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Frank Sinatra was vacationing on one side of the Salton Sea while uranium-laced bombs were dropped into it on the other side.
It’s no surprise that Democrats are up against it this fall. The president’s party generally does worse in midterm elections. Inflation is at a 40-year high. The mainstream media trumpet that crime is up. And the centerpiece of President Biden’s domestic agenda has been torpedoed by united Republican obstruction—and, until the recently brokered spending deal, by the Democratic Senator Joe Manchin III.

But a more long-term difficulty was revealed in a recent *New York Times–Siena College* poll: Though they enjoy a 20-point advantage over Republicans among white, college-educated voters, Democrats have a working-class problem—and the climate deal, while welcome, isn’t going to fix it.

Currently trailing the GOP by 12 points, Democrats are becoming the party of upscale urban and suburban voters, while Republicans are beginning to consolidate a multiracial coalition of working-class voters.

A chorus of armchair pundits believe they know who’s to blame. Not Biden, not Democratic centrists, not the gerontocracy that runs the party in the House and Senate, not the party establishment.

“Wokeness,” spouts James Carville, “is a problem, and we all know it.” Ruy Teixeira argues that the left has poisoned the “party brand,” dismissing the idea that campaigning for more gun control and against the assault on abortion and Donald Trump’s “big lie” about a stolen election will save Democrats this fall.

How to make sense of this house of mirrors? After all, Biden is the president, not Bernie Sanders. Nancy Pelosi and Steny H. Hoyer lead the House, not “the Squad” or the Progressive Caucus. Centrists have sabotaged Biden’s economic plan, not the left. Murder rates are up in red and blue states alike—and Biden has called for funding the police more than reforming them. Job creation keeps setting records. Abortion, gun control, and the idea of defending democracy all enjoy majority support—central reasons why Democrats lead among college-educated voters. And if, as the pundits argue, working-class voters feel looked down upon, nothing Black Lives Matter has done has been as poisonous as Hillary Clinton’s calling half of Trump supporters “deplorables.”

Yet Democrats are right to worry that the activists of their base—the young, African Americans, immigrant and climate activists, women—remain demoralized, while those on the right are aroused and on the march.

Trump’s administration was a hot mess, but the corporations got deregulation, evangelicals got zealous judges, the rich got tax cuts, Big Oil got climate action blocked. And for communities ravaged by plant closures and jobs shipped abroad, Trump called out the elites that had failed them and broke with neoliberal “free trade” shibboleths. He might not have had a coherent plan, but he did something. Republicans delivered to their base, even when most Americans disagreed.

Democrats, by contrast, spurn their activists. Promises on student loan relief have been broken, action on voting rights and immigration stymied. Biden is more pro-labor than his Democratic predecessors, but labor law reform is going nowhere. The party says it is all in on saving abortion, but that didn’t keep Pelosi and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee from fending off a pro-choice primary challenger to Representative Henry Cuellar of Texas, who opposes choice and much of the rest of the Democratic agenda.

The Democrats’ problem among the working class isn’t the Squad or pro-choice activists. It’s that this economy doesn’t work for working people. The rich capture the rewards of growth, while working people grow less secure. Working-class Americans struggle to afford necessities: health care, housing, education, retirement security—and now food and gas.

Centrist Democrats from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama championed the neoliberal policies—deregulation, free trade, privatization—that led to this crisis. What Democrats need isn’t a turn to the right on social issues but a populist agenda on economic issues. They must be clear they are willing to ensure that the rich pay their fair share in taxes, to invest in rebuilding America, to take on the monopolies—from Big Pharma to Big Oil—that are driving inflation, and to empower workers and hold CEOs accountable. And they have to deliver.

If Democrats can’t produce for working people, while Republicans continue to serve corporations and the rich, our divisions will fester, and the future of our democracy will be in doubt.
Bannon’s Game

Despite facing legal defeats, Trump’s former adviser is scheming Trump’s return—and Trump’s revenge.

STEVE BANNON CALLED IT ON JANUARY 5, 2021, when he announced that “all hell is going to break loose tomorrow.” Bannon knew what was coming on the eve of President Donald Trump’s violent coup attempt. And he knows what’s coming now as he promotes a “populist revolt” that he predicts will see an army of partisans flooding polling places this November to usher in a new era of right-wing extremism.

What Trump’s coconspirator is talking about is very different from the normal politics of a midterm election year. Bannon is plotting a “precinct strategy” takeover of the electoral infrastructure of the nation—by inserting MAGA supporters in key election oversight positions and by creating chaos where necessary—to ensure Republicans get control of Congress and statehouses in 2022 and of the White House in 2024. From there, the plan is for a re-empowered Trump to assert his authority as never before.

While most media coverage of Bannon these days is focused on his contempt of Congress convictions for disregarding a subpoena from the House committee investigating the January 6 attack, the more consequential story is that of his plot to upend the political process in order to return his former boss to the Oval Office as an angrier and more authoritarian president.

“We control this country. We’ve got to start acting like it,” Bannon declared in October, as he outlined plans to “deconstruct” the federal government and turn it into a hyper-politicized agency for Trump to exact revenge on those who are investigating him for conspiring to overthrow the results of the 2020 election. Revealing in the details of a recent Axios report on how Trumpers “are preparing to radically reshape the federal government if he is re-elected, purging potentially thousands of civil servants and filling career posts with loyalists to him and his ‘America First’ ideology,” Bannon is issuing new calls to action.

He wants people “stepping forward and saying, ‘Hey, I want to be one of those 4,000 shock troops,’” he said on his popular podcast, Bannon’s War Room.

Bannon won’t just be one of those shock troops; he intends to lead them. Indeed, he’s already doing so—with none-too-subtle encouragement from the former president, who for the better part of a decade has turned to Bannon as a theorist, strategist, and political hit man. Even though the pair have occasionally fallen out, Bannon has leveraged his mentorship from the former president, who for the better part of a decade has turned to Bannon as a theorist, strategist, and political hit man. Even as he faces legal scrutiny, Bannon is plotting the trajectory of Trump’s political project and of the party it dominates.

If Republicans take charge of Congress and statehouses this fall, they will follow a playbook outlined by Bannon and promoted by Trump. Bannon is already talking about impeaching Joe Biden and investigating the members of the January 6 committee. Last December on his podcast, he announced, “We’re going to hit the beach with the landing teams and the beachhead teams, and all that nomenclature they use, when President Trump wins in 2024—or before.”

The “or before” is an ominous reminder that Bannon is no new-comer to authoritarian politics. The extraordinary hearings of the January 6 committee confirmed that Bannon continues to serve as Trump’s savviest—and most Machiavellian—coconspirator. Officially, Bannon has been off the payroll since he exited the Trump White House in August 2017, after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va., focused attention on the white nationalist views that the president and the man who served as his “White House chief strategist” so obviously shared.

But Bannon didn’t disappear from Trump’s orbit. He decamped to Europe and joined far-right partisans in building the infrastructure for the “global populist movement,” hailed Hungary’s Viktor Orbán as “the most significant guy on the scene right now,” and sought to establish a “gladiator school for culture warriors” in a former Italian monastery. Back home, he allegedly sought to defraud Trump supporters who wanted to help pay for the president’s border wall.

But the side hustles were just distractions from the real project: remaking the United States as an “America First” enclave where racism and xenophobia are normalized and where Trump and his minions utilize the authoritarian power of government to punish their enemies and reward themselves.

When pundits talk about the 2022 and 2024 elections, they need to recognize—as Bannon does—that the results will determine whether an already battered republic will be handed over to the far-right political project of Donald Trump and Steve Bannon.
Hearing Loss

The January 6 investigation is entertaining, but it is not going to stop Republicans.

We live in historic times. The hearings of the January 6 committee are Watergate 2.0. Maybe they’ll have an even bigger impact than Watergate 1.0. At any rate, democracy is at death’s door, and if we want to ensure the future of our republic, we need to hold former president Donald Trump responsible for his deplorable behavior. And it doesn’t hurt that the hearings are must-see TV.

So goes the story line that has permeated much of the mainstream and progressive media. But this narrative obscures more than it reveals. Its popularity indicates that there’s something rotten at the heart of contemporary liberalism.

We don’t deny that January 6 was a grotesque moment in US history. The actions of the rioters who stampeded the Capitol, whipped up by the nonsensical lies of the outgoing president and an anonymous online buffoon, were a disturbing instantiation of the decay of the American political system. Trump’s behavior that day was shameful, and in an actually democratic country, his demand that an election official in Georgia “find” him 11,000 votes would have led to his criminal prosecution.

Unfortunately, we don’t live in that type of a country; we live in a profoundly undemocratic and unequal one. And it’s for this reason that the hearings are ultimately a distraction. If progressives want to make the US a better place, they shouldn’t pin their hopes on the January 6 committee convincing Attorney General Merrick Garland to bring charges against Trump.

Sadly, liberals don’t seem to have learned much from the failures of James Comey and Robert Mueller to take down Trump. Here’s a small reality check: It’s fantastically unlikely that Trump will spend a day behind bars. Just as no high-level decision-makers were held responsible for the many crimes of the Korean and Vietnam wars, just as Richard Nixon was pardoned for Watergate, just as no official in the George W. Bush administration was prosecuted for torturing detainees during the ignominious War on Terror, and just as Barack Obama was never held to account for murdering an American teenager with a drone strike, nothing of consequence is going to happen to Trump either during or after these hearings.

Even in the court of public opinion, it’s doubtful that the Democrats will achieve anything approaching a significant victory. They’ve been screaming for years that Trump is an erratic, unprincipled, and contemptible person who is manifestly unfit for public office. That was Hillary Clinton’s pitch in the 2016 election, and it was the premise of Mueller’s investigation and both failed impeachments. It didn’t work then, and it’s not going to work now. In fact, the hearings may well increase Trump’s support among his base.

While it’s true that the percentage of independent voters who blame Trump for the riot has climbed a bit since the hearings started, even that number isn’t dramatically different from what it was a year and a half ago.

And anyway, it doesn’t really matter. Going into the midterm elections, voters will care far more about the price of gas and food.

In an alternate reality, Democrats might have taken a page from their own history. Instead of trying to refocus voters’ attention on a riot from 19 months ago and the shameful but familiar behavior of a man who’s no longer president, they could have held hearings designed to galvanize public opinion on the issues of most concern to voters. In the early 1930s, Democrats did this when the Pecora Commission investigated corrupt financial practices, generating public anger and a wave of new regulations.

But the Democratic Party has decided to focus on the character of a man about whom most Americans long ago made up their minds. Fundamentally, the January 6 hearings are red meat for the liberal base and, perhaps most important for the party as an institution, provide an excuse for the never-ending fundraising appeals for which Democrats have become notorious. As Branko Marcetic put it in Jacobin, the hearings represent a decision to “quadruple down on the white, affluent, college-educated, and already largely Democratic-leaning segment of voters who tend to see January 6 and its vast web of story lines as their biggest concern.”

Simple enough. But this leads us to more interesting questions: Why does this segment of the population care so much? If the hearings are unlikely to have either electoral or legal consequences, why hold them at all? What psychic needs are they fulfilling?

Most obviously, the hearings are entertaining, and Americans love a good trial, whether it’s O.J. Simpson, Johnny Depp, or Trump in the docket. One should never underestimate the importance of a spectacle to the American public—after all, we’re the nation that gave birth to P.T. Barnum and elected a Hollywood actor and then a reality TV host to the presidency.

But at a deeper level, the obsession of a band of college-educated liberals with January 6 reflects the anti-populism that has long defined American liberalism. Where socialists want to empower the working class, liberals hope for a less chaotic form of social progress organized around institutions run by those with “merit.”

Since liberalism became a political force in the 19th century, liberals have instinctively distrusted the
The Right to Read

The Arizona prison system is censoring The Nation.

Unless you are a publisher—or happen to be reading this in prison—you may be unfamiliar with the “Exclusion Notice” that prison authorities use to justify the withholding of magazines and other printed matter from incarcerated subscribers. Over the past several months we at The Nation have received a number of these notices from the Office of Publication Review (OPR) at the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry. The explanations the OPR provides for banning a given issue are—true to its Orwellian name—invariably vague and lack any specific citations of the allegedly offending material.

Our April 5/12, 2021, issue, for example, was suppressed because it allegedly falls under the categories of “Promotes Superiority of One Group Over Another, Racism, Degradation” and “Acts of Violence.” Since they gave no further details, we can only assume the authorities objected to the cover story, “Black Immigrants Matter.” Our July 26/August 2, 2021, issue, devoted to “This Way to Utopia: Dreams of a Better World,” was excluded on the grounds that it might

The explanations for banning a given issue of The Nation are invariably vague and lack any specific citations.

The attack could have “succeeded” in installing Donald Trump as dictator of the United States. But as long as the January 6 hearings are on TV, liberals can continue to do what they did under President Trump and imagine themselves as a noble group fighting off a fascist threat.

The reality is that Republicans aren’t going to overthrow our half-democratic institutions in some 21st-century reenactment of Mussolini’s March on Rome. The threat they pose is that they’ll win elections—or sometimes steal them, as in Bush v. Gore—and impose on the American people their agenda of deregulation, environmental devastation, union-busting, and cruel laws that target marginalized groups.

And whatever liberals might want to believe, that threat isn’t going to be countered by appealing to establishment respectability or by conjuring notions of noble resistance. The only way to defeat reactionary populism is with a better appeal to the populace.

Daniel Besner is an associate professor of international studies at the University of Washington. Ben Burgis is the host of the Give Them an Argument podcast and YouTube channel and a philosophy instructor at Morehouse College.
Jews on Abortion

**Jewish law permits the procedure—so is there a First Amendment case to restore reproductive rights?**

HE JEWISH POSITION ON ABORTION IS SIMPLE: IT’S permitted. However ignorant the ancient rabbis may have been about the female reproductive system, they managed to land on the revolutionary concept that women are people too—a finding that eludes the 21st-century United States Supreme Court. But could the court’s radical transformation into a theocracy, all but annihilating the distinction between church and state, bite them in the ass when it comes to a Jewish First Amendment case for abortion?

