Nation*, the veteran organizer Jane McAlevey chronicled the group’s victories, which included passing stronger state laws on wage theft and helping car wash workers form unions. McAlevey described the culture of Make the Road New York as one of “love and agitation,” praising the group’s emphasis on “high participation” and concluding that if more of the US progressive movement were to adopt its approach, “we’d spend less time licking our wounds and more time celebrating our successes.”

By the mid-2010s, Archila was well-known in Brooklyn for her roles in Make the Road and a companion national organization, the Center for Popular Democracy, where she’d become the codirector in 2013. Under her leadership, the CPD won victories on housing policy (strengthening renter protections, for example), democracy (making it easier to vote), and numerous other areas. Then, in 2018, Archila achieved national fame.

After Brett Kavanaugh was accused of attempted rape, Archila, who is a survivor of sexual assault, went to Washington, D.C., with other women to protest his Supreme Court nomination. As Republican Senator Jeff Flake stepped out of an elevator in the Capitol, Archila and Maria Gallagher, a woman she’d only met that day, confronted him about his support for Kavanaugh. “What you are doing is allowing someone who has actually
violated a woman to sit in the Supreme Court,” Archila told him, with CNN cameras running. She reminded Flake that he has children: “What are you doing, sir?” Flake looked extremely uncomfortable, and the reporters present tried to get him to respond. A few days before, Archila had told the story of her own sexual assault to protesters assembled outside Flake’s office. The elevator confrontation went viral on social media and was widely covered by the mainstream press. Later, Flake changed his position slightly, saying he would support Kavanaugh only after the FBI had investigated the accusations. Explaining his shift, Flake credited the women’s elevator intervention. (Unfortunately, after a brief FBI probe led by Kavanaugh’s law school classmate, the judge was confirmed, 50 to 48, largely along party lines.)

At a press conference at New York’s City Hall, where Archila announced a slate of endorsers, I met Sophie Ellman-Golan of the Jewish Vote. She told me that although Archila is famous for her encounter with Flake, her role in supporting other women and encouraging them to speak up was just as important. “Ana María is absolutely not about ego,” Ellman-Golan said. “She never sought to make it about herself.”

A few minutes later, a crowd of teenagers protesting gun violence burst into City Hall Park. Archila went over to talk with them. Like the residents of the Kingsborough Houses, the teens liked her immediately; she seemed so plainly trustworthy and was entirely focused on them. They were soon taking selfies with her. Archila is “the real thing,” as Henderson, the tenant organizer, said: She’s all that a leader should be. Her message of redistribution and hope is a good one, and with children taking to the streets to protest gun violence in the wake of Uvalde, it’s clear that a “culture of care” is long overdue.

When I asked Archila about her campaign efforts upstate, she talked about the immigrant worker-organizers she had met on a recent trip; they sounded like amazing people doing great work. But her campaign has no physical offices—not even in Brooklyn. The field operation is particularly skimpy upstate, without a lot of volunteer opportunities even in June, and in New York City this spring, she had far fewer canvassing events than many candidates for a state Assembly or City Council seat, though she dramatically escalated her get-out-the-vote efforts in the weeks leading up to the primary.

Archila’s platform is similar to those of other left candidates this cycle: housing for all, health care for all, public safety, child care, a “Green New York,” and funding for public education. These are the right issues for a working-class campaign, and they have resonated in Brooklyn and Queens politics in recent years, but it’s not clear that has translated into either broad or deep support for Archila’s candidacy.

Antonio Delgado was able to transfer the money from his congressional campaign to the lieutenant governor’s race, and as a result, he has over $2.2 million—more than seven times the amount Archila has raised. Even more troubling, the other candidate in the race, Diana Reyna, a machine politician aligned with the conservative Democratic gubernatorial candidate Tom Suozzi, has also raised more than Archila. Most of the donations to Archila’s campaign have come from Brooklyn, many from the activist community. Few are from upstate, and fewer are in amounts less than $50. (When a candidate receives small contributions, it is often seen as a sign of working-class enthusiasm.)

While many progressive politicians—especially those connected with the Working Families Party, which recruited Archila to run—have endorsed her, it will take a broader coalition to win statewide. In some ways, the race seems like a missed opportunity for the left. The lieutenant governor, New York’s second-highest-ranking official, becomes acting governor if the governor dies or is otherwise unable to do the job. That’s a situation that seems hypothetical, until suddenly it isn’t—after all, Andrew Cuomo once seemed indestructible, and now his lieutenant, Hochul, is governor. Given Archila’s personal gifts and her political priorities, it would be wonderful to have her in executive office; and given the conflict between centrist and the left in the legislature, it would be a major advance to have someone firmly in the latter camp as president of the state Senate—one of the lieutenant governor’s roles.

Then again, it’s hard to fault the left for not going all in on Archila’s campaign. There are many other priorities this election year. A bigger socialist, progressive, and left presence is needed in the state Assembly—as we’ve just seen from that body’s failure to pass the Build Public Renewables Act (which did pass the state Senate) and the Good Cause Eviction bill, which would have greatly strengthened protections for renters. While several candidates supported by the Democratic Socialists of America, including Samy Olivares, a North Brooklyn district
leader running for state Assembly, have endorsed Archila, NYC-DSA has not given a formal endorsement or, crucially, the volunteer resources and work that such an endorsement entails.

This should be no surprise to those closely following New York politics: The organization favors candidates active in the DSA and with a clear path to victory, and in any case NYC-DSA is stretched thin, running 13 campaigns this year, all for Assembly and Senate seats, reflecting the organization’s statewide priorities of tenant protections and publicly funded renewable energy.

The Working Families Party is showing up for Archila, but it has also endorsed candidates in a number of other New York state races, many of them more promising than the one for lieutenant governor. Left and progressive candidates who are unaffiliated with these larger organizations—CUNY activist Tim Hunter in Crown Heights, for example—are attracting enthusiastic volunteers. And there are also the efforts to expand the Squad in Congress, such as Brittany Ramos DeBarros’s campaign to fend off centrist Max Rose and then flip the seat held by January 6 Republican Nicole Malliotakis in a district that covers Staten Island and parts of southern Brooklyn.

If the New York left had deeper and broader institutional reach—if, for example, more labor unions supported progressive electoral campaigns—these efforts would begin to feed off one another. But we’re not there yet.

Archila does not minimize the challenges of this race. “The difficulty was: Could I build a statewide organization? I’ve never run for office,” she said. “I’ve never raised money for that, never asked for endorsements. Is this a reasonable thing to do? I didn’t know if it was reasonable or not, but I did know that a coronation was about to happen”—referring to the process by which Hochul and Benjamin were chosen as the New York Democratic Party’s nominees before the primary. “When coronations happen, the communities that lose are working-class communities, Black and brown communities.”

During the pandemic, Archila continued, working-class people lost loved ones, jobs, and homes. “Our communities were fatigued and demoralized. When we were fatigued, the forces that didn’t lose loved ones, the people that didn’t lose jobs, the billionaires that didn’t lose anything—who gained during the pandemic—were reorganizing. And we’ve lost enough.”

