How the decade set the stage for the political, cultural, and economic turmoil of our current moment.
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Solidarity: Protesters at the Chinese Consulate in New York City on November 29.

With Democrats like Bill Clinton in power, there was hardly a need for the Republicans to push conservative policies.
COMMPARED WITH THE DECADES THAT CAME DIRECTLY BEFORE AND AFTER, THE 1990s have often seemed a ho-hum era, caught between its more outrageous siblings. While the '80s arrived with a burst of big hair and shoulder pads, a synth-y MTV soundtrack blasting over the Gipper’s evisceration of the welfare state, and the 2000s appeared like a deranged comet, throwing whole worlds off course, the '90s bounced and slouched their way forward, a little bit sunny, a little bit ironic, and more or less insignificant. This was the decade so boring it was supposed to be the end of history.

And yet, three decades later, the '90s don’t seem so dull after all. Squint a little, peer through the telescope of time, and they look not only consequential but foundational—a sort of cosmic microwave background flickering with the precursors of the present moment. Our obsessions, our follies, our heartbreaks, our struggles, and even a few of our triumphs—they are all there, radiating into the here and now.

Consider the new Cold War. You can glimpse its beginnings in the end of the old one, which spun out in spectacular fashion in December 1991, when the Soviet Union officially collapsed, leaving the United States the world’s sole superpower. Or neoliberalism? Sure, Ronald Reagan did his best to undo the New Deal, but it was Bill Clinton, that triangulating Lothario, who ushered in neoliberalism’s second wave, giving us NAFTA, welfare “reform,” and the enduring emptiness of “doing well by doing good.” And let’s not forget the tech revolution, which rewired our minds along with our machines. You can hear the revolution coming in the jagged stutter of your first modem, or the mechanical singsong of your old Nokia. You can feel it in the acceleration of culture itself.

The legacy of the last decade of the 20th century isn’t limited to the epic global stuff, either. In ways both big and small, the events of the '90s continue to exert their influence, echoing across the decades and into the present. Long before the outbreak of the current culture war, for instance, there was the '90s culture war, with its clashes over multiculturalism and political correctness. Before 2020’s Black Lives Matter uprisings, Los Angeles lit up in despair and rage over the acquittal of the cops who beat Rodney King in 1992. Columbine gave rise to Uvalde; Iron John to incels; Fox News to Newsmax TV; and on and on. Instead of the End of History, the 1990s gave us the Revenge of History.

To help make sense of this overlooked epoch, we have pulled together this special issue—a series of 12 articles probing everything from the rise of house music to the origins of today’s fractured politics. As Jeet Heer writes in the issue’s first essay, it was the 1990s—not the 2010s—that birthed Trumpism. It was also the '90s that gave us what might just be the world’s longest food fight—a culture-war fracas, as Brent Cunningham explains in a tour de force of culinary analysis, that has escalated into “a matter of life and death.”

To be sure, not all of the era’s developments were negative. Alongside the abundant ugliness, the '90s also seeded fresh dreams and possibilities. In the very first year of the decade, the philosopher Judith Butler gave us *Gender Trouble*, “introducing new ways of thinking about gender,” in the words of Naomi Gordon-Loeb. As for the activist left, it found ways, even in its diminished state, to resist—or, as Naomi Klein writes in her jewel box of an essay, to jam its foot “in the heavy door of history so that the full weight of neoliberal power would not succeed in slamming it shut completely.”

As 2022 comes to an end, it’s enlightening and perhaps oddly comforting to be reminded that we have seen—and survived—some of the afflictions roiling our society before. While it would be nicer if we’d managed to vanquish them, the reality is, that doesn’t happen very often. Instead, we struggle, we shift tactics, we struggle some more—and maybe we learn, as Mary Heglar writes in her essay (published online) about growing up as a child of the first climate-change generation. For Heglar, the great lesson of her childhood was that the fight to save the planet, like many fights, is not one generation’s “burden to bear all alone.” It’s an act of collective dedication. As we reflect on the past and plunge into the future, that’s a worthy lesson indeed.
Who’s Got the Power?

As we enter the third year of the pandemic, our reigning mantra has become “Give me liberty and give me death!”

Here comes our third year living and dying with Covid-19. We started this 2022 festive season on Thanksgiving with pediatric intensive care beds gobbled up by respiratory infections as our health care system sagged under the weight of a triple-demic of SARS-CoV-2, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV); a new set of Covid variants; and only a third of Americans having received a vaccine and the original boosters—with just about 10 percent lining up for the new “bivalent” boosters in the US.