Halacha, the collective legal texts that guide Jewish life, justify abortion well beyond contemporary notions like “safe, legal, and rare” or “to save the life of the mother.” The earliest reference to the ethics of terminating a pregnancy is a short passage in Exodus, which reads like a civil tort, stating that if a pregnant woman is physically injured in a fight and miscarries, her husband may exact a fine from the perpetrator to pay for “damages.” It’s only if she herself is injured that it’s eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth time. Fast-forward several centuries to the Talmud, and we get further confirmation of a woman’s personhood taking priority over her pregnancy, in that the fetus is “like her thigh.” Mind you, the rabbis also have a nonsense understanding of biology, differentiating a fetus from “a mere fluid” at 40 days. But eight weeks and under just so happens to be the timeframe within which two-thirds of abortions take place today. Things get really interesting, though, when we hit the 12th century. That’s when Maimonides jumps into the ring after earlier rabbis had decided that the fetus is a “pursuer” (rodef) of the woman, rendering abortion an act of self-defense: “A woman who is having trouble giving birth, they cut up the fetus inside her and take it out limb by limb, because her life comes before its life.” The physician-philosopher then adds “whether with a knife or with drugs,” effectively green-lighting medical abortion. But the twist comes when he commands us “not to take pity on the life of a rodef.” It’s in this same tractate that Maimonides also codifies when life begins: not at conception, but at crowning: “If the head of the fetus emerges, it should not be touched, because one life should not be sacrificed for another.”

In a halachic framework, then, there is no fetal personhood and no rights of the unborn. We’re not even supposed to feel bad about abortion. How’s that for a famously guilt-ridden people?

In the framework of Jewish law, there is no fetal personhood and no rights of the unborn.
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Can a religious freedom strategy to restore abortion rights do more than highlight our system’s hypocrisy?

have to be able to rebut the state’s likely argument that it has a “compelling interest” in protecting all fetal life, regardless of religion. Unlike with the Hobby Lobby case, in which the court exempted the crafting giant from covering birth control for its employees, reasoning that they could still access it through Obamacare, there is no compromise that satisfies both the fetus and the person seeking an abortion. As Professor Greene notes, even if the court overruled the Smith precedent and conducted this same sort of strict-scrutiny review under the First Amendment, “states have pretty wide latitude to voluntarily accommodate religion. If the state wanted to say ‘We’ll let you have your abortion,’ they can.”

It’s possible that Justice Samuel Alito could eventually find himself in an awkward position. Last year, the Roe slayer wrote a 77-page opinion declaring that the court’s previous refusal in Smith to sanction a religious accommodation was “ripe for re-examination.” But the reality is that a religious freedom strategy to restore abortion rights might do little more than highlight the hypocrisy of our current system. Then again, Jewish history is all about a small band of outsiders beating the odds. Let’s spin that dreidel.

N HIS SALAD DAYS, DURING THE HIGH COLD WAR OF THE 1950s and ‘60s, L. Brent Bozell Jr. was a notorious right-wing polemicist whose ideas influenced everyone from Joseph McCarthy to Barry Goldwater to Ronald Reagan. Yet he always bristled at the misfortune of living his entire adult life in the shadow of a celebrity relative. “It’s a hindrance to be William F. Buckley’s brother-in-law, because people are under the assumption that I share his views,” Bozell told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in 1971. “I do not. He is the right-wing establishment. I consider myself outside the establishment.”

Buckley and Bozell, relatives by marriage whose once-tight friendship eventually splintered over political arguments, remain a fascinating study in contrasts. Their divergent paths illuminate the conflicting factions of the right. After a period as an enfant terrible in his 20s, Buckley settled down to become a consummate player of the game of respectability politics. Bozell took the harder road of the militant agitator, constantly organizing radicalized cadres to push the most reactionary line possible on everything from nuclear war to abortion.

Buckley was a cultural superstar, a pundit whose distinctive drawl was recognizable enough to be regularly mimicked by Robin Williams (in the Disney cartoon Aladdin, among other places). This fame created the illusion that Buckley was the true face of the American right. But the Trump era and its aftermath make it clear that Buckley’s renown was a triumph of marketing rather than a reflection of lasting influence. Since his death in 2008, Buckley seems a diminished figure from an increasingly distant past. By contrast, Bozell, who died in 1997, now appears to have been the true prophet of an unrestrained right that openly embraces authoritarianism. As Jacob Heilbrunn recently noted in Politico, although he was “often dismissed as a kook during his lifetime,” Bozell “did more than perhaps anyone to create the blueprint for the militant conservatism now triumphant at the high court and the grassroots.”

Buckley and Bozell met at Yale in 1946, quickly bonding over religion (Buckley was a cradle Catholic, Bozell well down the path to conversion) as well as a passion for debating politics (both men falling under the sway of the anti-communist firebrand Willmoore Kendall, a political scientist who was a McCarthyite avant la lettre). Bozell’s marriage in 1949 to Buckley’s sister Patricia only cemented the alliance. Taking Kendall’s love of red-baiting as a model, the two friends even as undergraduates were preparing for a life
of fighting “the left” (an umbrella category that for them extended from Joseph Stalin to the milquetoast liberalism of Adlai Stevenson).

Buckley scored the first big hit with God and Man at Yale (1951), using Kendall’s arguments against academic freedom to argue that the Ivy League should be purged of atheists and Keynesian economics. In 1954, Buckley and Bozell collaborated on a follow-up tome, McCarthy and His Enemies, a defense of the Wisconsin demagogue. The following year, Buckley founded National Review, which quickly became the flagship journal of the emerging rabid right. Bozell was one of the new publication’s most valued writers.

In those days of youthful élan, Buckley and Bozell made a formidable duo. But as Buckley became a cultural luminary, a divide opened up between them. Buckley was a synthesist and a popularizer. The American right was deeply divided among competing factions (traditionalists, libertarians, foreign policy hawks). Buckley’s goal as editor was to keep the factions together as a viable coalition (under a makeshift ideology National Review called “fusionism”) while also promoting these ideas to a broader public.

Bozell, who took to Catholicism with not just enthusiasm but fanaticism, had no interest in coalition-building: He wanted to set the agenda. The core of Bozell’s politics was a theocratic zeal to impose reactionary Catholicism on the United States (in his wilder moments he aspired to create what his biographer Daniel Kelly calls a “global Christendom”).

To ensure the triumph of Christendom, Bozell advocated a holy war against the Soviet Union (with preemptive nuclear attack if necessary). He moved his family to fascist Spain (seeing in Franco’s regime a model for how a living Christianity could reject secularism and impose piety). He wrote a book on the Warren Court, arguing for a root-and-branch judicial revolution based on rejecting modern theory and returning to historical norms (a precursor of originalism). He and his wife organized a Catholic youth group that launched some of the earliest violent attacks on abortion clinics. He created a magazine titled Triumph that advocated a Catholic theocracy.

Buckley grew embarrassed by his brother-in-law (although he continued to provide financial support to the improvident Bozells). In retrospect, Buckley’s hankering after respectability led him to shy away from culture war strife, initially equivocating on abortion until he met with pushback from Bozell. It was Bozell, not Buckley, who proved to be the forerunner of our contemporary theocratic right with its unabashed hostility to democracy. Buckley’s fame owed much to the fact that he gave many liberals the imaginary conservatism they wanted: the erudite, companionable Tory. This diverted attention from the dangers of the real right: Bozell’s rabid theocrats.

In the wake of the Dobbs decision ending abortion as a constitutional right, in the aftermath of the January 6 insurrection, in the era when Fox News hosts openly cheer on Hungarian autocrat Victor Orbán, Bozell clearly had the more durable legacy. It’s hardly a historical accident that one of the hooligans arrested for participating in the assault on the Capitol building on January 6 was L. Brent Bozell IV, grandson of the late intellectual. Bozell is no longer the man who lived in Buckley’s shadow. Rather, today we are all living in Bozell’s shadow.
The Dobbs Price

BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

In 1973, when the Supreme Court established a constitutional right to abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, Justice Harry Blackmun wrote that an unwanted pregnancy “may force upon the woman a distressful life and future.” Later, in 1992’s *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, the court found that the right to abortion is necessary for “women to participate equally in the economic and social life of the Nation.”

Now that the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* has made it legal for states to ban or restrict abortions, what comes next is certain: More people who need an abortion will be unable to obtain one, which will plunge many of them into financial turmoil and curtail their ability to pursue their dreams.

The Turnaway Study, conducted from 2008 to 2010, contains perhaps the most important research on this topic. A team of academics led by Diana Greene Foster, a professor at the University of California, San Francisco, surveyed women who sought abortions across the United States and compared those who were able to get one with those who were not. They were later able to connect the women with 10 years of their credit report data to keep following what happened to them.

The women in the study started on a similar financial footing and economic trajectory. But those who couldn’t get an abortion were nearly four times as likely to be living in poverty six months later, and the gap persisted for at least four years. The authors found that this was because most of the women who didn’t get an abortion went on to give birth, usually with no increase in income and little in extra government benefits or child support.

Being unable to obtain an abortion also made it difficult for the women to achieve their economic goals. Six months after the start of the study, the women who were turned away were more than three times as likely to be unemployed than the women who got abortions, and those who worked were less likely to be doing so full time. They were also less likely to graduate from school and more likely to drop out. Among those who had aspirational life plans, the women who were denied an abortion and gave birth were far less likely to achieve them.

The financial distress that all of this created was acute and long-lasting. The women who couldn’t get an abortion were 78 percent more likely to end up with at least $1,750 in debt that was more than 30 days past due, and they were 81 percent more likely to end up bankrupt, evicted, or with a tax lien against them. And while having a child is an expensive proposition for any American, the study found that bearing an unwanted pregnancy “may carry additional economic penalties over and above what is typically experienced by disadvantaged women when they have a new child.”

These financial harms can be found in other kinds of national-level data as well. Researchers have compared outcomes in the five states that repealed their abortion bans before *Roe* with the rest of the country and found that legal abortion increased women’s levels of education, their ability to participate in the labor force, their earnings, and their “occupational prestige.” It also reduced the number of children living in poverty.

In recent years, many states have moved in the opposite direction, clamping down on access to abortion. Economists found that in states with TRAP (targeted restriction of abortion providers) laws, women are 5.8 percent less likely to move between jobs and 7.6 percent less likely to move on to better-paid jobs. Men experience no impact.

These costs do not fall evenly. Previous research has found that when clinics close, abortion rates decline the most for people who can’t afford the travel and child care needed to make longer trips. After *Dobbs*, those with the least means will be the least likely to be able to travel to another state to get an abortion. Many of them will give birth and suffer financial consequences.

Even if there were no financial cost to being forced to bear an unwanted pregnancy, it would still be a heinous violation of someone’s human rights. And even if the US offered generous supports to parents such that having a child created no financial harm, it would still constitute an attack on a person’s bodily autonomy if they are not able to terminate a pregnancy. But there is a clear economic cost levied on Americans who want and need abortions but can’t get them. It is a price we have already been making people pay by allowing states to restrict the procedure. And now it is a price millions more will have to pay.

Bryce Covert
Activists took to the streets of Turin, Italy, on July 29 in a demonstration organized by the international youth-led movement Fridays for Future, which calls on governments to take concrete action to address the climate crisis. The movement asks every country to commit to reducing CO₂ emissions to zero, to stop “climate wars,” and to end investments in fossil fuels.

**By the Numbers**

1,527
Number of residential evictions executed by New York City marshals so far this year

47%
Portion of legal aid and civil rights attorneys reporting rising eviction cases in HUD-assisted housing, according to a nationwide survey by the National Housing Law Project

12.3%
Rise in rents from one year ago

36%
Share of Americans who rent, according to 2019 census data

44%
Estimated portion of available rentals in Manhattan that were vacated by tenants who were priced out of their apartments

$37.72
Hourly wage required to afford a two-bedroom apartment at the fair market rent in New York state

2M
Number of households in the US that receive federal vouchers, allowing them to afford decent, stable housing

**Trump on Pence as Mob Constructs Gallows**

No calls for dispersal, just insults to Pence
Was what Trump relayed to the crowd he harangued.
He called Pence disloyal and things worse than that.
No thanks to his boss did Mike Pence stay unhanged.

**Calvin Trillin**
Deadline Poet
End of the Line

ON THE FACE OF IT, THERE ARE FEW PRESSING REASONS FOR AMERICANS TO TAKE ANY INTEREST IN WHAT IS HAPPENING IN ISRAEL-PALESTINE/PALESTINE-ISRAEL. FROM THE CLIMATE CATASTROPHE TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE, FROM THE ENERGY CRISIS TO THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY—AMERICANS HAVE PLENTY OF REASONS TO BE PREOCCUPIED.

This somewhat understandable American apathy was apparent in Joe Biden’s visit to our region in July. The US president, much like his predecessors, felt no need to pressure Israel on its military occupation; to force it back into negotiations with the Palestinian leadership; to visit the Masafer Yatta region of the occupied West Bank, where over 1,000 Palestinians are facing imminent ethnic cleansing; or even to hold Israel to account for the killing of the Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh.

Yet as the United States focuses elsewhere, the reality on the ground is changing. For Palestinians and Israelis alike, the Green Line—the 1949 armistice border that many view as the basis for a future two-state solution—has all but disappeared. For over a decade, under both former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the past year’s “government of change,” Israel has supercharged its de facto annexation of the West Bank, further entrenching a one-state reality between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. This has recently prompted leading Israeli and international human rights organizations, from B’Tselem to Human Rights Watch to Amnesty International, to accept what Palestinians have long said: that the Israeli regime is one of apartheid in every corner of the land under its control. It is this regime and the war crimes it carries out that uninterested Americans have plenty of reasons to be preoccupied. These are the only media outlets in the country that are grounded in an unequivocal commitment to fair journalism and anti-apartheid activism. And as the following two articles show, these journalists’ parallel yet complementary interpretations of what the Green Line’s erasure means for the future of the land between the river and the sea are essential to understanding the full story—and to charting a course for change rooted in justice, equality, and liberation.

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“Today, despite their physical dispersal, the Palestinian people have never been more connected.” — Amjad Iraqi

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The erasure of the Green Line is a seismic shift in the political reality of this land, which is precisely why the following two articles, by Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists Amjad Iraqi and Meron Rapoport, are so timely. The two serve as editors in a unique ecosystem of independent journalism: Iraqi at +972 Magazine and a codirector of Local Call. Rapoport at +972 Magazine, which offers news and analysis about Palestine-Israel in English for an international audience, and Rapoport at Local Call, which does the same in Hebrew for Israeli readers. These are the only media outlets in the country that are run jointly by Israeli and Palestinian journalists, and they are grounded in an unequivocal commitment to fair journalism and anti-apartheid activism. And as the following two articles show, these journalists’ parallel yet complementary interpretations of what the Green Line’s erasure means for the future of the land between the river and the sea are essential to understanding the full story—and to charting a course for change rooted in justice, equality, and liberation.

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Palestinian resistance tore down the Green Line long ago.

AMJAD IRAQI

MY UNDERSTANDING OF 1967—the year Israel began its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip—was completely upended by my maternal grandfather. Born during the British Mandate for Palestine, he was 19 years old when our town, Tira, was subsumed by the newly forged Jewish state in the aftermath of the Nakba of 1948, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were expelled by Zionist forces and barred from returning to their homes. Although granted Israeli citizenship, he and 150,000 other Palestinians, who became labeled Arab Israelis, were subjected to a military government that restricted their movement, expropriated their property, and suppressed their political activities. For nearly two decades, until 1966, my grandfather was trapped in a cage built in his own homeland.