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Throughout the middle ages and up until the era of Romanticism, most literature written in Europe and its colonies was decidedly allegorical in nature: Its concrete signifiers (characters, images, plot points) were understood to refer to abstract entities (ideas, concepts, teachings). The first readers of The Divine Comedy, to take the most obvious example, saw Dante the pilgrim not just as a middle-aged conspirator exiled from Florence and mad with mourning for a teenage girl, but as a personification of the soul in search of God. But in the 18th century, allegory began to go out of fashion. The explicit correspondences between the literal and the figurative began to seem staid,
infallible, even boring. In its place, realism and a concern for the unique rather than the typical emerged. This shift did not entirely banish allegory. One could list countless modern examples, both “highbrow” (Brecht, Beckett, Kafka) and “popular” (The Lord of the Rings, Dune, Get Out). But even if allegory has yet to go extinct in Western literature, it has become more and more uncommon.

That is, with the exception of Latin America. There, allegory has continued to thrive. Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude might be one of the most prominent examples, but the same could be said of many the Boom generation’s masterpieces—from Juan Rulfo allegorizing the incompleteness of the Mexican Revolution in Pedro Páramo to Augusto Roa Bastos doing something similar with the dictatures of the Southern Cone in I, the Supreme.

Today, too, many Latin American novelists carry on the allegorical tradition. Roberto Bolaño’s 2666 and Yuri Herrera’s Signs Preceding the End of the World both invite allegorical readings, as does the work of the Mexican novelist Fernanda Melchor. A crime reporter by trade, Melchor is only at the beginning of an exciting and promising career: She published her debut novel, Falsa Liebre, in 2013, followed by Aquí no Es Miami, a collection of literary journalism from the same year, and her second novel, Hurricane Season, in 2017.

Both Falsa Liebre and Aquí no Es Miami showed great promise, but it was Hurricane Season that established her as one of the most important writers working in Spanish today. A polyphonic account of the brutal murder of a transgender witch in a small town on the Mexican gulf coast, the novel was at once a literal murder mystery and an allegorical fable. Composed in labyrinthine sentences that often stretched for dozens of pages and yet somehow remained perfectly legible, Hurricane Season was also a prime example of social commentary: The killing of the witch was a synecdoche for femicide in general. The novel presented a systematic critique of gender relations in Mexico—the witch provides abortions to the town’s women; the main secondary character and more as a caricature. Fatboy is grotesque, almost inhuman—a baroque monster, lust incarnate. His “ge
terior”——a generous reader will see that the fatphobia is not Melchor’s
Polo cannot stand his drinking buddy and
see later, is the product of misdirected
and so he deputizes Polo, the
wealthy housewife, his neighbor in a gated
community called Paradise, or, in the
book’s Spanish transliteration, Paradais.
Paradais's title evokes a genealogy of allegorists that runs from Dante to José
Lezama Lima, and from the outset Melchor makes it clear that this is what she is up to. But in many other ways, she departs from her earlier efforts. If in Hurricane Season she seemed primarily concerned with language and form, in Paradais she appears more interested in content and message. While Hurricane Season was often subtle, the new book is blunt, narrated through a free indirect discourse that doesn’t pull any punches when it comes to her protagonist’s inner monologue.

Likewise, if gender was the main focus of Hurricane Season, Paradais takes class as its central concern. Having narrowed her wide cast of characters to only a mismatched pair of miserable teens, one rich and the other poor, Melchor offers a study of the pathologies of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—and does so in prose laced with both high diction and the vernacular. Her protagonist—Polo, a 16-year-old gardener in the community—is the incarnation of this class divide: He works in the community but is in no way a part of it. He is called muchachito, a word that means “lad” but which in Mexico carries ugly connotations of “servant.”

Polo’s antagonist, Franco “Fatboy” Andrade, is also sketched less as a character and more as a caricature. Fatboy is grotesque, almost inhuman—a baroque monster, lust incarnate. His “gender body”——a generous reader will see that the fatphobia is not Melchor’s—but Polo’s—is a transparent symbol for the gluttonous greed of the rich: the blind, polymorphous desire to swallow, to consume, to possess; the insatiable need for more that will eventually drive the boy to unspeakable crimes. But the main conflict in Paradais is not sex or gender violence—though those are certainly important—but anger at economic injustice: It does not follow from Franco’s gluttony for fleshy capital but from Polo’s growing hatred of the rich. It is this hatred, enabled by his underlying misogyny, that eventually leads him to join Franco’s murderous scheme—a nihilistic self-immolation that, as we will see later, is the product of misdirected political rage.

Before Polo joins up with Franco to plot a home invasion, he deals with his alienation by drinking; and in fact it is alcohol that brings him close to Franco. The rich kid has money but cannot leave the gated community to buy booze, and so he deputizes Polo, the muchachito, to procure liquor, which he shares with him in long, mosquito-infested nights of bingeing on the dock by Paradais’s river. The two are not friends, though one suspects that Franco doesn’t know this: Polo cannot stand his drinking buddy and puts up with him only because he cannot afford alcohol without Franco. His tyrannical mother—
In Melchor’s new novel, *Paradais*, crime is an allegory of capitalism. Given its violent plot, there is little doubt that *Paradais* is a morality play, a story about the *muchacho*’s descent into evil. But it is also a searing critique of class, one that seems to espouse a kind of determinism equidistant from Karl Marx and Juan Rulfo. And so we have to ask: Was it all fated? Was Polo’s situation truly so hopeless that this was the only exit? One could imagine a slightly different story, one in which the *muchacho*’s hatred for the rich led him to activism or organizing of one sort or another—perhaps even into guerrilla struggle—rather than to the killing of children. But in the Veracruz of Melchor’s imagination, there seems to be no place for emancipatory politics. Her characters never consider the possibility that their private disasters might be the product of public injustice, let alone that the answer to those disasters might be collective rather than individual.

This lack of collective consciousness is surprising, given that Mexico is a rather politicized place and Melchor a writer of fundamentally political concerns. But the absence of explicit political action in her books is not a matter of omission; she is making a point. Though Mexico these days has a government that purports to be leftist, the truth is that the country’s social ills, from violence to poverty, have only grown more bitter since the defeat of neoliberalism in the 2018 presidential election. The fatalism of Melchor’s characters, their inability or unwillingness to see their world as contingent, is the product of a disillusionment so deep that holding on to the optimism of the will that proves necessary for any leftist struggle is often impossible. It doesn’t matter whether the president in Mexico City is a corrupt neoliberal or a charismatic left populist: In Veracruz today, as when Hernán Cortés founded the port half a millennium ago, paradise remains the private property of the rich.