Meanwhile, administration officials continue to talk out of both sides of their mouths, saying we shouldn’t worry about Covid this winter, that “we have the tools” to handle the combined whammy of Covid, the flu, and RSV, while simultaneously making desperate pleas for more Covid funding from Congress, seemingly baffled that after months of downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic, no one seems to think Covid is a problem anymore. A dozen Democrats joined Republicans in the Senate in voting to rescind the national emergency declared in response to the pandemic in 2020.

Yet we keep hearing that public health has failed us during this pandemic. From right and left, from print journalists to talking heads, the mess we’re in gets laid at the feet of those of us working in the field—as if we have any influence on the circus going on in Washington or in statehouses across the country, where quacks like Florida’s Joe Ladapo are installed as surgeon general to spout nonsense about vaccines.

To paraphrase Dr. Lynn Freedman of the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health, who wrote about the global challenges of maternal and child health in a report in 2005, any serious strategy to change the state of American health, in particular our response to Covid, needs to ask, answer, and confront a single question: “Who’s got the power?” In the US, it’s not public health that has the power. Not at all.

We came into this pandemic with a feeble public health system, understaffed and under-resourced—mostly by design—in which we mostly ignore public health, frantically mobilize in the midst of crises, and then wonder why we end up doing so badly again and again. It shouldn’t be surprising that, as Alyssa Bilinski of the Brown University School of Public Health, along with Kathryn Thompson and Zeke Emanuel, reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association in November, “The US continued to experience significantly higher Covid-19 and excess all-cause mortality compared with peer countries during 2021 and early 2022, a difference accounting for 150,000 to 470,000 deaths.”

It’s not public health that failed us for the past three years. Rather, American political leaders have been failing public health for over a century. They pretended we could deal with public health one person at a time, fixing them up in our hospital wards, emergency rooms, and doctors’ offices. As Hibbert Winslow Hill suggested in 1913 in The New Public Health, treating a few thousand victims of disease is far cheaper than dealing with the structural causes of ill health.

Following Hill, contemporary commentators like Josh Barro heap scorn on the idea that more communitarian approaches to public health have any role in an individualistic America, trashing public health experts as tin-pot tyrants pushing a political agenda, rather than acknowledge that communitarian solutions gave us clean air to breathe and clean water to drink, and have been fundamental to public health success since John Snow pushed local officials to take the handle off the Broad Street pump (in what Barro would probably decry as interference in the free exercise of commerce and the private provision of water) in 19th-century London. It’s this kind of libertarianism—the you-do-you ethos of American culture that sees the “public” in public health as an anathema, clinging to a medical model of private risk and private cures—that has dropped us down to the 40s in global life expectancy rankings before the pandemic, and will land us below the 60s by 2040. “Give me liberty and give me death” is the reigning mantra of America today.

Instead I would hark back to one of Hill’s contemporaries, who had a more nuanced view of freedom: “Real liberty for all could not exist under the operation of a principle which recognizes the right of each individual person to use his own, whether in respect of his person or his property, regardless of the injury that may be done to others.” This was Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, who wrote the opinion in Jacobson v. Massachusetts in 1905 upholding vaccine mandates. Of course, nowadays the courts have become more hostile to public health protections, overruling expert opinion again and again. So remind me: Who’s got the power as we head into 2023?

What might “public health” do if it had the power to influence agendas, rather than have its best experts make post hoc justifications for the politicians they work for? In November, Jeffrey Lazarus and 385 coauthors offered us a road map in one of the world’s premier scientific journals, Nature (full disclosure: I was part of this process). Sadly, it is one that will almost certainly not be followed—but at least it shows us the road not taken when we look back on this moment.
Can a predominantly white state legislature overturn the votes of a predominantly Black city? Larry Krasner, Philadelphia’s district attorney, was elected in 2017 on a reform agenda and has faced a GOP backlash ever since.

On the last day of business before the 2022 midterms, Martina White, a Republican state representative, filed articles for Krasner’s impeachment. If the initiative wins a majority vote in Pennsylvania’s Republican-dominated House, Krasner will stand trial in the state Senate. Charles D. Ellison, the executive producer and host of Reality Check on WURD, and Sara Lomax-Reese, a cofounder of URL Media, joined me for this conversation with Krasner.

—Laura Flanders

**Q&A**

**Larry Krasner**

**LF:** Homicide rates are higher than they’ve been in decades in Philadelphia. Do you dispute that, and how do you think about that?

**LK:** We have achieved, sadly, all-time-high homicides in Philadelphia. This is something that did not just happen in Philadelphia. One statistical analysis said that during the pandemic, of the largest cities, the average increase over this period was 42 percent, and in Philadelphia, the increase was actually 40 percent from 2019 to 2020. The part they don’t want to talk about is the red-state murder problem. If you look at the whole country during this time period, the murder rate is 40 percent higher in red states, which comes from a couple things. Number one, guns everywhere. And number two, an old-school approach to criminal justice, which is: Take the most incarcerated country in the world, which we are, and make it even more incarcerated. That approach has failed.