In June 1967, after Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War, the military regime that ruled over my grandfather with an iron fist was replicated and expanded to the newly occupied territories. This terrible turn of history, however, also brought a strange blessing for my grandfather. For the first time in years, he could travel freely not just to the Palestinian communities inside Israel but also to those in the West Bank and Gaza, which had previously been cut off by the 1949 armistice boundary, known as the Green Line. I remember him reminiscing about his first visit in years to Tulkarem, a city in the northern West Bank, where he found his former British school still standing. As a historian and teacher, he would later guide students and groups throughout the territories, recounting the land’s history and building educational ties with fellow Palestinians.

The Six-Day War, or Naksa (“setback”), was a cataclysmic event for the Palestinian people; yet, paradoxically, it also may have been one of their most vital lifelines. In attaining a “Greater Israel” in 1967, the Zionist movement

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THE NATION 8.22–29.2022

15
had effectively restored Palestine to its territorial unity. While this conquest was done in the name of Jewish supremacy, it inadvertently opened new spaces and opportunities for Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line to cultivate their national identity, rebuild their social fabric, and resist their common oppressor. These bonds ebbed and flowed over the years but ultimately accumulated in strength in profound ways, even in the face of Israeli attempts to fragment Palestinians through a multitiered system of laws, policies, and statuses.

The result of this phenomenon was witnessed on a grand scale during the Palestinian uprising of May 2021, widely described as the Unity Intifada. The Israeli repression during those weeks—from fighter jets over the skies of Rafah to vigilante mobs on the streets of Jaffa—was brutal and horrifying, but the grassroots resistance it stoked was infectious and inspiring. The unity of the mobilization and the geographic scope of the violence shattered the misguided notion held by many abroad that the conflict was somehow centered on the Green Line. That illusion had already been dissolved for Palestinians long ago, but even the most ardent activists could not help but be startled at what transpired during those weeks—and what it might portend.

Reunifying Palestine

In the two decades following the Nakba, the land that made up historical Palestine was parceled out among the nascent Israeli state, Jordan, and Egypt. Whether destitute in refugee camps or with second-class status under foreign rule, Palestinians found themselves severed from one another by artificial borders drawn up by kings and colonizers. Although various nationalist activities persisted, the traumas and losses wrought by this dispossession had left much of the population weakened and demoralized.

Within days in the summer of 1967, however, Palestinians who remained between the river and the sea suddenly found themselves absorbed into a single regime. The Green Line, once a no-man’s-land guarded by snipers, became a porous zone loosely monitored by Israeli soldiers and easily crossed by all. Army barracks, roads, and other Israeli infrastructure became permanent features of the occupied landscape; Israeli settlements sponsored by the government stretched far past the armistice lines, swallowing Palestinian land and resources. Elated by their triumph, Israeli politicians and religious leaders made fiery pledges to never relinquish their spoils—least of all the Temple Mount in Jerusalem’s Old City. This “one-state reality” took decades to consolidate, but it was born the moment Israeli soldiers set foot on the Gaza coast and in the Jordan Valley 55 years ago.

The irony of this seismic transformation is that, in its hubris and lust for land, Israel reunified nearly half of the Palestinian people. This was hardly its intent; the army had expelled over 300,000 Palestinians during the ’67 war, and in the ensuing weeks and years, Israeli officials tried various means of deporting more, particularly from East Jerusalem. Yet when total population transfer became impossible because of international scrutiny, the entrapment of the population became Israel’s modus operandi—and Palestinians took advantage of it.

Using their Israeli IDs and license plates, Palestinian citizens of the state, including my grandfather, were able to travel to the territories and reconnect with their brethren for the first time since the Nakba. They visited family members who had been locked away by the armistice lines, and they crossed every day for groceries, school, commerce, political organizing, and more. Thousands of laborers from the territories—with or without permits—worked...
Synchronizing Resistance

For years, this common pulse across the Green Line was largely omitted from the world’s understanding of Palestinian national consciousness. A key reason for this is that much of the Palestinians’ political narrative was drastically rewritten to fit the spirit of the so-called “peace process” and the pursuit of a two-state solution— a phase that was instigated in the late 1980s and culminated in the 1993 Oslo Accords, which remain in place today.

According to the Oslo paradigm, although the Palestinians may constitute a single national group, they are not bound by a common political fate. Rather, a national state would be built for those living in the occupied territories, excluding major settlement blocs and remaining subject to Israel’s security and economic preferences. Meanwhile, those inside Israel would have to resign themselves to minority citizenship within a “Jewish and democratic state,” entailing some form of second-class status; refugees would either be repatriated to the future Palestinian state or naturalized in their host Arab countries. For the international community, this arrangement might have seemed like a fair resolution to the long-standing conflict; in practice, it was a legitimation of most of Zionism’s colonial conquests and an attempt to make Palestine’s dismemberment final.

Although Israeli policies spearheaded this fragmentation, acquiescence by Palestinian leaders played a critical role in internalizing the divisions. In 1988, the PLO, pushed by its chairman, Yasir Arafat, decided to recognize Israel and accept the pre-1967 borders as the blueprint for a Palestinian state. This move, which has deeply divided the national movement ever since, shrank the Palestinian struggle from the liberation of all the land to a statehood project confined to less than a quarter of their historical territorial. At the same time, while Arab political parties and civil society in Israel grew more assertive about Palestinian identity in the Oslo era, they continued to make their Israeli citizenship the centerpiece of their struggle, promoting the language of “equality” and “minority rights” within a two-state arrangement. Refugees, meanwhile, were effectively shut out of the Oslo framework, relegated to an intractable question that would be dealt with at some (infinitely receding) later stage.

This fragmentation was particularly evident in the narratives around the early phase of the Second Intifada. Although Palestinians in Israel took to the streets in tandem with those in the occupied territories in late 2000, historical accounts tend to dissociate them from each other; that is, instead of viewing the popular protests on both sides of the Green Line as part of a common resistance, Palestinian leaders and intellectuals in Israel often framed them as parallel but distinct phenomena. When police snipers killed 13 Palestinians during demonstrations inside Israel—12 citizens and one Gaza resident—the murders were deemed especially shocking because they targeted citizens as if they were no different from occupied subjects. Though some justified this framing as a strategic move, it ultimately distanced Palestinian citizens from the wider national movement, confining their demands for justice to the Israeli state rather than promoting a holistic interpretation of the protests as a single uprising between the river and the sea.
Even after the heavy bombardment of Gaza, the belief that armed struggle had succeeded in putting a price on Israel's plans for Jerusalem, in a way that civil disobedience could not, had become widespread. It is this legacy of fragmentation, which remains alive in many sectors of Palestinian society, that made the events of May 2021 so striking and powerful. Led largely by youths born during or after the Oslo era and facilitated by social media and other technologies that did not exist two decades ago, the Unity Intifada was in many ways a historical corrective by the Palestinian community to the mistakes of their leaders, a reckoning with the flawed political ideas that had weakened and splintered their national movement. It was not the first time in the past decade that protests had broken the Green Line's psychological barrier—the 2013 Prawer Plan in the Naqab, the 2014 Gaza War, and the 2018 Great March of Return also saw joint actions—but the scale of those efforts don’t compare to that of last year’s uprising.

What began that month as a confluence of two struggles in Jerusalem—over police violence and restrictions at the Damascus Gate and the Aqsa complex during Ramadan, and over the attempted expulsion of Palestinian families in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah—rapidly diffused into demonstrations throughout Palestinian communities, from Haifa and Umm al-Fahem inside Israel to the borders of Lebanon and Jordan. The uprising was met with Israeli military assaults, police brutality, and vigilante mobs, enveloping Palestinian towns and neighborhoods with terrifying effect. Israeli violence became synchronized between the river and the sea to put Palestinians back into their cages; but the Palestinian resistance showed that it, too, was in sync.

Armed attacks by militant groups and acts of violence by some Palestinian mobs in Israel were also part of this mass revolt. Hamas, which for years had focused its military arsenal on alleviating the Israeli-Egyptian blockade on Gaza since Israel’s takeover of the strip in 2007, surprised many when it fired thousands of rockets as a response to Israeli aggressions in Jerusalem. While some Palestinians viewed this as a co-optation of the grassroots protests, others saw it as a legitimate challenge to the Israeli regime’s unhindered violence in the city. Even after Israel’s heavy bombardment of Gaza—which killed 260 people and wounded over 2,200 in 11 days—the belief that armed struggle had succeeded in putting a price on the state’s plans for Jerusalem, in a way that civil disobedience alone could not, became widespread.

The uprising did not end with the Gaza cease-fire. A month later, Palestinians in the West Bank took to the streets after the killing of the activist Nizar Banat by Palestinian Authority security forces, directing their outrage at President Mahmoud Abbas and his authoritarian government’s role as a subcontractor of the Israeli occupation. Then, in September, six Palestinian political prisoners broke out of the notorious Gilboa Prison, a dramatic saga that captured the imagination of Palestinian society before they were caught a few days later. Though seemingly separate events, both were in many respects the continuation of the Unity Intifada, passing the baton of resistance from Jerusalem to Gaza, from Haifa to Ramallah, from the streets to the prison cells—showcasing the myriad ways in which Israel rules over Palestinian life. Their material impact may have been negligible, but their psychological power was immeasurable.

Kanafani’s Warnings

In a famous essay published in 1972, the Palestinian writer and intellectual Ghassan Kanafani outlined the factors that led to the demise of the Great Revolt of 1936–39 during the British Mandate, regarded as one of the most seminal mass mobilizations in Palestine. Kanafani identified a trio of threats that undermined Palestinian national aspirations then and thereafter: the local “reactionary” leadership, which co-opted the grassroots uprising; the regimes in surrounding Arab states, which sought to curb the revolt for their own geopolitical interests; and the Zionist movement, which advanced its program of territorial and economic colonization with the help of British imperial power. By the time the revolt was violently quelled, Kanafani wrote, the Palestinian movement “had been pretty well tamed: its head was broken and scattered, its base had been weakened and its social fabric worn out and disintegrated.”

The effects of this devastation and the persistence of the three threats, he concluded, were pivotal to the Palestinians’ inability to resist the Nakba a decade later.

In many ways, Kanafani’s diagnosis remains as relevant for the present state of the Palestinian struggle as it was nearly a century ago. While the PLO has been reduced to little more than a symbolic relic, the dominant rival factions, Fatah and Hamas, have strengthened their hold over Palestinian society and taken on the role of local enforcers of the so-called “status quo.” The Arab political parties in Israel, which bitterly split from the United List last year (with the breakaway faction, the Islamist Ra’am, joining the Israeli governing coalition), have continued to peg their platforms to passing legislation in an increasingly right-wing Knesset. Following in the footsteps of Egypt and Jordan, the autocrats of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have abandoned the Arab League’s “peace parameters,” laid out in 2002, and normalized relations with Israel. Other Arab states—including Saudi Arabia, which US President Joe Biden visited immediately after Israel in July—are expected to be next in line. All the while, the Zionist movement, bolstered by the unrestrained backing of American power and the acquiescence of European states, has continued...
to fulfill its wildest ambitions while enjoying unprecedented impunity.

In addition to these long-standing threats are the multiple fissures within Palestinian society, which were visible even during the May uprising. Geographical fragmentation—particularly the total isolation of Gaza—has stunted many of the material and social bonds that had existed in the 1990s. The endurance of patriarchal structures and misogynistic attitudes continues to block and undermine women’s participation and leadership in political life, though feminist and women’s movements have intensified their fight against this. The rise of a Palestinian middle class, along with a general improvement in socioeconomic standards compared with those of previous generations, have made many warier of risking their precarious financial status. After the fervor of May calmed, daily local struggles over jobs, crime, and housing once again took precedence over the national project. For all the chants of unity, the Palestinians have still not found a way to sustain a united movement.

All this is compounded by the fact that, despite an invigorated consciousness and fresh clarity on the oppression at hand, the Palestinian people no longer know where they are headed. “Liberation” is interpreted through multiple and at times conflicting lenses: Do Palestinians still want an independent state of their own? Can they foresee life in a binational state alongside Jewish Israelis? Does justice entail the total restitution of stolen land and property, or will compromises have to be made? How can we prevent another mass war, or is war inevitable? The divergences are very real, and the temptation among many activists is to hold off addressing these questions. But without some consensus around a political vision, the failure to answer these questions may lead to further infighting and turmoil rather than collective progress and freedom.

But the debates around what Palestine-Israel should become must not distract us from recognizing what the present reality actually is: a robust apartheid regime between the river and the sea, driven by a settler-colonial ideology, complex in its design but simple in its purpose. A cursory review of similar anti-colonial struggles from Vietnam to South Africa teaches us that the resistance to such regimes is never straightforward; as just as their causes are, the struggle is often messy, ugly, even violent. These campaigns of resistance, however, are hardly as violent as the brutal structures against which they are fighting. It is this oppressive condition that all Palestinians are trying to dismantle—and the erasure of the Green Line is a vital step in that direction. Zionism has done much to tear down that line for its supremacist vision; Palestinians must now coalesce to replace that vision with a nobler one.

Do Palestinians still want an independent state of their own? Can they foresee life in a binational state alongside Jewish Israelis?

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Separate but not equal: The settlement of Modiin Illit rises behind the Apartheid Wall in 2012, while a protester waves a Palestinian flag.

For 55 years, the Green Line has shut down our political imagination. Its disappearance gives us a chance to do things differently.

Meron Rapoport
More than a year after a wave of violence, rage, and resistance swept through the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, the events of May 2021 are still very much present in the minds of Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Two hundred and eighty-six Palestinians, most of them in Gaza, and 13 Israelis were killed during the 11 most intense days, but it was not only the number of casualties that left a mark. It was also the fact that the drama unfolded all over historical Palestine: in Jerusalem, in Gaza, in the West Bank, and most important, in Israel’s “mixed cities” such as Lydd, Ramle, Acre, and elsewhere, which was almost unprecedented since 1948.

As one would expect, Palestinians and Israeli Jews have nearly diametrically opposed views on these events, including their causes and the lessons to be learned from them. Yet in one regard there is a peculiar consensus: The conflagrations that broke out across the country revealed that the Green Line—the demarcation drawn after the 1948 war that many hoped would serve as a border between Israel and a future Palestinian state—is no longer relevant.

For many Palestinians, this was a cause for pride. The Palestinians, commentators argued, had managed to overcome the divisions Israel imposed on them and protest simultaneously all over “historical Palestine”—in Lydd and Ramle inside “sovereign” Israel, as well as in occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. The uprising was dubbed the Unity Intifada.