In truth, the only organizing to be found in Polo’s town—the only viable alternative to semifeudal servility—is organized crime. The gardener is acutely aware of “them,” as the civilians refer to the local cartel. He sees kids younger than himself keeping watch over the town, all proud and cocky with their scooters and their dime bags of bad coke. Polo’s older cousin, Milton, whom the teenager idolizes, has also joined the organization, though not willingly: They kidnapped him and enlisted him under the threat of death. Whatever the particulars of his induction into the cartel, however, the fact remains that Milton now possesses some of the same signifiers of wealth as the residents herself a personification of the cruelly optimistic ethic of bootstrap—pulling known in Mexico as *echeleganismo*—keeps all of his paycheck and spends it to support Polo’s slightly older and detested cousin, who is pregnant. In a twist, we gradually discover that this cousin sexually abused Polo when he was younger and that Polo may be the father of her child.

For all the misery of his home life, however, Polo seems to think that his greatest problem is a labor conflict. Melchor makes this explicit in a passage about the teenager’s contract, which stipulates that his working hours would be “between seven am and six pm with one hour for lunch at midday, and that any activity undertaken outside of those hours would be duly remunerated.” Contract notwithstanding, Polo’s boss expects him to work whenever and for as long as the boss sees fit—and also to perform such humiliating extracurricular services as washing his personal car. Reading about Polo’s resentment toward his boss and the apparent powerlessness of Mexican labor law gives Melchor’s allegory a comic element: It turns out that the gardener of the Garden of Eden is owed overtime pay, like so many gardeners toiling in more earthly domains. Here the novel highlights the almost feudal nature of the so-called “service economy” in Mexico. Even in the most paradisiacal places, one fact stands above all others: Before the power of capital, everyone else, including the state, is powerless.

Polo would like nothing more than to spend his days fishing in the river, or if not, at least to get as far away from that river as possible. But this is impossible. It is the knowledge of this impossibility, the awareness of the extent of his unfreedom, that drives Polo to drink—and, in a drunken stupor, to listen to Franco’s fantasy of breaking into the house of a woman in the community named Marián. Once in the house, he tells Polo, he would subdue Marián’s husband and rape her. If Polo agrees to help him, Franco says, he can steal anything valuable that he finds in the house. This drunken fantasy gradually becomes a plan, one that Polo half-pretends to go along with, at first almost as a joke, then suddenly very seriously—so seriously that he winds up wrapping so much duct tape around the faces of Marián’s children that they asphyxiate.
of Paradai’s. He drives a pickup truck as ostentatious as Marián’s SUV and drinks the same expensive scotch as her husband. That his new line of work is destroying him psychologically and morally—his first assignment, a proof of loyalty, was to shoot an innocent taxi driver—matters little to Polo, who begs Milton to bring him into the organization. Milton refuses, thus foreclosing the only viable escape route available to him. It is then that the muchacho decides to join Franco’s plot.

Ever the crime reporter, Melchor accurately notes that “they,” like many similar organizations in Mexico, have diversified their business beyond drugs. They rob gas stations, run stolen cars, and in general find myriad ways to convert their willingness to kill into capital. And isn’t that precisely what Polo tries to do when he agrees to help Franco with his plan? Could it be that crime in Mexico, whether the work of specialized professionals or a pair of fumbling teens, is nothing else but an expression of class warfare, the result of alienation, of misplaced political rage? Such is the lesson at the heart of Melchor’s morality play: The injustice in Mexico is so great, the contradictions so acute, that structural violence will inevitably explode in concrete acts of violence. As above, so below: Crime is an allegory of capitalism.

At both the beginning and the end of the novel, Polo insists that “it was all fatboy’s fault,” that he “just did what he was told, followed orders.” At the literal level, this is a transparent and unconvincing attempt at self-exoneration. But at the figurative level—if we look at the situation allegorically; if we replace the vehicle (Franco) with what is fueling it (rich people’s libidinal drive to possess and consume) and read “orders” not as “commands” but as the manifestation of a “political order”—it is an accurate statement: Polo has done exactly what his society told him to do. This obedience does not justify his actions, much less redeem him, but it does complicate the picture. It also highlights the moral conundrum at the heart of the Mexican situation: The perpetrators of violence are responsible for their actions, but we are all their accomplices. How to direct the social energies derived from social antagonisms away from crime and toward political change? Melchor offers no answers—but an accurate diagnosis of the disease is often the first step toward a cure.

Nocturne

When at a loss for words—during, perhaps, a time of want or desire, when one’s body is overwhelmed by light, as if by the effect of Ketamine or MDMA, when overwhelmed by the weight of the moment, the silence, the look of disappointment in a lover’s eyes—what do we call the moment, then, when the words are finally summoned, like a sparkle of fireflies, and by grace, by the mercy of the night, what was damaged has been restored? Freire spoke that one reads the world before they read the word, which suggests that the first stage of language is in the experiencing of a thing to the point of knowing; in this knowing, then—of song sparrows and house sparrows, of catbirds and European Starlings, of a lover’s wants and needs, one could say, genuinely, that knowing to the point of the words conjuring themselves is, perhaps, the truest form of love.

In Los Angeles, my lover drove me to the airport. It was mid-summer, and along the highway, the neon sun poked through a grove of palm trees, its corona pink with a thick haze of smog. In my youth, in the hope of producing a kind of love, I attempted to acquire the words to conjure a new world—of which I was god—not God, but yes, as in the creator. After watching the television series WandaVision, I see now how foolish a person can seem when they want to be loved. Maybe foolish isn’t the word. Anyway, we stopped to eat ramen a few miles from the airport, and when we returned to the car and sat inside, she leaned into me and whispered the words, Don’t go. I whispered back, I don’t want to go. And yet I did. I flew back to LaGuardia on a red-eye flight. What is the word for the kind of sadness that comes from having to leave a place where one is loved? What is the word for a lover who says, I don’t want to go but goes?

KWAME OPOKU-DUKU
VER THE PAST TWO DECADES, PIERRE SENGES HAS emerged as one of France’s most important and celebrated writers. At the age of 54, Senges has published 16 novels, mostly with Éditions Verticales, an experimental imprint of Gallimard, the most storied publishing house in France, as well as some two dozen radio plays. Since his 2000 debut, Veuves au Maquillages, a dark comedy about a man with a fetish for women who have murdered their husbands, he has won a number of prestigious literary prizes. Yet despite the efforts of a handful of devoted translators and small presses, he remains little-known among Anglophone readers.

To a degree surpassing even his postmodern counterparts in the United States, Senges specializes in irreverent literary pastiche and baroque maximalism. His 2004 novel The Major Refutation is a fictitious treatise attributed to the 16th-century Franciscan monk Antonio de Guevara, whose aim is to prove the New World does not exist and to expose Columbus and the other explorers as frauds. His 2008 Fragments of Lichtenberg tells the story of a group of scholars who are attempting to piece together a systematic work of philosophy out of the aphorisms of the 18th-century German physician Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. In the 2010 Studies of Silhouettes, Senges tries his hand at something similar with the unpublished fragments of Kafka, “completing” sentences from the Prague writer’s diaries by turning them into longer fictions. And in his 2015 masterpiece Ahab (Sequels), now available in an English translation by Jacob Siefring and Tegan Raleigh, we see Senges train his sights on the Great American Novel: Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick.