For many Israelis, meanwhile, especially those on the right, the protests reaffirmed their conviction that the problem is not Israel’s occupation of the West Bank or its siege of Gaza but rather the Palestinians’ refusal to accept a Jewish presence in any form in “historical Israel.” Much like the Palestinians, they saw the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea torn apart by violence even as it was more unified than ever as a single political unit.

It could be argued that the erasure of the Green Line is an inevitable and perhaps even positive development, as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, first and foremost, about the war of 1948 and the Nakba—the expulsion and prevention of return of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians—with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 following from that. And yet, inevitable or not, this new moment certainly represents an important shift. The collapse of the Green Line, and no less important the collapse of the ability to imagine it, has set a new stage in the decades-long conflict.

The green line was never meant to be Israel’s permanent border with its neighbors. It came about as a result of the armistice agreements signed by Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab states after the 1948 war. The armistice line was marked on the map with a green pencil (hence the name Green Line), and it was never accepted as an international boundary. In fact, it was only the outbreak of the 1967 war that turned it into a widely accepted border, as all United Nations declarations—beginning with Resolution 242 in November of that year—demanded that Israel withdraw to its borders before that war, meaning to the Green Line.

It was also at this moment, precisely as the line became official, that Israel’s relationship to it began to shift. To understand how this process began, one must go back to the discussions held by the Israeli government during and right after the 1967 war.

On June 15, five days after the fighting ended, Yigal Allon, who commanded the pre-state Palmach Zionist paramilitary group and later served as a minister in the Israeli government, put forward a plan for the territories seized by Israel. This plan called on the government to immediately annex the newly occupied Jordan Valley (a 15-kilometer-wide strip west of the Jordan River), the city of Jericho, and the...
along with East Jerusalem a few weeks after the war, followed by the establishment of settlements in the Jordan Valley and Kiryat Arba near Hebron, the erasure of the Green Line had begun. Over the next two decades, successive Israeli governments would continue in this vein, slowly chipping away at both the idea and the reality of the Green Line. After Menachem Begin was elected prime minister in 1977 on a platform of establishing a “Greater Israel”—one stretching from the river to the sea—he set in motion the project of building settlements in the West Bank. (When Begin assumed office, the number of settlers was 1,900; by 1987, the number had grown to almost 50,000.) Yet he refrained from formally annexing the West Bank and Gaza, preferring instead to keep the Palestinians living there under military rule. This limbo served Israel well, allowing it to continue occupying the territory without giving Palestinians political rights.

The First Intifada in 1987 showed Israeli Jews what it meant to force millions of people to live under military occupation. With the signing of the 1993 Oslo accords—which led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority in parts of the West Bank and were supposed to lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state on the other side of Israel’s pre-1967 borders—the idea of the Green Line made its comeback in the Israeli political arena. It served the interests of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Jewish center to try to convince the Israeli public that separation—Israelis here, Palestinians there—was the only solution to the conflict.

With the violence of the Second Intifada and the collapse of the Camp David talks in 2000, Israel imbued the Green Line with yet another meaning. It became a wall, a concrete and metal barrier called the Separation Wall by Israel and the Apartheid Wall by Palestinians and human rights activists. Rather than conceiving of it as a political border to solve the conflict, Israelis understood it as a line of defense against the Palestinian suicide bombing attacks of the time—a tool for proving that separation from the Palestinians is possible, even without a political agreement. (Israel’s “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005 only reinforced this concept.) But that wasn’t all that the newly concrete border did. Because the wall was not built along the Green Line but, in many places, ran deep into the West Bank, surrounding Palestinian villages and bifurcating Palestinian lands, it also pushed the Israeli presence deeper into the occupied territories.

When Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power in 2009, he sought to undo key parts of this paradigm. In fact, the central legacy of his second tenure as prime minister, from 2009 to 2021, can be summarized as an effort to “re-erase” the Green Line—for Israelis if not for Palestinians,
who, in critical ways, were locked behind an even more restrictive set of legal and physical barriers. He did this through two main policies: expanding settlements in the West Bank and legitimizing them internally among Israeli Jews as well as on the international stage; and, due to his vehement opposition to a Palestinian state, replacing the Oslo peace process with what he termed “economic peace” with the Palestinians. Economic peace, in Netanyahu’s eyes, meant that Israel would lift restrictions on Palestinian economic development and allow Palestinians to work in Israel in greater numbers, while the Palestinians would give up their political demands, such as an end to the occupation and the settlement enterprise.

The settlements did expand during Netanyahu’s time. According to the Israeli NGO Peace Now, which tracks settlement growth in the occupied territories, there were some 296,000 settlers in the West Bank in 2008, just before Netanyahu returned to power; by 2021, that number had grown to 415,000. And these numbers represent an undercount, since Peace Now does not include the Israelis living in East Jerusalem.

Yet numbers are not enough to understand just how far Netanyahu went to render the reality on the ground irreversible. Yesh Din, an Israeli human rights organization, compiled a list of 60 bills pertaining to various forms of annexation of the West Bank that were proposed from 2015 to 2019; eight were signed into law. The most prominent among them was the Expropriation Law, passed in 2017, which retroactively authorized Israeli settlement outposts on privately owned Palestinian land in the West Bank. It was later struck down by Israel’s High Court, but it signaled Netanyahu’s intentions: to completely blur the divide between sovereign Israel and the West Bank and to normalize the settlements and settlers.

These moves did not go unnoticed by Palestinians and Israel’s human rights community. “Steps towards de jure annexation are evident through legal opinions and shifts in the State’s position (such as in petitions adjudicated in Israeli courts and publications issued by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as in legislation,” Yesh Din wrote in a 2019 report. “These shifts ostensibly challenge the West Bank’s legal status as occupied territory, Israel’s authority to operate there, and Israel’s duty to protect the rights and property of the Palestinian population living under its occupation.”

This process was not restricted to legal and legislative actions but was enabled by an increasingly potent political force in Israel. Despite its relatively small size—no more than 10 percent of the population—the religious Zionist community, which is the main force behind the settler movement, is overrepresented in various branches of the Israeli security forces and judiciary as well as in the realm of public opinion. According to one study, the percentage of graduates of the Israel Defense Forces’ field officer training course who came from the religious Zionist schooling system grew from 2.5 percent to 34.8 percent between 1990 and 2018. Three of the 15 justices on Israel’s High Court come from this community, and two of them actually live in West Bank settlements.

One recently wrote the court’s decision to green-light the expulsion of more than 1,000 Palestinians from their homes in Masafer Yatta in the South Hebron Hills.

“There is a large-scale involvement of religious [people] in promoting the occupation and legitimizing it,” wrote Mikhail Manekin, a well-known Israeli leftist, in Haaretz last year. Manekin, himself an Orthodox Jew who recently published a book about religious Zionism, wrote that “the representatives of Religious Zionism, a leading force in the army, would ‘make kosher’ any action by the IDF…. It seems that those wearing a kippa are leading the ideology of ethnic supremacy.”

The religious community’s growing and outsized power has paid off: The political campaign, led mainly by settlers, in support of the annexation of parts or all of the West Bank grew stronger during the fourth Netanyahu government, from 2015 to 2019, and in 2017, the Likud Central Committee passed a motion to annex the West Bank. A week before the April 2019 elections, Netanyahu promised to annex the Jordan Valley, the first Israeli prime minister to do so since 1967.

When Donald Trump presented his “deal of the century” in 2020, the hearts and minds of the broader Israeli public were ready. With the exception of the liberal Meretz Party, every Jewish political party in the Knesset supported the plan, which called for the annexation of all Israeli settlements in the West Bank, leaving the Palestinian territories as Bantustan-like enclaves. Trump was also the first foreign leader to recognize Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem, and he moved the US Embassy to the contested Israeli capital. With its support for his plan, the majority of the Jewish Israeli public affirmed the death of the Green Line.

With its support for Trump’s “deal of the century,” the majority of the Jewish Israeli public affirmed the death of the Green Line.

The story of Netanyahu’s plan for “economic peace” is somewhat muddier: It neither greatly improved the Palestinian economy nor ushered in an era of peace, but it did increase the interdependence of the Israeli and Palestinian economies. This was especially evident after the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. For decades, Israel forbade Palestinian workers from staying overnight in Israel because of what it deemed “security reasons.” Yet as the country went into lockdown and the Palestinian Authority severely restricted movement inside the West Bank and from the West Bank into Israel, Israel forced some 30,000 Palestinian workers to remain for weeks inside Israel, preventing them from going back to their homes, because they were badly needed in the construction and agriculture sectors.
The Green Line promoted the idea of separation, of hostility, the assumption that Jews and Palestinians cannot live with one another.

Quoting Palestinian sources, Local Call (the news site I work for) reported in 2020 that Israel even opened intentional breaches in the separation barrier to let in Palestinian workers. It is estimated that until the most recent wave of violence, in April and May of 2022, some 40,000 to 80,000 Palestinians were passing through these breaches daily to work in Israel, even though they did not receive permits from the Israeli authorities. They joined the 120,000 Palestinians who have permits from the army to work in Israel. If we add to them the more than 100,000 Jerusalemite Palestinians who work, buy, or travel in Israel, we see that at least 260,000 Palestinians—perhaps many more—cross the Green Line every day from the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of settlers regularly cross the separation barrier. This seems routine to most Israelis, but it is clear that it is impossible to create a true barrier between Israel and the West Bank given such a reality. In this sense, the separation wall has lost most of its symbolic meaning for Jewish Israelis. Although the majority of them were convinced, and probably remain so, that the barrier prevents suicide bombings and other forms of violence by Palestinians, anyone who knows the situation on the ground can tell you that the main function of the barrier is psychological: It is there to mark a boundary in the Israeli Jewish consciousness more than to serve as a real physical obstacle. If one remembers that potentially tens of thousands of Palestinian citizens of Israel cross the barrier into the West Bank every week for shopping, leisure, studying, or living in Palestinian cities and villages, one begins to understand that separation does not truly exist and that the Green Line has, in practice, been erased.

This reality dawned on many Jewish Israelis in May 2021, when, after Israel attempted to evict Palestinians from their homes in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, Hamas fired rockets from Gaza and protests and violence erupted in other Israeli “mixed cities” and in the West Bank. The illusion that some Green Line, fence, or barrier separates Jews from Palestinians collapsed to a large extent.

Evidence of this new understanding was on display during the most recent wave of violence, which began in March 2022 with the deadly attack in Be’er Sheva by a Palestinian citizen of Israel, a follower of the Islamic State, and continued with the attacks in Tel Aviv, Bnei Brak, and other Israeli cities. Some of the Palestinian attackers were Israeli citizens; others traveled easily from the West Bank to Israel through breaches in the separation barrier. Never has it been so evident that there is no real dividing line between Israel and the West Bank, between Jews and Palestinians.

This reality was manifested in the Israeli response to the attacks in the past two months. On the one hand, Israel carried out deadly military operations in the West Bank, mostly around Jenin Refugee Camp, killing dozens of Palestinians (more than 60 have been killed since the beginning of the year), as well as the Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, in the futile hope that the operations would prevent future attacks. The government and the army also pledged to mend the breaches in the separation barrier and replace parts of the fence with a concrete wall. On the other hand, Defense Minister Benny Gantz has promised to increase the number of entry permits granted to Palestinian laborers not only in the West Bank but also in Gaza, and the Israeli authorities have approved 4,000 new units for settlers in the West Bank. It is as if Israel is saying, “Let’s rebuild the Green Line and destroy it at the same time.”

Before Prime Minister Naftali Bennett resigned in June, his government had intensified this contradiction. Bennett had agreed to take annexation off the table in a mutual understanding with his partners from the center-left, but he had also refused to meet with Palestinians and declared that there would be no Palestinian state under his watch. While it becomes ever more evident to many Israelis that the separation of Jews and Palestinians is impossible, there is no political will to grant equal political rights to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem—to say nothing of those living under siege in Gaza.

This tag-team attempt by Netanyahu, Bennett, and the current prime minister, Yair Lapid, to bury the two-state solution while refusing to offer equal rights to Palestinians under a single regime is likely what prompted local and international human rights groups and the United Nations’ special rapporteur on the occupied territories to recognize what Palestinians have been saying for a very long time: that Israel commits the crime of apartheid.

While many on the Israeli center-left continue to hope that separation is still possible, the right wing understands that the abolition of the Green Line may lead Palestinians to escalate their demands for equal rights and
the democratization of the land between the river and the sea. Wedded to the idea of Jewish supremacy, the right views this possibility as a direct threat and thus is intensifying its propaganda against the Palestinian citizens of Israel while trying to goad the Israeli army into expanding its violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, even going so far as to raise the prospect of a new Nakba.

In many ways, the present deadlock—no Green Line yet no formal annexation—works for Israel; but in others, it only serves to increase Israeli frustration. With the dismantling of the Green Line, Israel has effectively swallowed up the Palestinians, yet it continues to be dismayed when it sees how they refuse to give up their national identity and their struggle for freedom and return. This explains, at least in part, the attacks by Israeli officers on the pallbearers at Abu Akleh’s funeral: The simple act by Palestinians of raising their flag on the pallbearers at Abu Akleh’s funeral: The fact that the Green Line has ceased to function as a physical or even an imaginary barrier between Israel and the West Bank does not necessarily imply that the two-state solution is dead and that we have to share this land, our political imagination will open up. The Green Line closed it shut.

The fact that the Green Line has ceased to function as a physical or even an imaginary barrier between Israel and the West Bank does not necessarily imply that the two-state solution is dead and that we are moving toward a one-state solution—or toward a dramatic rise in violence that may indeed culminate in Israel carrying out a new Nakba. Jewish Israeli society is still distinct from Palestinian society, and the desire for self-determination and an independent Palestinian state is still very strong among Israelis and Palestinians.

During his recent visit to Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, and Saudi Arabia, US President Joe Biden reiterated his “commitment” to the idea of two states based on the 1967 borders—meaning the Green Line. Even Lapid said that he still supports this idea for the sake of a “democratic and Jewish” Israel. For his part, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has warned that time might be running out for a two-state solution, but he said that it is still on the table. If Lapid is reelected in November, it is not impossible that some sort of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians could resume after being frozen for more than a decade. These may seem like empty words, considering the facts on the ground, but words do count.

What all this means is that the two-state idea in its traditional incarnation is indeed in deep crisis but not dead. What is needed now is not to give up on the Green Line but to reimagine it in a form that is far less rigid than the one envisaged by the architects of Oslo. I am part of an Israeli-Palestinian movement, A Land for All, that is calling for two independent states, Israel and Palestine, with a “soft” border between them that will run along the Green Line, allowing for freedom of movement and residence for all, Jews and Palestinians, including refugees. According to this vision, the two states will join in a confederation or union, not unlike the EU model, and Jerusalem would be an open city, the capital of both states, governed by joint rule.

Others, like former Israeli politician Yossi Beilin and Palestinian lawyer Hiba Husseini, both veterans of past negotiation efforts, offer a different model of confederation. The revival of the idea of a single democratic or binational state is also part of an effort to respond to the practical erasure of the Green Line, and there could be other ideas. But one thing is certain: After 55 years of occupation, and more than a decade of intensive efforts to replace it with annexation, it is hard to deny that the Green Line does not represent the same physical and emotional reality that it did many years ago.

This is not necessarily negative. To some extent, since 1967, the Green Line has been an illusion. Palestinians and Israelis live on and fight over the whole of the land between the river and the sea, with most of them seeing the whole of it as their homeland. The conflict did not begin in 1967, as the concept of the Green Line may suggest, but long before it. The Green Line promoted the idea of separation, of hostility, the assumption that Jews and Palestinians cannot live with one another. When we—particularly my fellow Israeli Jews—fully understand that we have to share this land, our political imagination will open up. The Green Line closed it shut.
Pennsylvania’s Residents are uniting across political lines to battle corporations attempting to take over public water systems.

BY HADAS THIER
The town of Towamencin, Penn., is not known for being a hotbed of activism. Sitting 30 miles northwest of Philadelphia, it is a mostly middle-class, white commuter community of 18,000 that has long skewed Republican. But this past April, as the township’s governing board of supervisors prepared to sell Towamencin’s wastewater facility to a private water company, hundreds of residents packed town hall meetings in an effort to stop the sale, the culmination of a year-long campaign by a newly formed group called Neighbors Opposing Privatization Efforts (NOPE).

Big water companies like American Water, Aqua America, and, in the case of Towamencin, the Florida-based NextEra have been buying up water and wastewater systems in Pennsylvania, after legislation passed there that allows municipalities to sell public utilities more easily.

But in Towamencin and other towns of varying sizes, demographics, and political leanings, they’re meeting unexpected resistance. At one town hall meeting, resident Kofi Osei called out, “Since [the town supervisors] have not gone out of their way to ask us what we want out of our sewer system, I want to ask everyone here: Who would like to keep the municipal control and ownership of our sewer system? Raise your hands.” A near unanimous raising of hands swept the auditorium.

According to the supervisors, selling off the sewer system is necessary to fund multimillion-dollar expenses that are on the horizon: maintenance and upgrades to the sewer and stormwater management systems as well as to the town’s fire station. The supervisors did not respond to requests for comment, but in a North Penn Now editorial, they wrote:

The NextEra proposal offers our township a generational opportunity to reboot and reset our finances for the foreseeable future. With the money we collect in taxes, fees and the interest generated from the capital reserves, Towamencin will be in an outstanding position to meet its obligations.

Yet every Towamencin resident I spoke with says they have not met a single person, other than the town’s supervisors, who is in favor of selling the wastewater system. “Nobody, and I mean nobody, is saying anything positive about the sale,” said Ryan Cooper (whose name has been changed here to protect him from workplace retaliation). Cooper, who works at Towamencin’s wastewater treatment plant, said that his coworkers went “bat-shit crazy” when they heard of the plans to sell, not only fearing for their jobs and benefits but also angry that the municipality would, in the words of another employee, sell off a public “gold mine.” Towamencin’s sewage plant generates more than $5 million in revenue each year. The facility is well organized and smoothly run, and many of its employees, including Cooper, have worked there for over 20 years.

Wary of creating the perception of a labor-versus-township feud, Cooper linked up with Osei. Cooper told me that Osei has gained so much respect that if he ran for local office, he’d surely win: “The first meeting I went to that he was at, after he spoke, I told him, ‘Kofi, man, the only thing is maybe you need to speak a little louder.’”

Osei started attending the board of supervisors’ meetings last summer, asking the supervisors to notify residents of their wastewater deliberations and to advertise public town halls. Where and how water and wastewater infrastructure is built and maintained needs to be under democratic control, he told me: “Water is a really fundamental thing. It’s obvious that we should publicly own it.” Seeing Pennsylvania’s systems being sold off to private companies was disturbing, Osei said, and when the trend hit his own town, “I felt like I had a duty to protect my neighbors from this.”

Until recently, Towamencin’s monthly meetings were typically attended by a single longtime resident. The township’s leaders, it seems, expected to sell the sewer without public discussion and without the public even knowing about their deliberations. Osei said this has been common across the region: “In a lot of the townships that have done this, they’ve done it at a regular session. They didn’t have any town halls.”

A Crossroads for Waterworks

The struggles in Towamencin and dozens of nearby towns are a warning of what could be on the horizon across the country. Water systems in the United States are a patchwork of regional and local arrangements. (Pennsylvania, for instance, has some 1,900 different systems.) Since the Progressive Era, when many of the nation’s waterworks were municipalized, access to water has mostly been kept in public hands. In the US, only 10 percent of people get their water from private companies, and only three out of 100 rely on private companies for wastewater treatment.

But in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the states where pro-privatization legislation has been most aggressively pursued, about a third of the population get their water from private companies. Not coincidentally, the country’s biggest water companies, Aqua America (part of Essential Utilities) and American Water, are headquartered in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, respectively. Organizers say...
Aqua lobbyists spend so much time at the state capitol that they have become part of the furniture. (When Pennsylvania Speaker of the House Mike Turzai retired from public office in 2020, he took a job with Essential Utilities.) As Mary Grant, the director of Food and Water Watch's Public Water for All campaign, explained to me: “Pennsylvania is the trial where pro-privatization legislation is first passed and tested.”

In 1997, Pennsylvania was the first state to pass a “distribution system improvement charge,” which allows water companies to raise certain rates without standard regulatory oversight. Then, in 2016, Pennsylvania passed Act 12, which authorized municipalities to sell their public utilities at “fair market value” (FMV), which bases the price not on expected cash flows but on what a knowledgeable buyer would be willing to pay. The act works alongside Act 11, passed a few years earlier, which allows water companies to recover the costs of acquisitions and investments by raising customers' rates.

This combination allows companies to buy out systems at inflated prices, then use the cost of the acquisition to justify rate hikes. Local politicians, meanwhile, can use the influx of cash to pay off debt or build new projects without having to raise taxes. “It’s like Oprah Winfrey,” a wastewater operator at the Bucks County Water and Sewage Authority joked: “You get a park! You get a playground! Everybody gets something that’s amazing!” Then, by the time the rates spike, the officials are out of office and the town’s value-generating public assets are gone.

Representatives from Aqua dispute these claims. In a phone call, Chris Franklin, the chairman and CEO of Essential Utilities, told me that his company spends “a billion dollars a year on infrastructure replacement” and has “developed not only deep experience but also deep staff and know-how capabilities to deal with just about anything that comes along associated with water or wastewater.” Across the United States, Franklin continued, “there is a huge need for capital in infrastructure. The government has tried to fund some of it, but the need is estimated to be about a trillion dollars for water and wastewater. That trillion-dollar need is something that municipals have a difficult time addressing.”

Following Pennsylvania’s and New Jersey’s examples, another 10 states have adopted FMV legislation. The number of people who depend on private systems for their water is therefore bound to increase. This will drive up costs, make it more difficult to protect the environment surrounding water sources, and take away local control of public assets, just as the budgetary and climate pressures on water infrastructure are increasing. “The water sector is facing huge challenges in this country,” said Marcela González Rivas, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Public and International Affairs. “Climate change is exacting a toll on the infrastructure and putting costly pressures [on the ability] to operate and provide clean, safe, affordable water. Who’s going to pay for it?”

Indeed, water organizers at the other end of the state noted that decades of disinvestment in the Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Authority (PWSA) led to outdated technology and a deteriorating physical infrastructure, leaving the system vulnerable to claims that private companies could manage it better. Organizers with Pittsburgh’s Our Water Campaign had to not only fend off privatization but also fight for greater public investment and accountability, eventually winning on demands for the full replacement of lead pipes, a moratorium on winter water shutoffs, and a program to provide low-income residents with financial relief for unpaid bills.

According to Caitlin Schroering, a sociologist and a participant in the Our Water Campaign, “PWSA has had plenty of problems connected to the austerity and disinvestment in public systems that we’re seeing at a national level. But PWSA was also more responsive to the community and to our mobilization and is starting to do the right thing.”

Federal funding for water systems peaked in the late 1970s and was cut dramatically in the 1980s. Since 1977, it has fallen by 77 percent. Last year’s infrastructure bill sets aside $55 billion over five years to invest in water systems. But the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater systems need to spend at least $744 billion over the next 20 years for basic maintenance alone.

“Affordability is going to be an increasing issue, because all of our water systems need upgrading,” said Mildred Warner, a professor of city and regional planning at Cornell University. “Investment needs are very, very great. That will cause higher user fees going forward, which will fall particularly hard on the lowest income quintile.” Even worse, she added, “if we unnecessarily inflate the cost of systems [as FMV legislation allows companies to do] before making the investments and upgrades that are needed,” once those investments and upgrades happen, user fees will have to go up again.
Public Water Independence Day was therefore not just a celebration; it was an organizing festival, drawing residents and activists from across the region to eat, play, boat, and listen to speakers denounce the actions of “Big Water.” One speaker, Bill Ferguson from New Garden Township, exclaimed, “The Aqua Express is barreling down the tracks. This is not a train you want to get on. However, they’re not asking you if you want to get on the train; they’re trying to kidnap you.” And he should know: Aqua bought New Garden’s wastewater system.

New Garden Township was among the first to sell its sewer system after Act 12 passed. When the sale was announced in 2017, New Garden residents watched their wastewater rates jump 30 percent, and when it was completed in 2020, rates spiked another 37 percent. The agreement between Aqua and New Garden initially included a two-year rate freeze, but this “guarantee” was rescinded in 2019.

Recent research has confirmed what many residents have instinctively understood: When private companies take over water systems, rates go up. A report in Water Policy found that the average bill for customers of private water companies is 59 percent higher than that of public utilities in the country’s biggest water systems. Public systems were also found to be more likely to enact moratoriums on water shutoffs and more likely to implement conservation programs.

Private companies are obligated to increase profits for their shareholders. What little cost savings might be gained through Big Water’s economies of scale—its transparent way of doing business—often paid out to shareholders as dividends. And because water utilities are natural monopolies, residents don’t have a choice about where they get their water from or who treats their wastewater. A privately owned utility faces no competitive pressures on pricing, water quality, or customer service.

A report in Utilities Policy found that publicly run systems offer “more transparency and accountability, since board meetings must be public, officials are obligated to meet with residents, and residents are able to voice concerns and demand equitable (and safe) water policies.” A public system is not automatically democratic, but a private company is automatically accountable to its shareholders, not to residents. In Conshohocken, outside Philadelphia, Carol Smith, who’s been a member of the Municipal Sewer Authority Board for 12 years, explained how complaints from neighbors about a smell emanating from the plant led the board to invest more than $1 million in an odor control system, despite receiving no citations from the state’s Department of Environmental Protection. What was the mechanism by which Conshohocken’s residents were able to make their voices heard, I asked her? “They would just call the Sewer Authority. We keep track of every complaint.”

Thus, when David McMahon, a resident of Norristown, outside Philadelphia, heard about possible plans to sell the municipality’s wastewater system, he got worried. He’d been attending his borough’s council meetings regularly in 2020. At first, talk of a sale was cast in vague, exploratory terms. But one day in June of that year, council members announced that they had accepted a bid from Aqua and would advertise it for seven days before putting it to a vote. McMahon told me he was suddenly in a “mad scramble.”

Norristown is one of a few dozen municipalities in Pennsylvania that have what’s known as a home rule charter, which includes a provision that allows voters to repeal council ordinances through petitions. McMahon and three other residents who opposed the sale moved quickly. But they were hard-pressed to gather some 2,000 signatures in seven days on a topic that nobody knew anything about. After they failed to do so, they tried to use the same provision to create a ballot question. That failed as well. But by speaking to hundreds of fellow residents during the early months of the pandemic, they were able to recruit volunteers and educate their neighbors. Then, when the sewer authority itself tried to back out of the deal with Aqua, the borough council of Norristown moved to dissolve the sewer authority and accept the bid without it. Now McMahon and the volunteers had a third chance to stop the sale. This time they gathered almost double the number of petition signatures they needed to repeal the ordinances. And it worked.

After the win, McMahon and the group he founded, Norristown Opposes Privatization Efforts, the predecessor to Neighbors Opposing Privatization Efforts, took their organizing across the state. “We knew from the beginning that once we saw the route and who the players were and why, we had to help other places.” Like-minded Pennsylvanians were not hard to find. McMahon heard from the Towamencin Sewer Authority’s Ryan Cooper. A local blogger put him in touch with Carol Smith from Conshohocken. Then he heard from Henry Yordan, a resident of Willistown who had read about Norristown’s efforts in a local paper. Mike Greek, a CWA foreman of 21 years, found NOPE through its Facebook page. McMahon, a member of the...
Democratic Socialists of America, also sought the help of national organizations like Food and Water Watch and the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund.

When Smith heard about her town’s plan to sell off the wastewater facility, there wasn’t much time to act. With McMahon’s help, she and her neighbors launched a petition, covered nearly every street in Conshohocken with flyers and instructions to call the borough, and put up lawn signs all over town. “That really bothered the borough council,” Smith said. “We had over 100 lawn signs in Conshohocken. And that was my little unhappy toilet,” she added, pointing at a lawn sign featuring clip art of a dour, anthropomorphic toilet next to the words “NO TO SELLING OUR SEWER. Bad for residents, elderly, fixed income, businesses.”

At a well-attended meeting on March 17, the council unanimously voted down the sale, contravening the wishes of Conshohocken’s borough manager. “We wouldn’t have been able to do it without David’s help,” Smith said.

McMahon isn’t the only one traveling across the state to fight in Pennsylvania’s water wars. Residents in New Garden Township formed Keep Water Affordable and have been driving to meetings in other townships, including in Tredyfrin, where telling their story helped persuade the township to reject Aqua’s bid. Tom Tosti, the director of AFSCME’s District Council 88, has also been going to board meetings in municipalities throughout Bucks County to try to stop the sale of the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority (BCWSA), one of the largest wastewater treatment authorities in the state. (Despite months of community opposition, BCWSA’s board agreed, in an unannounced vote on July 13, to enter into exclusive negotiations with Aqua. If Aqua’s $1.1 billion bid is approved, it will be the largest sewer privatization in the country.)