The zany premise of Ahab (Sequels) could have been dreamed up by Eli Cash, the writer played by Owen Wilson in Wes Anderson’s 2001 film The Royal Tenenbaums: “Well, everybody knows that Captain Ahab dies at the end of Moby-Dick. What this book presupposes is... maybe he didn’t?” Having survived his encounter with the white whale, Senges’s Ahab
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moves to New York City, where he works a series of odd jobs (pastry chef, shoe shiner, elevator operator, phony Catholic priest) until he hits upon the idea of turning his time aboard the Pequod into the libretto for a Broadway musical. When that fails, he moves to Hollywood to try his luck in the script factories of the nascent studio system. Ahab’s screenplay is passed from director to director—Josef von Sternberg, Erich von Stroheim, Billy Wilder, Orson Welles—with no success, before being handed off to the alcoholic F. Scott Fitzgerald, who works on it in the months leading up to his death in 1940. Meanwhile, the hunter has become the hunted: Up and down the coasts of North America, dozens of people have been swallowed by a white whale bent on revenge against a certain one-legged captain.

Alongside these afterlives or sequels, Senges also gives us two backstories or prequels for Ahab, one for Melville’s character and the other for his own. In the first, the story of an “irascible, old whaling captain” and “pirate from Nantucket” is “palmed off” on the 19-year-old Melville by Mozart’s former librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, during a chance meeting in a Manhattan tavern in 1838, just before the aspiring writer sets off for five years at sea. In the second, Ahab is born in 1851 (that is, the year of Moby-Dick’s publication) and spends his 20s and 30s working his way up the ranks of the London stage—where he goes from prompter, to understudy, to Shakespearean actor—leaving behind a wife (the suggestively initialed Martha Doolittle) in the United States. In September 1891 (that is, the month of Melville’s death), Ahab commits a crime and is forced to take to the sea in flight (it is implied that he has murdered Melville himself). Aboard the Pequod, the fugitive is mistaken for the captain, forcing him to rely on his experience playing Richard III, Ophelia, Shylock, and company to fool the crew. In Senges’s version, Ahab the thespian invents the grudge against the whale as a sort of myth that legitimizes his position on the ship for an Odyssean two decades before the Pequod finally has its chance run-in with a white whale.

Senges makes no attempt to reconcile the two incompatible origin stories he gives for Ahab; the point, rather, is to satirically undercut the originality of Melville’s masterpiece by attributing it to someone else. Just as in real life, Melville dies an unrecognized “customs inspector,” but in Ahab (Sequels), Moby-Dick remains largely forgotten: not a central text of American fiction, but an obscure, out-of-print book known only to cognoscenti like Orson Welles. Senges’s Ahab is not content with just killing his maker; he also spends his twilight years and loose change buying up and destroying the few remaining copies of Moby-Dick he can locate in secondhand shops. Melville’s Ahab is a larger-than-life monomaniac, and his pursuit of Moby Dick to the exclusion of considerations of morality and self-interest is in no small part what gives him his grandeur. Senges’s Ahab, by contrast, is a huckster whose motives are self-preservation and personal profit: “American pragmatism putting a stop to the wanderings of a Shakespearean lunatic.” In Ahab (Sequels), the ersatz captain’s grudge against Moby Dick is downgraded to “pure theatricality”; the golden doubloon that Ahab nails to the mast as a reward for the first crew member to spot Moby Dick is a cheap “trick” likened to a manager giving out “bonuses.” The relationship between Senges’s book and its source text can be best summed up in his tidy description of the character they have in common: “Ahab: one step on his good leg, the next on a crude imitation.” The first time as epic tragedy, the second time as burlesque farce.

If at first the object of satire here appears to be Moby-Dick itself, on closer inspection it turns out that Senges has bigger fish to fry. Ahab may “comically outlive his death,” but Senges does not adequately explain how his protagonist comes to be almost 130 years old. This stretching of biological plausibility serves to change the scene from the mid-19th-century energy extraction economy in Moby-Dick to the early-20th-century entertainment industry of Ahab (Sequels). Senges’s persistent use of anachronism—among other things, there are references to deindustrialization, gentrification, photo booths, Saturday Night Live, the speakeasy revival craze, animal documentaries, TV miniseries, fast food, and a certain coffee chain named after a character from Moby-Dick—suggests that the Great White Way and Golden Age Hollywood are in fact merely stand-ins for a satirical target that is nearer to hand: the totally marketized culture of the 21st century.

Especially its literary culture. Today, thanks in large part to corporate consolidation, the rise of the online retailer Amazon as a publishing platform, the academicization of significant parts of literary production, and competition from film, television, streaming services, and social media, writers in particular have been returned to levels of economic precarity unseen since Alexander Pope satirized the hacks of Grub Street in The Dunciad. The key feature of our literary landscape, as Mark McGurl notes in Everything and Less, is that the novel in what he calls “the Age of Amazon,” is “scarcity amid abundance.” More narratives are being produced than ever before, but we have less and less leisure time to experience them; prices are driven down, but the opportunity costs of reading are driven up. The result of these developments in the market, McGurl writes, is that there are “infinitely various messages” to be consumed, but only “one true meta-message: the necessity of corporate capitalism and the consumerist way of life.”

Under these conditions, individual writers may still create difficult, unconventional, high-opportunity-cost fictions in the “style” or “genre” of former avant-gardes, but the subculture that was constructed over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries as a vital institution for technical innovation and a repository for nonmarket values has effectively ceased to exist. This seeming contradiction—a mode of anti-commercial writing that has “outlived” the “death” of its social function—is the central conceit of Ahab (Sequels). As we will see, it goes a long way toward explaining Senges’s initial puzzling aesthetic choices.

they were a “tough audience,”  Senges writes of the Pequod’s crew, “lovers of tradition...and for [this reason] were not always appreciative of the avant-garde.” Ahab’s early “art for art’s sake” performances left them “speechless” and “exhausted,” so he modifies them accordingly, “playing aquatically with the ambiguity of genre.” What Ahab learns during his time as captain is how narrative can be a form of customer service. Once off the ship, Ahab is pauperized, but he wholeheartedly embraces the values and ideology of “free enterprise.” His time as an odd-jobber in New York is “part of the pilgrimage necessary to make oneself into a self-made man,” “the man oriented wholly toward the future,” “a man of common sense” who has understood the “logical and moral impossibility of renouncing profits.”

Ahab’s turn to writing is an attempt to monetize the only “merchandise” he has at his disposal: his life story. As a “reckless entrepreneur,” he is the cousin of today’s self-publishing “service providers,” and like them, he confronts the hard economic logic of a marketized culture. “Stories kept being told,” Senges writes; “all that matters” in both the Hollywood Ahab encounters and in the 21st century literary marketplace, is that “they be in abundance.” It does not matter if they are high-quality or even original: When even the avant-garde has “long since given up...the search for new subject matter,” Senges contends, why should anyone else feel any compunction about “wanting to cash in on stories that have already been told twenty times over, and then resumed under a different title”? That Ahab ends up writing screenplays rather than the best-selling “sailor’s Autobiography” (tentatively titled “Memoirs of an Irked Sailor”) that he dreamed of at first is an acknowledgment that, today, the telos of commercially viable literature is the screen.