In town after town, the script is the same: “exploratory language” followed by sudden announcements of privatization bids when they are all but done deals and lavish promises of what the town will do with its newfound piles of cash. Once residents find out about the sales, they oppose them. And depending on the circumstances and ordinances, people in some towns manage to stop the takeovers, while others fail or remain locked in protracted legal struggles.

The pretext for selling the authority to Aqua is to bail out the bankrupt city of Chester, which incorporated CWA in 1939 but has since played no role in its operations and makes up less than 20 percent of its customer base. The proposed acquisition, said Franklin, the Essential Utilities CEO, “has nothing to do with the capabilities of the authority, and everything to do with Chester being a poor, third-class city, which is trying to dig itself out of bankruptcy by selling one of their only remaining assets.”

The city, which has been struggling financially since 1995, was placed under receivership in 2020, when a casino—one of the few generators of revenue in the city—had to close because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Another major source of the city’s financial woes is a police pension system that was intentionally inflated in 2009. Disinvestment and corruption have fed a cycle that has caused great harm to the city’s population.

Chester’s demographics are a flip of Towa- mencin’s. Towamencin is three-quarters white; Chester is almost three-quarters Black. Sixty-five percent of Towamencin’s housing units are owner-occupied; 37 percent of Chester’s are. The median income in Towamencin is about $85,000; in Chester it’s just below $33,000. Yet a strong sentiment against privatization binds the two communities together.
Greek, the CWA foreman, grew up in Chester and was, in his words, “welfare poor”—his parents received public assistance for most of their lives. He rejects the idea that there are only two options for Chester: bailing it out by selling CWA or hanging it out to dry. (In fact, CWA offered to pay $60 million to Chester in exchange for keeping CWA in a trust for the next 40 years.) “I don’t ever want to say ‘Screw Chester’ out of all this, because you can’t. But is the state of Pennsylvania really helping them with grants and with other sources of money?” Greek asked. “The state doesn’t want to be bothered. It’s like they’re saying, ‘Can’t you guys handle it yourself?’ No, sometimes they can’t.”

Many residents of Chester agree that selling off a prized public asset is not the solution. About 100 locals have volunteered with the Save CWA campaign, among them Kearni Warren, who was born and raised in Chester and was recently a Green Party candidate for the city council. Sitting on a rock by the shore of the Octoraro Reservoir, Warren explained to me that the Pennsylvania Constitution guarantees the right to clean air, pure water, and the preservation of the natural environment. It even declares that “Pennsylvania’s public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations to come.” But, she said, Chester is an environmentally overburdened community with the largest incinerator in the country. “We don’t have clean air in Chester. But we do have clean water. Chester Water Authority is one of the only assets in Chester that has a positive impact on the community.”

“It’s frustrating. It’s infuriating,” Warren said with a sigh. “It’s just total disrespect that is taking place, because Chester is a predominantly Black city, and it’s poor. And so all the ills of society are dumped upon poor and Black communities. To take away a company that is not in distress, because Aqua wants to own the water and wastewater systems—that is an extractive economy.”

Warren said that when Aqua purchased the Springton Reservoir, eight miles north of Chester, the company closed off public access to it and sold off much of the land to an upscale senior housing facility. Warren told me she has fond memories of going to the spring at the reservoir with her grandfather. Now, she said, it’s a “space where only wealthy residents have access to walking paths and picnics and lake views out of their windows.”

Though many of Big Water’s acquisitions have been in small boroughs and towns, there will be tremendous consequences if the sales of CWA and the sprawling BCWSA go through. Some organizers have noted recent visits by Aqua representatives to Philadelphia’s city council offices and wonder if the Philadelphia Water Department, Pennsylvania’s largest system, is next on the docket.

Kevin Davis (whose name has been changed) has worked at BCWSA for over a dozen years and has two young kids. He told me he looked forward to what he hoped would be a long career. “I just always took for granted that my job would be secure and my future would be secure,” he said. Stability is the main thing that he and his coworkers have wanted from their jobs. “We’re not going to get rich here. I’m up to my shoulder sometimes in rags, digging deep into a pump, pulling stuff out. It’s not glamorous, but it’s stable. And everyone—everyone—agrees that having some sort of corporate entity come in here, it would be bad news.”

Water Politics in a Swing State

Pennsylvania’s ever-shifting political lines have made the state a focal point for strategists. This year’s elections include a populist Democratic nominee for the Senate and a far-right Republican running in a tight race for governor. Much of southeastern Pennsylvania, where water and wastewater privatization is currently concentrated, is traditionally Republican territory. But many of the counties in the region voted Democratic in the last few presidential elections.

The politics of the few dozen Pennsylvania water organizers that I met stretch across party lines. Cooper and Greek are both registered Republicans, but as Cooper told me, he now just votes for “the best candidate.” Margo Woodacre, a retired teacher who started the group Keep Water Affordable in New Garden Township, was briefly a Republican state senator in Delaware but has since changed party affiliations. Meanwhile, McMahon is a socialist, and Smith is a Bernie Sanders supporter. As we walked by her car earlier this spring, Smith pointed to its bumper, plastered with stickers for Bernie, Medicare for All, and an assortment of other left causes. “I’m not trying to be a cliché,” she said. “But it’s a bit of a cliché.”

Among the many new organizers, everyone seemed to note the ease of working across the binary of the political parties. As McMahon put it: “We had Trump voters collecting petition signatures next to me, and I was saying, ‘I am a socialist, by the way.’ We were all fighting this corporate takeover.”

Organizing against water privatization is not going to cover over this country’s political divides. Nor does it offer a shortcut to building a mass working-class politics. Challenging multibillion-dollar companies will also never be easy, but it does present an opportunity to link the growing disaffection with corporations and with the country’s two main parties to concrete steps forward.

Demands that run along a top-versus-bottom axis rather than a left-versus-right axis can provide political inroads. As Catherine Miller, who leads CWA’s anti-privatization campaign, told me, “This really is a nonpartisan issue. It’s more like public good versus corporate greed.”

“It’s just total disrespect that is taking place, because Chester is a predominantly Black city, and it’s poor.”

—Kearni Warren, Chester resident

Getting grilled:

Bruce Hauk, right, president of NextEra; and Scott Shearer, left, from the consultancy hired by Towamencin, at a town meeting.
OTTessa Moshfegh’s latest book, LAP-vona, is a masterful and excruciating novel about a village of idiots. How do we know that they’re idiots? Because the narrator says so, constantly, mercilessly, and in every possible way. Even before the narration begins, their idiocy is made clear in an epigraph borrowed from a Demi Lovato song: “I feel stupid when I pray.” But Lovato has one up on Lapvona’s characters. At least the singer has enough self-awareness to recognize stupid behavior.

The characters largely do not, and the narrator’s steady ridicule of them continues to the final, murderous scene, which would be a devastating tragedy of Shakespearean proportions if it weren’t first and
foremost an act of drastic stupidity. As a result, Lapvona is more puppet show than Shakespearean tragedy—there is hilarity, but scenes where there might be gravity often just trigger a facepalm.

This is not to say that the story is not complex and cleverly wrought. The characters’ compounding mistakes and misunderstandings drive an ingenious plot. The result is dramatic irony par excellence. Yet all that relentless insistence that the characters are fools, almost too foolish to warrant attention, puts the reader in a position to feel “addicted to suffering.” God, he is convinced, will reward him for doing evil.

Despite this zeal for sinning, Jude is unresentful. His claim to the fiefdom is based on the manor house he is responsible for building. His claim to the land is more puppet show than anything else, because he is not feudal lord himself. He is the village’s lamb herder, who breeds rams and romanticizes the idea of a pure, uncorrupted pastoral. In this, he is an autobiographical character: Moshfegh does not write about history, but about the present.

As for Villiam, Moshfegh hyperbolizes his loathsome-ness to Disney-villain proportions. When we first meet him, he’s asleep, in the middle of a dream that his sumptuous bed is made of human flesh. After awakening, he insists that a red carpet be rolled from his bedchamber so that he can make a magnificent entrance before his servants, who hate him. He spends his days demanding silly entertainments, fucking his attendants, having petulant tantrums, and gorging on food and drink, although he remains hideously skeletal, like an “insect.” Villiam is a man-child, but unlike Marek, he’s a grownup, with adult power. All the same, he appears to have fallen ass-backwards into his lordship. His claim to the fiefdom is based on a made-up lineage.

A medievalist might balk at the Dark Age clichés that abound in Lapvona. The village is home to a cultureless population with no sense of its own subjugation and no political consciousness, one that could be described in the same terms as Jude’s breeding ram: “strangely complicit in his own imprisonment.” That “strangely” is important: Moshfegh does not attempt to explain Lapvonian complicity; she only states, weirdly and repeatedly, that this is the way they are. Of course, this is far from realistic when it comes to either the human condition or historical circumstance. One might note, for instance, that during the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church’s brokering of contact with the divine through wealthy clergy-men like Barnabas was the cause of many violent peasant revolts. Even the lowest mediavals had civic tradition, historical memory, and class consciousness.

Yet Moshfegh clearly has no concern for historical specificity; she is using premoderns as shorthand for the generally unenlightened. She invokes many familiar medieval tropes in order to exploit them for farce. But unlike in her first book, McGlue, set partly in Salem, Mass., in 1851, and her more recent My Year of Rest and Relaxation, set just before 9/11 in New York (themselves absurdist takes on

Elvia Wilk is the author of the novel Oval and a book of essays, Death by Landscape.
their time periods), *Lapvona* cannot plausibly be called historical fiction. Despite the novel’s medieval trappings, its story exists neither in historical time nor in future time. It exists in the no-time of the parable—albeit one Dyson-vacuumed of any trace of a moral message. Its plot is cyclical: It torques and twists, it tightens upon itself, it baffles. I suppose you could ask (and people will), “Is this a metaphor for the current moment?” or “Why this story now?” But the very notion that there is a “now” depends on a belief in linear progress that the novel belligerently resists.

In *Lapvona*, not only religious origin stories but also social and familial ones are vague or convoluted. Major traumas that might define village life—bandit raids, a plague that decimated half the population a generation earlier, a dreadful famine that occurs halfway through the book—are forgotten by the population as quickly as possible. Supposed blood relations repeatedly prove false; sons constantly turn out to be “bastards.” Jude vaguely remembers that Villiam is his biological cousin, and yet he has no idea why Villiam ended up a lord while he wound up destitute. If this were a play, the actors would be constantly switching costumes. A woman whose children were slaughtered by the bandits “coolly” explains: “They were my children…. And I’ll replace them if I want.”

The book’s sense of time is also cyclical: It is arranged into five seasons, beginning with spring. The summer section alternates between what’s happening down in the village and what’s happening up in the manor. In *Lapvona*, a months-long drought—which, coincidentally or meaningfully (you decide), begins the day after Marek commits an act of violence—causes a famine. People eat mud; when mud fails, they eat each other. Up in the manor, there’s no shortage of water or food. Villiam has stockpiled the village food stores and, in a feat of engineering, has also diverted the water that trickles down from the mountains to his garden. As the villagers perish, Villiam delights in such pastimes as commanding his (fake) son to rub a grape in his asshole and toss it into a servant’s open mouth.

Throughout *Lapvona*, Moshfegh stubbornly resists the central writing-class tenet of developing her characters’ inner lives.

If you can make it through the particularly gruesome summer, fall delivers some small mercies. The plot becomes complicated and circles back on itself in truly inventive ways. For example, Marek’s long-lost mother returns from the nunnery where she’s been hiding and is sexually assaulted by a hallucinating Jude, who mistakes her for a ghost; later she arrives pregnant at Villiam’s manor, where Barnahas declares that she is still a virgin, and Villiam takes her as his bride. People continue to swap roles as parents, children, and spouses. They become more compelling as people; several laugh lines are delivered; and a glimmer of political awareness shines in the occasional Lapvonian eye.

Two not-quite-as-stupid characters come into focus. The first is Grigor, the oldest man in *Lapvona*, who, after suffering through the famine, has a minor breakthrough and becomes “open to change.” He starts “to suspect that life in Lapvona was not what he’d thought it was. He had worked so hard to feed himself and his family, believing it would earn him a seat in heaven. Now he knew he had been working, in fact, to make heaven on earth for the lord above.”

The second wiser person is Ina, the village witch, the only survivor of a long-ago plague that left her sightless. After decades exiled in a cave, experimenting with the healing powers of plants, Ina began to spontaneously lactate and returned to live on the town’s periphery, where she became Lapvona’s wet nurse. She is now maybe 100 years old. In a village where most die young, she is a bridge between generations and a source of nourishment—it is Ina who nudges Grigor toward his political awakening. And yet she does not represent anything like goodness, but rather shrewdness; Ina acts entirely out of self-interest, manipulating other people as needed. She wants to survive, and she’ll eat you if she has to.

Grigor and Ina might realize, Demi Lovato-style, that prayer is pointless, but their presence has very little effect on village life. Grigor’s epiphany is a relief—someone gets it!—but in a village of idiots, one wise old man is not enough. “A more discerning group of people might have questioned” their lot, the narrator tells us. “But nobody questioned anything. There was no mob, no uprising.” Oh, well. Grigor concludes: “They were idiots.”

Throughout *Lapvona*, Moshfegh stubbornly resists the central writing-class tenet of developing her characters’ inner lives. For example, it’s impossible to discern whether Marek is stirred to acts of violence because he is woefully misguided, is traumatized beyond words, or is pathologically cruel. That Marek’s life is abject and hopeless is abundantly clear—so what to make of the flat statement that he is “happy” after being beaten? Or that in the village “everyone looked happy” because of the mere fact that “they were no longer starving”? Or that Villiam “was a happy person” even after seeing his son’s mutilated dead body? These statements might be read as a suggestion that ignorance is bliss, but bliss in these circumstances is patently unbelievable. If these people are human, ignorant or not, they are likely not happy. And so it comes across as though the narrator is mocking them for their misery, in what is essentially a formal exercise in brutal irony.
The novel's biblical references are not subtle, but neither are they straightforward—instead, they're wildly mashed up. It doesn't take a close reading of the Gospels to see how Marek, a child raised among Jude’s lambs, might be proffered as a kind of Christ figure. But as the story evolves, a plethora of babies, boys, and men seem like they too could stand in for the Son of God, right up to Marek's mother's supposed virgin birth. Myriad other biblical allusions, from Villiam's Edenic garden to Ina's spontaneous lactation, are peppered throughout. A rigorous theologian may be tempted to tack up some red yarn and try to map out the patterns; however, if there's an algorithm for the transpositions, I can't parse it.

Marek might be read instead as a whacked-out version of Dostoyevsky's famous Christ-like character, the innocent and infuriating Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*. Both Myshkin and Marek are misguided, unable to see the world around them as it really is, and both pretend to be passive bystanders. But while Myshkin is driven by noble motives, Marek's are selfish and pathetic. While Myshkin is so stubbornly naive that others assume he is stupid, Marek might truly be innocent, because—if we choose to believe the narrator—he is actually stupid. The question in *Lapvona* is not whether a true Christ on earth would be insufferable because of his goodness, but whether goodness is a relevant way to evaluate human behavior.

It's tempting to say that this book—which is about the badness of faith—was written in bad faith, but it would be more accurate to say that it was written in no faith at all. In *Lapvona* and across her work, Moshfegh's most brilliant skill is her refusal to moralize. In this way, she marks out how much the reader desires to judge, to arbitrate, to know. Perhaps the impulse to ferret out motives or diagnose a condition—in a person, a village, or an epoch—is itself idiotic. At one point, Villiam asks sarcastically, “Am I a god? Do I control the weather?” He asks this as if he has no responsibility for anything, but in many ways he does control the weather—or at least the water supply. Similarly, the novel's narrator disavows responsibility, purporting to state only the facts; but in truth, the narrator dislikes these village idiots. And if the omniscient narrator is the god of the story, then this god thinks you’re an idiot, too.

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**Closure**

Is it the eight titanium pins around my knees or the fact that for three months the incisions were left open? I grew to know that plush of inside—the velvets, the iodine to prevent infection, the smooth of body cast like another girl who was exactly my shape, but calmer than I would ever be.

She lay still, barely shifting, like a vase holding a flower, which was me with my hot dangers, my itchy despairs.

In the myth, the girl who is Spring only gets her power when she chooses the mask of bone.

I did not want the world to be this way.

For weeks, I stared at the dull view out the window of alleys in moonlight, a few sunken garages, a dirty-white cat. I stared until these things became beautiful again.

Something closed inside me, which glinted like a sharp bright pin.

**SHEILA BLACK**
I’ve been following Keith Gessen for my entire adult life. The magazine he cofounded, n+1, debuted in 2004, the year after I graduated from college, when I had just entered New York’s creative underclass and was filled with a fire to do what the guys at n+1 did, writing about politics and culture in the nightmare that was George W. Bush’s America. In 2008, Gessen published a novel called All the Sad Young Literary Men, its title describing my twentysomething self to a tee. Then came his years of fruitful productivity: a critic’s gig with New York magazine, articles for The New Yorker and Vanity Fair, a translation of Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich’s Voices From Chernobyl into English, and the publication in 2018 of a second novel, A Terrible Country, set in Russia, where he was born. He has recently been reporting on the war in Ukraine, cementing the impression that for every political era and life cycle, Gessen would always be there for young Gen Xers and old millennials, offering a ticking indicator of time’s passage.

I am now a father in my 40s, so naturally Gessen has written a book, Raising Raffi, about being a father in his 40s. The parenting memoir is possibly the most polarizing genre of book, since it concerns a subject that is fascinating to parents and pretty much no one else. It can alienate parents, too, for that matter, because the foibles of one’s children are about as interesting to other people as the details of one’s dreams. Social media is a sad testament to this truth, littered with parental anecdotes in which the gap between the author’s delight and the audience’s indifference could not be starker.

So it’s not a knock against Gessen to point out that Raising Raffi is not for everyone. Nor is it a dig at parenting memoirs in general to acknowledge that the likely reason this book is being reviewed here, in a section devoted to the arts and the life of the mind, is that it was written by a person who helped inaugurate a column in n+1 called “The Intellectual Situation.” It is instead to say that if this book has a broader significance—beyond,
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of course, the significance of child-rearing, a timeless and necessary human pursuit—it lies in what it says about “us,” the cohort of New York Xennials whose careers and marriages and first forays into parenting have taken place against the backdrop of the Iraq War, Occupy Wall Street, the Trump presidency, and now the pandemic. If Adam Gopnik’s witless parenting memoir *Through the Children’s Gate* inadvertently revealed the vapidity of the post-9/11 upper middle class of the Upper East Side, then *Raising Raffi* is a tour of the anxieties of semi-gentrified Brooklyn in the 2020s. This New York is not Gopnik’s fantasy of merry, well-to-do Manhattanites, where children and parents alike frolic on “Paul Desmond saxophone mornings,” as he hilariously put it. In Gessen’s New York, the apartments are too small and the income for creative types too precarious. It is a city where the future of racial integration seems to rest on the decision of which preschool to send your child to and where white parents are proud that their toddlers yell “Black lives matter!” out the window. It is a faithful and perceptive depiction, though I’m not sure anybody will really like what they see.

*Raising Raffi* is ominously subtitled “The First Five Years,” as if this child’s life is some sort of literary experiment that will be conducted in quinquennial installments. Most parents are infatuated with their children, but Gessen takes his infatuation to typically overachieving heights: Not only has he written a book about his eldest boy; he has also seemingly read every guide to parenting on the market. “A little of this and a little of that, you could create the perfect kid,” he writes. This is, to be clear, a joke, but like all good jokes it contains a kernel of truth. Gessen may not want to hammer his child into an instrument for blowing away Ivy League admissions officers, but he does obsess over his child’s development in a way that other parents might find bewildering. In a nod to Amy Chua’s Chinese “Tiger Mom,” Gessen’s wife, Emily Gould, dubs him a Russian “Bear Dad” (which she admits makes him sound like a “cute hairy gay guy”). At one point Gessen describes parent-teacher conferences as “major” events in his life, which earned one of the numerous question marks that line the margins of my copy of this book.

In other words, Gessen worries. A lot. He worries that Raffi’s school history project won’t be as brilliant as those of his peers. He worries that Raffi may not be any good at sports. He worries that Raffi won’t be able to speak Russian. Above all, he worries that Raffi may grow up to be the sort of male we might despise: toxic, a mansplainer, whatever you like. And Gessen does have cause to worry, for Raffi is what we in the parenting community, ever so fond of gentle euphemism, would call “a handful.” He gets kicked out of day care for causing a ruckus during nap time. He punches his friends, who punch him back. His teachers send weekly e-mails to Gessen and Gould with the subject line “Scratch”—as in, scratches on his face. He sometimes takes his younger brother Ilya’s milk bottle and sprays its contents all over their Bed-Stuy apartment. With admirable honesty, Gessen describes Raffi as a “three-year-old terrorist.”

The question becomes: How do you solve a problem like Raffi? Much of the book traffics in the kind of parenting porn that will be recognizable to anyone who has even a passing familiarity with the genre: sleepless nights, endless screaming, catastrophic road trips, public meltdowns—one grim, bleak-eyed hardship after another. Sometimes Gessen meets the challenges of an obsturate, occasionally violent child with his own mix of stubborn grit and occasional violence, accidentally slapping Raffi on the head in one instance and purposely slapping him on the wrist in another. These outbursts, which also include admonishing his willful, crazy-making child in a “very scary manner,” are impossible to control, the angry Bear Dad emerging from Gessen like the Hulk tearing through the clothes of Bruce Banner. As so many fathers know from similar experience, such lapses of judgment are instant sources of regret and shame. Raffi tells him, “You’re a bad dada and I’m never going to listen to you again!” Gessen ruefully concedes the point: “I felt he was right. I was not a good dada. But I didn’t know what else to do.”

Lest any parent reading this feel smug right about now, it is worth noting that to the extent that anyone is “good” at parenting, it is almost entirely due to the disposition of the child. I’ve heard stories of parents who thought they had the whole thing figured out, only to be utterly defeated by their difficult second or third child. Boys in particular develop less quickly than girls; at the risk of generalizing from my own experience, I’ll never forget walking into a pre-K class where the girls were seated at their tables, drawing and talking quietly, while the boys were wrestling, yelling, throwing stuff, and basically losing their minds. Gessen gets it in the end, observing that the parents of one of Raffi’s friends “were a lot more chill” because their kid “was a lot more chill.” Ultimately, “it was the kid who set the tone. And Raffi set a very particular tone.”

Still, it’s clear that Gessen doesn’t have much chill either. He plows through scores of parenting books, hoping to solve the riddle of his son’s recalcitrance. Like every parent, he gets up in the middle of the night in a panic to check whether Raffi is still breathing, but unlike other parents, who stop doing this after the first week or two following birth, Gessen continues to check for three more years. He pushes Raffi hard, whether it’s forcing him to learn Russian or how to ice-skate. He swings between wild ambitions for his son (“Was our child a genius?”) and melodramatic guilt over expecting too much (“Did he hate me?”). All of this is told in a tone that, while not quite humorless, doesn’t exactly abound with sweetness and light. Gessen lands on a hard-bitten realism: “It wasn’t over, this battle between us. It would, maybe, never be over. But here we were.”

Gessen’s anxiety finds its oddest expression in his analysis of the beloved children’s book *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown. For those of you

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who have never had the pleasure, the story involves a bunny who wants to run away from his mother; she responds that wherever he might run, she’ll be there. If the bunny wants to transform into a “fish in a trout stream,” the mother will become a “fisherman and I will fish for you”—and so on and so forth, the mother thwarting every possible escape attempt with the calm assertion that the bunny will end up back with her. Gessen says the story was too much for him: “To me the book seemed like an expression of terror and madness: the mother’s terror of losing her child and the madness this caused in her. Emily had that madness, and so did I.” But, sorry, this is quite obviously not what The Runaway Bunny is about. The point, at least of reading it to a young child, is that no matter what flight of fancy might take hold of them, no matter how ungrateful or disobedient they may be, they will always come home—because love is their home.

As it happens, amid the reams of literature about screen time and sleep schedules and diet, the guarantee of unconditional love remains one of the few proven goods that parents can actually provide for their children, giving them a place in the world and a reason for being. Our kids are not geniuses, of course; they are just themselves. That this is more than enough, that this causes our hearts to brim over, is the miracle of having children. They exist! No one else might value them, or find them beautiful or interesting, or perceive the light inside them—but their parents do.

That every child has this light is why I cannot agree with Gessen’s great thesis that parenthood is a “tragedy.” “There is no other thing you do in life only so that the person you do it for can leave you,” he writes, adding, “You succeed when you make yourself irrelevant, when you erase yourself. Parents who fail to do that have failed. I feel myself failing in exactly this way every day.” It is a poignant sort of failure, to want to remain an integral part of your child’s world, the sun they look up to when you walk down the street hand in hand. But for me, anyway, the inevitable separation is part and parcel of the miracle, the gift of my child’s own self and her own life.

he insane calculus involved in enrolling your child in a public school in New York City—a veritable Rubik’s Cube of logistical, pedagogical, and moral factors—can drive the most even-keeled parent to despair. It seems almost engineered to confound a hand wringer like Gessen, who flies at the problem with his customary doggedness, determined to make the choices that will allow the cube to click perfectly into place. The hitch is that this is impossible. Like much of liberal America, Gessen has read Nikole Hannah-Jones, and so he knows that the New York City public school system is the most segregated in the country, largely because white parents cluster their kids in the better schools, which by and large are in wealthier neighborhoods that can provide more resources. He understandably has no desire to help perpetuate this racist system, which means Raffi must go to a school that is reasonably diverse—but also one that is not crumbling into disrepair and taking its students down with it. Gessen tours the schools in his neighborhood and, like the straight-A student he undoubtedly was, asks the administrators conscientious questions. (“Is there room for parental involvement?”) He performs the uncomfortable calculations necessary to determine a school’s racial makeup: this percentage of Black kids, that percentage of Latinos, this many whites. The options narrow down to three: one that is too white, one that is too decrepit, and one that is just right. The only issue with the third is that Gessen and Gould must move to a different apartment to be in the school’s zone.

If it sounds ludicrous to uproot your life just to send your kid to a decent school that isn’t contributing to the systemic racism of society—well, it is. Nearly every family has to make such calls, further entangling school enrollment in issues of real estate and gentrification. I will submit that these moral calculations are simply too much to expect of average parents who, again, just want to send their kids to school, not fix the problem of racial equality in America while they’re at it (a doubly absurd enterprise because, of course, this is a collective issue that requires collec-
less hope

apologies. i was part of the joy
industrial complex, told them their bodies were
miracles & they ate it, sold someday,
made money off soon & now. i snuck an ode into the elegy,
forced the dead to smile & juke.

implied America, said destroy but offered nary step nor tool.
i paid taxes knowing where the funds go.
in April, my offering to my mother's slow murder. by May
my sister filled with the bullets i bought. June & my father's life
locked in a box i built. my brother's end plotted as i spend.

idk why i told you it would be ok. not. won't. when they aren't
killing you they're killing someone else. sometimes their hands
at the ends of your wrist. you (you & me) are agent & enemy.

there i was, writing anthems in a nation whose victory was my blood
made visible, my mother too sugared to weep without melting, my rage
a comfort foaming at my racial mouth, singing

Lord
your tomorrow holds no sway, your heavens too late.
i've abandon you as you me, for me. say la vee.

but sweet Satan—OG dark kicked out the sky
first fallen & niggered thing—what's good?
who owns it? where does it come from?
satan, first segregation, mother of exile
what do you promise in your fire? for our freedom,
i offer over their souls. theirs. mine

is mine. i refuse any Hell again. i've known
nearer devils. the audience & the mirror. they/i make you look weak.
they/i clapped at my eulogies. they/i said encore, encore.
i/we wanted to stop being killed & they/i thanked me for beauty.

&. pitifully, i loved them. i thanked them.
i took the awards & cashed the checks.
i did the one about the boy when requested, traded their names
for followers. in lieu of action, i wrote a book,
edited my war cries down to prayers. oh, devil.
they gave me a god and gave me clout.
they took my poems and took my blades.
Satan, like you did for God, i sang.

i sang for my enemy, who was my God.
i gave it my best. i bowed and smiled.
teach me to never bend again.

DANEZ SMITH
A Dead Sea

The history of one of North America’s most polluted bodies of water

BY KYLE PAOLETTA

THE UNITED STATES’ CENTURY-OLD AMBITION TO IMPOUND and divvy up every drop of water that could be wrung from its most arid stretches began with a flood. A private firm called the California Development Company (CDC) completed a canal in 1901 that zigzagged across the state’s border with Mexico in order to connect the Colorado River to a dry riverbed that aspiring farmers had already begun to section off for themselves, heeding the proclamation by the newly founded Imperial Valley Press that the region constituted “the most fertile body of arid land on the continent.”

Only two years later, the CDC’s canal was filled with silt, and the customers who had paid up-front for rights to water that could no longer be delivered started filing lawsuits. The CDC dug a new ditch next to the original canal, but in its desperation to act quickly, the company neglected to build any means of controlling how much of the river was diverted into this new channel: If the Colorado flooded, the excess water had nowhere to go but toward the Imperial Valley. To make matters worse, 1905 was an unusually wet year, and by autumn the Colorado was flowing with the same force as Niagara Falls. The CDC’s diversion held, but that only served to funnel the entire river downhill into the valley’s center, a vast salt plain then known as the Salton Sink. It would take two years before the river was contained. Once it was, California had a new body of water, the Salton Sea, almost twice the size of Lake Tahoe.