The sticking point in the attempts to adapt Ahab’s story for stage and screen is always the same—how to represent the whale?—but Ahab never objects on creative grounds when the directors suggest that he replace the whale with something else. “Sub specie aeternitatis, profit of Rockefeller, genius of Puccini, it’s one and the same thing,” he reasons. He would very much like to sell out, but under these conditions—where there is no space for evaluation external to the market—selling out has lost its meaning. In the end, Ahab’s story gets made into a TV miniseries, but he doesn’t see a penny in royalties. Ahab learns the hard way that in a cultural economy totally colonized by the profit motive, there may be a multitude of stories but really only two master narratives: that of quantitative commercial success and that of “defeat.”

Since the cresting of high modernism a century ago, several generations of avant-garde writers have cast doubt on the possibility of originality, novelty, and innovation in literature, just as Senges does in this satire. However idealistic and naive these paradigms now seem, it is worth recalling why they were held up as virtues in the first place. Originality, novelty, and formal innovation in literature were modes of differentiating particular books from others; as unique objects, they acted as symbols for the possibility of unique selves. Their individual aesthetic choices could be said to have functioned as models for their readers to achieve a degree of personal autonomy from the power of the social customs, political regimes, religious institutions, and, crucially, market forces by which we are all shaped.

In his drive to become a “self-made man” according to the commercial values of the market, rather than an autonomous self according to the aesthetic values of the avant-garde, Ahab in fact allows himself to become “thingified,” Senges writes. As a flat character, lacking both psychological interiority and a plot arc, he becomes interchangeable with anyone else. The reason the whale swallows so many people before it finally captures Ahab is that it cannot tell them apart: “from the high seas, looking at the coasts, there is not a single Ahab, but millions of Ahabs.” To the whale—who is the character that is furthest removed from the market and, not coincidentally, the most well-rounded character in the book—there is “nothing more similar to a human being, than another human being, their harmony is, the predator knows, based on this repetition of motifs.” In Melville’s epic, the singular Ahab goes on a hunt for an equally singular creature; in Senges’s satire, everything and everyone has become generic: an act, an imitation, a copy, a plagiarism—a sequel.

Yet the way Senges constructs Ahab (Sequels) represents such a radical departure not only from the conventional realist novel but also from the American postmodern novels with which it would seem to have the most in common that it amounts to a kind of sabotage. At the level of form, the book explodes its potential as a commodity and, collaterally, the customer service logic of justifying aesthetic choices exclusively with reference to a reader’s pleasure. In doing so, Senges does not merely seek to place Ahab (Sequels) in the vestigial tradition of avant-garde writing; he also seeks to recapture something of its lost social function.

Much to the chagrin of its initial reviewers, Moby-Dick is famously split between novelistic “scene” (Ishmael’s adventures on the Pequod) and essayistic “discourse” (the chapters on whaling). Judging by some of the customer reviews that can be found on Goodreads, Reddit, and a number of amateur book blogs, this is the feature of Melville’s text that remains disquieting and odd to many readers to this day. (“Just skip the whaling stuff and read the story” is not uncommon advice.) Senges takes Melville’s intervention into the novel form one step further: Ahab (Sequels) is almost exclusively discursive; in other words, it does not show, it only tells. It contains no dialogue and, aside from a few monologues by the aforementioned directors and one by Ahab himself, no speech whatsoever.

Unlike the overwhelming majority of novels, which are narrated in the past or present tense, Ahab (Sequels) is narrated largely in the past or present continuous tense, and sometimes in the conditional. This gives the events the provisional status normally associated with storytelling modes like rumor, legend, or speculation—sometimes they are tagged as such by Senges—rather than with fiction proper. It is not that Senges’s narration is unreliable, a hallmark of the novel form; it is that it is unreliably unreliable. And this, rather than its syntax, or its breaks with linear chronology, or its engagements with a broad swath of European literary, artistic, and
musical production going back to the Renaissance, is what makes it difficult.

A novel is a single possible world created by a one-time suspension of disbelief. Senges’s use of narrative tense in *Ahab (Sequels)* multiplies these possible worlds and requires the reader to suspend disbelief over and over again, until belief is no longer available as a response to the text. (We are told, for example, that there are “99 stories” behind Ahab’s missing leg; we never find out which one we are supposed to believe is true.) Serial forms like sequels, prequels, and trilogies are beloved by authors writing for commercial success, as the repetition of a successful formula across multiple books increases the likelihood of sales and downloads. By injecting seriality into the structure of a single book, however, Senges impedes the reader’s ability to imaginatively escape into a stable fictional world and the minds of the characters that inhabit it. (Needless to say, not unlike the whale in Ahab’s script, such a book could never be adapted for the screen or receive its attendant revenues, either.) The result is a formally distinctive work of literature that nonetheless limits the size of its potential audience by deliberately foreclosing the kind of narrative pleasure the novel form, grounded in the presentation of scenes, has accustomed readers to.

It is fair to ask, then, why anyone should read it. The standard defense of a work of avant-garde fiction is that once a reader has “invested the time” to master its stylistic idiom, it delivers a different (by implication, higher) set of literary pleasures: the pleasure of the unfamiliar, the pleasure of solving a puzzle, the pleasure of linguistic virtuosity and complexity, the pleasure of imagining the taboo. Senges’s prose is consistently gorgeous, and *Ahab (Sequels)* is frequently funny and profound, but evaluating it on these grounds would be to ignore the way it deliberately sabotages storytelling norms upheld even by otherwise “difficult” avant-garde fictions from *Ulysses* to *Infinite Jest*.

To reduce the experience of reading avant-garde fiction to the pleasures it provides is to concede that it is one genre among others, with formal conventions that may be relied on to deliver these pleasures, and a paying audience, however small, whose needs must be met. The question then becomes how to sustain the production of such pleasures for a select audience (the handful of readers of difficult literature) and transmit them as efficiently as possible, a question whose answer finds itself in the very object of Senges’s satiric critique: the literary marketplace. What makes *Ahab (Sequels)* the proper inheritor of the avant-garde is not merely its formal uniqueness, but the way that it challenges its reader to forgo the logic of pleasure entirely and, in doing so, to experience, for the duration of reading, something we used to be able to count on the institution of the avant-garde to provide: a space where we might be able to exert some measure of autonomy from the market forces that dominate every other square inch of our culture.

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**The Light**

Isn’t it the work of those of us who work to make new tools with the tools we are given, hammering matter into matter more adapted to the hand than to the memory of a hand, less to the past than to the path to what comes next?

And isn’t it the work of the next adaptation in part to evince specifically by being what it is, regardless of detail and whether it wants to or not, the matter of persistence through change, the hammering of being into time, which is itself the work?

And so it was I took myself downriver, early in the midst of the worldwide sickness, the light on me knowledgeable as all light is knowledgeable, silent archive of everything that happens—it puts you in your place, the light put me in my place. Light on the surface of East River in March, light July through October, light at noon on slopes of undulations pearling for a moment till it gleams up on the peaks, the light like melon ribbon, light dribbling from the mouth of a mythical beast like Blake’s dragon, but in effect, closer to a nebulous walrus made of fire. I am the nebulous walrus made of fire. I walk among you unrecognized but laughing. There is so much beauty left to see in this world. And I became what I am now to see it.

TIMOTHY DONNELLY
Mirror/Stage
Kendrick Lamar’s Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers
BY JOSHUA BENNETT

What do you call a group of people united by grief? A family. Or at least that’s the formulation that has been dancing through my mind as I pondered where to begin. This is, after all, the frame that Kendrick Lamar offers from the outset on his long-awaited fifth album, Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers.

When my friend Tim and I talked about the record, he told me that he’d misheard its title as “Mr. Morales and the Big Steppers,” which sounds like the name of a late-’70s family band that I would love. Later that day, in my group chat, another friend, Kyle, shared the abstract of a paper that he’d just presented, in which at one point he says something like “What’s important to remember is that funerals are also reunions.” I hear these lines on repeat, resounding in the background as the beat builds, while I play Kendrick’s album, trying to find a foothold.

A quick bit of accounting clarifies that the 1,855 days in question refers to the period between Kendrick’s last release, 2017’s Pulitzer Prize–winning DAMN, and the project we are now listening to. This has been a period, our protagonist tells us, marked by trials and tribulations so severe they required (apart from the rare guest feature on other people’s tracks) all but absolute silence.

Over the course of the 19 songs that constitute this double album, we come to learn not only the details of the “something” Kendrick has been going through but also who has been on that journey with him: his of a crisis of faith that felt like my own personal apocalypse.

In the music, I encountered a young poet, full of fire, wrestling with the same sorts of questions—about grace, loss, eternity—that surrounded me. I heard a man trying to make a choice between love and the law and always doing his best to choose the former—no matter the cost.

The cover image of Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers, which was made public before the music, features Kendrick with his fiancée and two children. The crown he wears is all thorns. At first I was tempted to read this as a reference to kingship, a familiar trope for the artist. But now I think it has more to do with a vision of parenthood as sacrifice. And a vision of life on Earth in which we can experience the end of the world, sometimes more than once, and yet live.

The opening track of Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers, “United in Grief,” begins with an echo looming over us to establish the general atmosphere: “I hope you find some peace of mind in this lifetime.” Then another voice, not yet Kendrick’s, follows that affirmation with a prophetic imperative: “Tell them / tell ’em / tell them the truth.” Then the first echo again, but with a slight variation, moving from the level of the individual psyche to that of otherworldly, utopian striving: “I hope you find some paradise.” To round out this ensemble of voices, we hear the man himself around 30 seconds in:

I’ve been going through something 1,855 days I’ve been going through something
partner and his daughter and his new-born son; his new therapist; and his cousin Baby Keem (who appears several times on the album, making his presence felt with a star turn on “Savior”). Beyond these members of his inner circle, Kendrick has been on this journey with a number of loved ones who enter the frame only via the kaleidoscopic lens of childhood memory.

More than once, Kendrick’s accepted opening charge to tell the truth brings us back to this space: one marked by triumph, regret, and, most vividly, education. Here’s a sequence from one of the album’s standout tracks, “Father Time,” that illustrates this point:

I come from a generation of home involvements and I got daddy issues, that’s on me
Everything them four walls had taught me, made habits bury deep
That man knew a lot, but not enough to keep me past them streets
My life is a plot, twisted from directions that I can’t see

The triple entendre in the song’s title reappears here, at the end of its first verse: The phrase “Father Time” is, simultaneously, a familiar idiom, a reference to the specific stretches of time Kendrick spent with his own father, learning the various lessons the song elaborates in detail, and an almost religious vision of time as an entity that acts upon us consciously, turning each individual life into a “plot,” a work of literature, cinema, music, or some unwieldy, chimeric combination of the three.

Just as Kendrick cannot shake the indelible influence of time, he cannot undo the effects of his father’s instruction. That antagonism enters the song at the level of lyric as “daddy issues,” a phrase he repeats. This umbrella term is meant to stand in for behaviors as varied as fistfighting in the street, hesitating to express affection, or jumping up after a skinned knee without shedding a tear or making a sound (“‘cause if I cried about it / he’d surely tell me not to be weak”). And though there is a certain critique of normative masculinity one can offer here, what is much more interesting, I think, is the fact that for Kendrick these memories are presented as part of a legible tradition, one born of specific material conditions (Black generational poverty in the modern city) at a particular moment in history (Compton in the ’90s), as well as an ancient impulse to survive them at all costs.

“Father Time,” then, isn’t just a song about the limits of a dominant form of masculinity, or the failures of one man’s father, or his successes. Or the joy you felt but couldn’t sing about. Or how, for Black boys growing up everywhere in the United States of America, the language of adoration and admiration alike are policed from the very beginning, often by forces that don’t let up for as long as we are alive. Somehow, against the tide of centuries of such brutalization, there persists the possibility of something like the sort of intimacy, however fraught, that Kendrick outlines throughout the album.

This, it seems to me, is the project’s core theme: How, in a world where Blackness is said to be synonymous with general dishonor, do we nevertheless care for each other? How does such care show up in real time? Where and how does it fall short, or suffer from a contamination so familiar it defies our attempts to name it, even when we try? In what ways does that love surpass human understanding? Can it survive the full force of an entire social order dead set against such love? Could you be loved? Are you sure?

The map of human relations Kendrick lays out for us here—the larger social world our love must survive—is an intricate one, full of both opportunities and threats. “We Cry Together,” for example, brings to life the story of a romance cracking at the seams—one that appears to be done for good, before an unexpected (and genuinely tragic, though it is presented ironically) volta at its conclusion. “Auntie Diaries” tells the story of Kendrick’s relationship with two family members who are transitioning, and how those lifelong bonds influence the way he comes to think about the exclusionary, queophobic rhetoric—employed by himself and others everywhere from the playground to the sanctuary—that he once treated as acceptable everyday parlance. Kendrick, we are reminded, demands transformation. It is, by its very nature, marred by our human frailty, our disposition toward falling short.

Kendrick doesn’t shy away from that complexity; he embraces it. He acknowledges the terrible things that served as his condition of emergence while refusing to let that be the entire story. The sort of trauma we experience within our kinship networks—those we are born into as well as those we choose—is one of the album’s central objects of concern. Here, though, tragedy is not a casual shorthand for Blackness. There is infinitely more to the plot. There is still room for change. But it will require that we tell the truth: “Before I go in fast asleep, love me for me / I bare my soul and now we’re free.”