The Salton Sea was formed before the Hoover Dam, before Lake Powell, before the aqueducts that stretch for hundreds of miles across the West. But there were many more new water features on the horizon: The Bureau of Reclamation, created to develop a “system of nationally-aided irrigation for the arid reaches of the far West,” began building dams across the region in the first decade of the 1900s. It also ac-
The West became dependent on these waterworks as soon as they were constructed, even as their forerunner, the Salton Sea, was slowly transforming into a surreal and toxic landscape. The so-called sea’s salinity began to rise as soon as it was formed, because its water evaporated steadily in the unrelenting sunshine. Over the following decades, the lost water began to be replenished by the runoff from the acres of farms and feedlots spreading across its southern edge. But as the basin was refilling, the runoff was turning the Salton Sea into one of the most polluted bodies of water in the West—a lake that gives off a stench of eggs and kills migrating birds by the thousands. The western shore, meanwhile, was littered with detritus from weapons testing by the United States military, and along the eastern shore you could find a tourist town called Bombay Beach that would be all but abandoned in the 1970s after being flooded with runoff. Bombay Beach has since found a second life as an artists’ colony that, starting in 2015, has staged a yearly “biennale” that bills itself as a “renegade celebration of art, music, and philosophy that takes place on the literal edge of western civilization.” But everywhere around the Salton Sea, the shoreline is receding, leaving thousands of acres of polluted playa—the earth that remains after the water has evaporated—which, once it becomes airborne on the wind, produces some of the worst asthma rates in California.

In The Settler Sea: California’s Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism, Traci Brynne Voyles, a professor of women’s and gender studies at the University of Oklahoma, catalogs the alarming events that created this environmental disaster as well as the efforts of policy-makers and private interests to maintain a stronghold on the area they dubbed the Imperial Valley. The story of the Salton Sea is a revealing one, helping us understand the limits of the United States’ ability to conquer and control the landscape. Voyles pegs the beginning of the desert’s despoliation to the arrival of settlers in the West. Thousands gravitated to the Colorado River in the 1880s and ’90s for the same reason that Indigenous people had done so for thousands of years: Its 1,450-mile run, from the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of California, provides the most reliable water source in the vast desert that covers North America’s underbelly. Not that the Colorado was ever predictable: In some years the river was a pleasant stream, in others a nightmarish rapid. After engineers repeatedly failed to constrain the river in 1905, a resolute Los Angeles Times declared that “American engineering will not for long be baffled even by a mighty and treacherous Colorado River.” And yet it was: Even in the 1920s, the river troubled many of the region’s residents to such an extent that California Senator Hiram Johnson added “devilish” to the list of pejoratives thrown at the Colorado, in a speech calling for it to be tamed into “a servant of mankind.” If the Southwest was to become a land of plenty for the white settlers who now lived there, the first step was to subdue the Colorado River.

While the Anglos of the Imperial Valley may have been surprised by the Colorado’s wild gyrations, the Cahuilla and Kumeyaay people, who had lived there for centuries, were well acquainted with its tendency to occasionally run so powerfully that it redirected itself away from the Gulf of California and into the Salton Sink.

When that happened, the Cahuillas who lived in the valley would escape to the hills along its edge and, once they had reestablished their settlements, sustain themselves by fishing in the newly formed body of water. After the water evaporated, they dug wells deep into the exposed valley floor and relied on mesquite trees for sustenance. Meanwhile the Kumeyaay, whose traditional lands straddle today’s California-Mexico border, practiced flood irrigation along the Colorado’s banks. As with the Maidu peoples of the Sierra Nevada, who understood forest fires to be a natural part of their homeland’s life cycle, the Cahuilla and Kumeyaay thought of flooding not as something that should be stopped but as a natural process that life had to be oriented around.

The white settlers of the Imperial Valley, meanwhile, were baffled by the reaction of the Indigenous peoples to events the settlers found catastrophic. When a salt-mining operation in the Salton Sink, set up by an entrepreneur to harvest the bountiful deposits left behind by previous floods, was washed away in the 1890s, its owner stood flabbergasted as the Cahuilla laborers he had hired “packed their belongings, abandoned the salt field, and headed into the mountains.”

Voyles makes a persuasive case that the Salton Sink likely would have been flooded in 1905 even without the CDC’s negligence. Nevertheless, the new arrivals to the Imperial Valley refused to adapt to the Colorado’s cycles the way the Cahuilla had. Once the Salton Sea was formed after the flood of 1905, scientists predicted it would fully evaporate by the 1930s, but settlement prevented this process from running its course. Instead, as more and more people moved into the region and set up farms, more runoff was directed toward the Salton Sea, turning it into a “natural dumping basin.”

For the past century, then, every year has seen some of the sea evaporate, only for that water to be replaced by runoff contaminated with, among other things, DDT and untreated human sewage. Making matters worse was the military testing done by the United States in the 1940s and ’50s. The lake, like nearly half the land in the West, is the legal property of the federal government, and the Defense Department and the Air Force took advantage of that fact by crashing more than a dozen aircraft into the Salton Sea during World War II training exercises; after the war, nuclear weapons researchers dropped thousands of dummy bombs into its waters, many of which included raw uranium.

For this reason, Voyles calls the Salton Sea “an archive of twentieth-century toxins.” And as the Southwest’s current megadrought—which began 20 years ago—worsens, it’s no longer possible to pretend that those toxins will remain sequestered forever. The sea’s shoreline has

Kyle Paolella is at work on American Oasis, a book about the cities of the Southwest.
been receding rapidly since 2018, after the expiration of an agreement between the Imperial Irrigation District and San Diego that diverted water to prevent the polluted lake bed from being exposed. By 2025, as much as 40 percent of the sea’s volume could be gone, leaving behind tens of thousands of acres of sand laced with toxins and easily kicked up by the breeze. One in five children in Imperial County already suffers from asthma, and a higher proportion of them are admitted to emergency rooms for life-threatening episodes than anywhere else in the state. The more the sea’s water evaporates, the more dangerous the air will become for the families of the farmworkers who labor downwind.

In addition to this physical legacy of settler colonialism, Voyles charts the less obvious systems of oppression that created the infrastructure necessary for the agriculture, defense, and tourism industries to exploit the region, observing that “the labor of constructing this world around, because of, and for the Salton Sea often came from a specific category of workers: incarcerated ones.” In the early 20th century, Hispanic and Indigenous men who had been arrested for public drunkenness were routinely impressed into mining granite from Superstition Mountain, which overlooks the Salton Sea, for the material then used to pave the county’s roads. The Salton Sea has also led to the Cahuilla people’s dispossession, not only of the lifeways that were once informed by the Colorado’s rhythms but also of the land the US government ceded to them. When the Salton Sea was formed, close to half of the Torres Martinez Cahuilla reservation, a 24,000-acre parcel of land, the first portion of which was granted in 1876, was inundated with floodwater, destroying many of the reservation’s wells. Rather than provide support to the Cahuilla farmers to build new waterworks and cultivate the land that was left, officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs gladly facilitated the claiming of their water rights by white settlers and then expressed disbelief when members of the tribe left the reservation to find work elsewhere. It was an impossible situation: As Voyles puts it, federal officials were blithely hoping “to convert the Native people into dryland farmers—dryland farmers, that is, without enough land or enough water to produce a crop.”

Public officials also tried to remake the area around the Salton Sea into a lake resort, complete with “exclusive resort hotels, water sports facilities, beaches, and every other type of service and accommodations that will attract winter tourists and health-seekers.” Date Palm Beach sprouted up on the northern shore in 1926, followed by the North Shore Yacht Club and, to the east, Bombay Beach. By the 1950s, celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Rock Hudson were vacationing on one shore of the Salton Sea while uranium-laced bombs were dropped into it on the other side.

The days of this “California Riviera” were numbered. A surge of agricultural production in the 1960s led to the inundation of many of the beach resorts with runoff, and what few pleasure seekers

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**By 2025, 40 percent of the Salton Sea could be gone, leaving behind tens of thousands of acres of sand laced with toxins.**

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**THE PERSONAL IS STILL POLITICAL**

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*“Gripping prose and lucid analysis make this an essential study of what needs to change before the next epidemic.”*

—*Publishers Weekly, Starred Review*
toward the already ravaged Colorado River Delta. Loath to commit to yet more landscape reengineering, California’s Department of Water Resources has focused instead on the short-term fix of pumping water from the center of the Salton Sea into new wetlands along its exposed shoreline, a plan that will stretch the surface area of the lake as thinly as possible in the hopes of keeping its noxious dust at bay, though it does nothing to solve the vicious cycle of contamination and evaporation that is harming the landscape and its inhabitants.

While no body of water in the West is quite as vexed as the Salton Sea, echoes of its dissolution have been evident across the region this summer. Lake Powell, which attracted over 4 million motor boaters and #lakelife Instagrammers as recently as 2019, has seen its annual visitation shrink as more and more of the reservoir is drained to supply water to Southwestern cities and farms, leaving the ramps that tourists previously used to launch their vessels stranded far from the water’s edge. In California, the aura of depletion has produced a similar sense of dread, as forest fires grow more ferocious by the year; the fires and the water shortages are the inevitable consequences of a century of riparian overgrazing that deprived inland areas of the nutrients the river once provided.

Yet rather than accept the fatalism of the Chinook is having profound effects on ecosystems across Northern California, from disrupting the region’s food chain to depriving inland areas of the nutrients the fish once provided.

As I wandered around the beach, a BMW came over the berm and parked a short distance from my rental car: a couple from LA, here to gawk at the ruin of the place. One of the few roads that crests the berm constructed in the 1970s to protect the town from floodwaters opens out into an enormous stretch of dried-up lake bed. I visited Bombay Beach last fall, just as the sun was setting over the flat expanse of the Salton Sea, casting a soft glow on the art installations scattered around the beach. There’s an entrance to an imaginary metronome station, its arch marking a descent into bare sand, as well as a toilet with some sticks poking out of the bowl. Most striking is *The Death Ship*, an assemblage of driftwood meant to resemble a wrecked pirate ship.
Letters

Gay Liberation

I’m a little older than Benjamin Moser, but my experience was not at all that different from his in “How I Stopped Being Gay” [July 11/18]. I agree that it’s wonderful to have acceptance, but we, indeed, paid a price for it. In spite of our opposition, we had the freedom to create ourselves—and we had to create ourselves because there was no preordained, respectable way to be a gay man. I don’t wish for young LGBT people to experience the fear, loneliness, and danger that we did, but it makes me sad that they, much like straight people, will go from their high school Gay/Straight Alliance, to dating nice young men in college, to finding the “right guy” to legally marry and adopt children with, and then never again to be wild, to feel that power of being on the outside of the city walls, free to roam the countryside, with no desire to get back in.

Bruce Tidwell

Hooded Justice

Louis Michael Seidman’s exposé of the Supreme Court was an eye-opener for me [“The Problem of the Supreme Court,” June 27/July 4]. I would also like to add something about Hugo Black, the justice with links to the Ku Klux Klan who was nominated by Franklin Roosevelt. In 1921, James Edwino Coyle, a Roman Catholic priest, was shot and killed by E.R. Stephenson, a Methodist minister and a Klan member, in Birmingham, Ala. What motivated the attack was that Coyle had performed a marriage that day between Stephenson’s daughter, Ruth, who had converted to Catholicism a few months earlier, and Pedro Gussman, who was Puerto Rican. The Klan paid for Stephenson’s defense. Four of his lawyers were Klan members, and the fifth was Black. Though he was not a member of the Klan at the time, Black played a role in Stephenson’s acquittal for the murder of Father Coyle.

Ed Nizalowski

Newark Valley, N.Y.
Viruses do not discriminate. As Covid-19 has made abundantly clear, no one is safe from infection, not even Queen Elizabeth II or Kim Kardashian. But as the journalist Steven Thrasher discusses in his new book, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide*, the universal nature of viruses does not mean that all humans will contract them equally. Rather, viruses interact with entrenched power structures in a way that results in highly skewed rates of exposure, transmission, serious illness, disability, and death. *The Nation* spoke with Thrasher about how pandemics magnify inequality, the lessons learned from the HIV/AIDS crisis, and what we should do to confront the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

—Charlotte Rosen

CR: What is the “viral underclass”?

ST: The term helps explain why marginalized groups of people are disproportionately infected with and harmed by viruses. Being in poverty and/or a member of a stigmatized or criminalized social class makes someone more likely to become infected with viruses, because they are more likely to be living under conditions that hasten viral transmission and to lack the resources to care for themselves should they become infected.

The viral underclass also refers to how viruses deepen marginalization and create a distinctly disadvantaged group of people. Becoming infected with a virus makes people more susceptible to fall into poverty, experience deprivation, and face state violence.

CR: What insights does the history of HIV/AIDS offer for understanding the viral underclass under Covid-19?

ST: When a virus affects a population deemed disposable, there are different levels of care in response. Under Covid, we see there’s not much care provided for elderly people who are at high risk of dying, in the same way that gay men who were getting AIDS and dying in the 1980s and ’90s did not receive care. Despite some initial bursts of state mobilization in response to Covid, we’re now seeing the dismantling of any social safety net enacted during the pandemic. There’s no longer funding for people who are uninsured to get tested or treated, even though there’s clear evidence that people without insurance are the most likely to transmit Covid, get sick from it, and die. But the uninsured and poor are considered disposable, and so we’re seeing less and less money spent on protecting them.

CR: And can you talk about how policing, prisons, and the criminal legal system in the United States exacerbate harm against the viral underclass?

ST: It’s important to recognize that being marked as a person who has been incarcerated creates disasters in life that puts that person in the viral underclass. High rates of incarceration not only help produce more pathogens because of the unsanitary and inhumane conditions in US carceral institutions; they also exacerbate inequalities in housing, employment, and access to health care, which then heighten the risk of viral infection and death for an entire class of people.

CR: What is your assessment of the current government response and how we continue to fight back?

ST: There is a mistake in not centering the viral underclass in our policy-making. What would a world look like in which a line cook doesn’t get sick and die at a higher rate than people in other jobs? Well, that would be a world where there is really good ventilation in kitchens, where people have paid sick leave, where there is an excess of labor available so that you’re not looking at one person and saying, “Can you cook 100 hamburgers in an hour?” Rather, you have two people working, with enough support so that if one person is sick, they have someone to cover for them. If we centered the people who are in the viral underclass and asked ourselves, “What would it take to get them housing, insurance, the things they need to be safe?” that would have a net-positive effect for everyone in society—well, except for the billionaires, who would have to pay more money in taxes and share their resources.
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