These closing lines from “Mother I Sober”—perhaps the song on the album that goes most into depth about the various sorts of abuse that Kendrick’s kin, blood and otherwise, have survived over the years—are a fitting end for one of the record’s most powerful meditations on the costs of loving Blackness, loving Black people, loving oneself. Such love, Kendrick explains, requires the willful abolition of our well-earned fear. It demands the creation of new myths, icons, and images. It demands that we lift the mirror to ourselves and see the beauty, and the terror, and all that persists in between.

Joshua Bennett is a professor of English at Dartmouth College. He is the author of two collections of poetry, Owed and The Sobbing School, as well as a book of criticism, Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man.
Vengeance

The brutal verisimilitude of The Northman

BY ERIN SCHWARTZ

HE NORTHMAN, A MEDIEVAL NORDIC EPIC WRITTEN AND directed by Robert Eggers, begins with a familiar setup: a young prince loses his family and kingdom in an act of fraternal betrayal. King Aurvandil (Ethan Hawke) is assassinated by his brother, Fjölnir (Claes Bang), while his young son Amleth watches; the young prince also sees Fjölnir kidnap his mother, Gudrún (Nicole Kidman), as part of a bloody coup to seize Aurvandil’s title and land. Barely avoiding capture, Amleth escapes and rows away, repeating a vow to avenge his father, kill his uncle, and rescue his mother—an overture to the story of a hero. (The film is based on a Scandinavian legend, recorded in the 13th century, that may have inspired Hamlet.)

We next see Amleth (played as an adult by Alexander Skarsgård) years later, now a formidable warrior applying his martial prowess to raiding Slavic villages. His revenge oath has been indefinitely deferred in favor of pillaging with a band of shamanic berserkers; he isn’t yet aware of Fjölnir’s movements, that his uncle has lost his land and fled to Iceland. Only after the urging of a mystical figure played by the musician Björk does Amleth resume his quest. He disguises himself as a slave bound for Fjölnir’s settlement; once he arrives, he plans a series of escalating attacks with the help of another captive, a Slavic sorceress named Olga (Anya Taylor-Joy). The campaign eventually destroys the remnant of Fjölnir’s kingdom, and Amleth faces his rival in a final duel at the top of a volcano.

Although The Northman represents Eggers’s most ambitious project yet, both in its narrative scope and budget, he is known for choosing stories like this—spooky historical dramas that can skew melodramtic—and managing to avoid sentimentality and shtick through obsessive, anthropological detail. In his previous films (The Witch, a horror film set on the edges of a 17th-century New England Puritan settlement, and The Lighthouse, a darkly funny 19th-century drama that follows two bickering lighthouse keepers in their descent into madness), Eggers has a knack for collecting period-specific ephemera—phrases from accounts of demonic possession, antique camera lenses, a museum-replica pagan rattle, and hand-stitched costumes—to make a coherent facsimile of a world. When the method works, tenets that might seem prosaic to modern viewers become vivid and urgent, located within a faithful reproduction of the setting that produced them.

Although there are flashes of this sensibility throughout The Northman, the film falls into an awkward middle ground between blockbuster epic and the cerebral historical dramas that preceded it, not quite filling either prompt. Moments of revelatory strangeness come inconsistently, and they feel disjointed from a plot that’s too unwieldy for verisimilitude alone to carry. The sequences that lack a sense of context to animate them can feel rote or even silly—a scene in which Amleth duels a ghost skeleton for a magic sword, for example; a couple of instances of animal-based deus ex machina; or the abrupt end of Olga and Amleth’s romantic relationship, soundtracked with a swell of music that make its pathos feel forced. Still, beyond the less convincing scenes, there are glimpses of a more interesting story that reflects Eggers’s broader interest in outcasts, grievance, and the futility of honoring one’s fate.
The parts of The Northman that take place in Iceland are set during a period early in the country’s colonization, about 16 years before the establishment of its parliament in 930 AD. The choice was intentional: The Icelandic poet and novelist Sjón, who cowrote the script with Eggers, told The New Yorker that he “realized that we could slip in a family there, that settled early and then just disappeared from the face of the earth.” In his other films, Eggers has chosen settings on the fringes of a more formal society, which is effective for horror because it makes the consequences of interpersonal friction more dire. To see the danger of these places feels like a forgotten instinct: These small and isolated communities have no guarantee of survival, making their members both acutely dependent on and vulnerable to one another.

When we first see Fjölnir’s settlement, a cluster of buildings in a wide green valley in the shadow of a volcano, it feels precarious, barely rooted in the earth even before the machinations of a vengeful prince work to dismantle it. It’s the kind of place that, in Sjón’s words, looks like it could “just disappear” from the face of the earth. Sod-roofed structures covered in fresh grass appear halfway to being swallowed by the ground. With vast stretches of uninhabited wilderness as their alternative, a human village, even one as violent and miserable as Fjölnir’s, binds its inhabitants to it: “Even if you did escape this farm, you’d only be carrion for the blue fox and selkies,” another captive tells Amleth.

In Iceland, for Amleth, two tenets meant to ensure the preservation of social order soon come into conflict: the taboo on murder and the duty to enact vengeance on murderers, especially those who kill kings, whose position of invulnerability is necessary for the strength of the state. This paradox—whether to carry out a string of killings to symbolically buttress the sanctity of life—is at the center of many tragedies, including Hamlet. In The Northman, Amleth doesn’t dwell much on these social and moral intricacies: At one point he kills an opponent during a sports match by headbutting him to death. Yet he decides that he can’t take his final revenge on Fjölnir until the terms of the prophecy made by the seer in the Slavic village are met. “It was foretold that I would slay my father’s killer in a burning lake,” Amleth says. “Until that day comes, I will torment the man who made my life hell…. We thirst for vengeance, but we cannot escape our fate.” In the meantime, with Olga’s help, he executes a gruesome series of attacks on Fjölnir’s men, laden with religious symbolism, which the settlement’s priestess at first blames on a “distempered spirit.”

In this sense, The Northman resembles other recent films—The Green Knight, for example, based on the Arthurian chivalric romance, and Martin Scorsese’s mob drama The Irishman—that place preordained male violence in a nihilistic, almost ironic register rather than in the heroic or tragic tone of an epic. These films facilitate a reading in which acts of violence that define a person’s life can provide a necessary sense of purpose and belonging but also be arbitrary, incidental, or vaguely foolish. Partway through Amleth’s campaign, his mother, Gudrún, confronts him with the revelation that his quest is built on childhood illusions about his parents and that she very much invited Fjölnir’s act of betrayal. Enraged, Amleth kills his uncle’s son, but he isn’t dissuaded from his goal. At the beginning of his final confrontation with Fjölnir, instead of rescuing Gudrún, Amleth murders her in a struggle.

In these films, the violence of men trapped by fate appears both inevitable and like a waste of time; their blood feuds, which give them purpose, contain no inherent depth, eloquence, or special insight. By the film’s conclusion, Amleth’s commitment to vengeance seems divorced from the people it was intended to honor or protect, rolling forward on the strength of its own, preordained inertia. If in Hamlet a prince’s desire for revenge is checked by doubt and melancholia, The Northman’s Amleth would find that kind of introspection totally alien. This single-minded devotion to fate would benefit from Eggers’s anthropological insight; without it, we’re left to extrapolate from religious rituals and scenes of parochial drudgery that being governed by destiny, no matter how destructive, may offer transcendence in a grim, chaotic world. “Hate is all I have ever known,” Amleth tells Olga in the one brief moment in which he considers abandoning his quest to kill Fjölnir. “But I wish I could be free of it.”

The Northman is a brutal and violent film, felt in both its protagonist’s appetite for revenge and a world that seems to require suffering to continue turning. Enslaved laborers are killed at random; in the continuous shots of battle that Eggers favors, half a dozen discrete, horrifying injuries might play out within the same few seconds. During the raid on the Slavic village early in the film, Amleth rips out a man’s throat with his teeth and howls to the sky like a wolf. But the film suddenly cuts ahead, to just after the battle. Amleth is part of a tableau of a dozen wounded berserkers who are hunched over, panting and bleeding from open cuts, their muscles trembling with exhaustion or pain. A separate group of more uniformly dressed and armored fighters administer the raid’s aftermath. In the longer view, Amleth’s group, dominant in battle, gains the connotation of hired muscle, useful in the fight but peripheral to its planning and an afterthought in the allocation of its rewards.

That moment has curious implications. It presents comfort with brutality as a skill within a hierarchy of skills that a medieval society needs filled, and casts Amleth’s quest in an almost entrepreneurial light. But those threads aren’t pursued. Soon after, Amleth hears about Fjölnir’s loss of his kingdom and his departure to Iceland from a fellow fighter as he is sharpening an axe. “Fjölnir killed his brother for nothing. Now he’s a sheep farmer,” the fighter says, laughing, as the cycle of fate starts over again.
Letters

Not Just a Women’s Issue
Re “The Fight for Abortion After Roe Falls,” by Amy Littlefield [May 30/June 6]: Too many people thought Roe v. Wade was all that was needed. Except among some feminists, there was little thought about continuous organizing to protect access to abortion services, which were not widely seen as related to health—an intersectional issue connected to education, income, housing, and equal opportunity for everyone. So long as it was seen as a “niche issue” for women and not a social and political issue that affected everyone, directly or indirectly, there was always something else that was considered more important. Now women of color and poor women, especially, will pay the highest price.

Carolyn Wallace

How We Win
Re “The National Grid as Political Metaphor,” by Jessi Jezewski Stevens [May 30/June 6]: Inconsistency as solar and wind energy can be, there is, on the other hand, the reliability of geothermal, biomass, and, hopefully soon, wave energy. Additionally, an alternative to the grid would be to require new construction to be self-sufficient, integrating renewable energy, and also to augment existing structures with renewable sources.

My energy company is swapping out my electrical panel next month in an effort to improve the grid, but I don’t think grid work or any effort except transitioning off of fossil fuels will hold back climate change. Nuclear power is out of the question: Accumulated radioactive waste will harm future generations. In my frustration with government efforts, I wonder if an international boycott of fossil fuels by the public, coordinated on the Internet, would be possible.

Kathleen Freeman

Collective Power
Re “The National Grid as Political Metaphor,” by Jessi Jezewski Stevens [May 30/June 6]: Inconsistency as solar and wind energy can be, there is, on the other hand, the reliability of geothermal, biomass, and, hopefully soon, wave energy. Additionally, an alternative to the grid would be to require new construction to be self-sufficient, integrating renewable energy, and also to augment existing structures with renewable sources.

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FRED COLEMAN
A Kron, Ohio

This has to be one of the finest columns Elie Mystal has written. I am so very pleased that The Nation gives such prominent place to his commentary. These are appalling times we live in, and we desperately need the kind of forceful, fluent, and non-nonsense message that he continually sends our way. Long may he prosper!

WALTER PEWEN
Melissa Lin Perrella

The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Melissa Lin Perrella sees a direct line from her childhood in a small town in Central California in the 1980s to her work on the front lines of environmental justice.

“We looked different from most everyone else; my house smelled different, because the food we ate was different,” she said. She was bullied. “It [affected] my confidence and what I thought was possible for myself, but it also made me the advocate that I am.” Today, Lin Perrella is the head of justice and equity for the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council, a role that was created last year. The move is part of a larger shift among environmental organizations toward recognizing that climate change and pollution do not affect all communities equally.

Lin Perrella got her start with the NRDC nearly 20 years ago in the organization’s Santa Monica office, where she worked alongside communities near the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, areas with some of the worst air quality in the state. “That’s where I learned that in order for environmental policies to be responsive and durable, they have to be prioritized and really led by the communities that are most impacted by them,” she said.

DR: How has your understanding of environmental justice changed over the years?

MLP: In the beginning, I was very focused on outcomes. But what I think has deepened over the years is my understanding of how to do that work—the need to honor local community leadership and intentionally take care not to supplant it. Even a well-intended organization can disrupt local power-building if it does not intentionally look for ways to share power. I’ve learned that environmental justice means reducing pollution in communities of color and low-income communities, and building community power is part of that work.

DR: How does that relate to your new role at the NRDC?

MLP: If we’re working alongside communities to close down a polluting facility, NRDC shouldn’t stop there. We should also be working alongside communities to transition workers that were working at that facility [to green jobs]. If we’re going to propose new green spaces, we should be working alongside housing advocates to ensure that the new park doesn’t result in gentrification.

“Polluters go for the communities perceived as lacking power.”

DR: You’ve said that being bullied as a child for being Asian American is part of what brought you to advocacy work.

MLP: All forms of violence, whether it’s a punch to your gut or pollution that burns your lungs, is targeted at those who are perceived as unable to fight back. Attackers choose who they attack. I’m vulnerable because of my race, my gender, my size—and similarly, polluters don’t site their facilities randomly. They go for communities that are perceived as lacking the power to resist. That’s why I think it’s so important for the environmental movement to support community power-building so that these perceptions change.

DR: The Biden administration has pledged to deliver 40 percent of federal climate-related investments to “disadvantaged communities,” and it released a screening tool to determine which ones to include. The tool has been criticized because it doesn’t include race. Can a “race-neutral” environmental justice strategy succeed?

MLP: You need a comprehensive suite of policies and tools that consider race in order to correct long-standing environmental racism, and to see whether the policies enacted actually reduced racial disparities in environmental protection and health outcomes. Some of these policies include restrictions on siting new environmental hazards in places that already get high and disproportionate amounts of pollution. They should also include actions to reduce existing pollution burdens on low-income communities and communities of color.

It’s not a mystery what needs to be done. Environmental justice advocates’ vision and policy priorities can be found in initiatives like the federal Environmental Justice for All Act, a bill that environmental justice leaders have been instrumental in crafting. From where I sit at NRDC, I can use the organization’s platform to lend its support to these movement voices and efforts.

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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 Maestra University in Santiago, the country’s second largest city.

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