**LF:** One of the things that you have done is de prioritize the prosecution of nonviolent drug crimes. How does that affect public safety?

**LK:** We prosecute all types of drug dealing vigorously. What we have de-privitized is the prosecution and conviction of people who possess drugs. We don’t see value in making it harder for them to become employed on the basis of convictions for possession of a small amount of drugs.

**CDE:** How do you see a place like Philadelphia reducing violence and crime?

**LK:** One of the ironies of this impeachment effort upstate is these red-flag-waving Republicans who are all of a sudden worried about Philadelphians, even though they’ve done nothing to make us safer with reasonable gun regulation. They’ve done nothing to fund our public schools.

There’s no question that the pandemic correlates with spikes in gun violence all over the country and that it has affected us here. The manifestations of shutdowns, in education and constructive public-prevention-type activity, are severe, and the lesson is that we should have always been investing more heavily in that prevention. That path forward is a reconsideration of how valuable our limited prevention efforts were and a commitment that we’re going to invest more heavily in them. We’re not just going to have public education; we’re going to put the kind of money into it so that a Philadelphia student isn’t funded [at] barely 50 percent of what a student is in a suburb across the county line.

**SLR:** What do you think this impeachment process means for democracy and for other progressive DAs around the country?

**LK:** Their tactic now is not even so much to win elections, because they’re not winning elections. Their tactic is to undo those elections or to do things in between election cycles. What they’re doing in Philly with the district attorney’s office is something they’re doing around the country. They can’t beat George Gascón when he runs for DA in Los Angeles, because the people want him and they want his policies. So what do they do? They try a recall.

But they’re using other tactics in other places: bogus investigations like the one that they’re doing here in Philadelphia. Knowing that I have done nothing that is an impeachable offense—nothing criminal, nothing corrupt.

In Philly, this is a direct effort to erase the votes of hundreds of thousands of people, most of them Black and brown and young and broke. This is a gut punch at democracy, and it’s incredibly dangerous.
The Pink Ghetto

Democrats need to remember that women are half the population, not a special-interest group.

A bortion rights won big at the ballot box, and it’s a huge shock to certain opinion makers, who are wracking their brains to understand the results. “Joe Biden and Democrats have managed to resist the normal pattern of heavy midterm losses for a first-term President without a New Deal (1934), Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) or national solidarity after the 9/11 attack (2002). Shows the magnitude of this achievement,” Michael Beschloss tweeted to his 800,000 followers. A prominent presidential historian with many fancy affiliations who appears regularly on PBS, Beschloss somehow didn’t register the 50-year rollback of half the population’s human rights as a major event.

This is the problem of the pink ghetto of ideas, that niche category of human affairs known as “women’s issues,” whereby anything that women in particular (but not exclusively) might care about gets downgraded to “not serious” compared with important matters of state. (The term “pink ghetto” was originally coined to describe lower-paying jobs held primarily by women.) Rhetorically, invoking “women’s issues” is reminiscent of the pre-civil-rights use of the “Negro question”: It problematizes the group it’s supposed to define. Gender, like race, is a relational category that exists within a broader social context. But the nomenclature has a siloing effect that both marginalizes over 50 percent of the country and turns it into a monolith, while excluding men entirely. This also makes it low-status and therefore unworthy of meaningful recognition—consider the historical dearth of medical research on female bodies or the devaluing of women-dominated professions like teaching and nursing. Research even shows that when women enter male-dominated fields, the average pay goes down for everyone. Obviously, if women care about it, or if it pertains primarily to women, it must not matter that much. The pink ghetto phenomenon often manifests in political campaigns as “women for X candidate” events or efforts to capture the “women’s vote”—oversimplifications that ignore racial, class, and geographic differences.

But the fact is that women all over the nation understood the Dobbs decision as a nuclear event and reacted by registering to vote in record numbers, far outstripping new male voters. The CEO of TargetSmart, Tom Bonier—one of the few to publicly value this astonishing development—published detailed data about registration surges.

In Pennsylvania, where voters just elected Democrats for governor and the US Senate and flipped the state House of Representatives, 56 percent of newly registered voters were women. In states as varied as Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, and Wisconsin, newly registered voters were more likely to be young and/or female. Much of the news coverage qualified these surges with statements about how registration rates aren’t generally indicative of who actually votes or with conventional polling that showed economic issues outpacing “social” ones. That’s likely because newly registered and younger voters tend not to show up in the data that becomes the basis for public discussion, since they don’t yet have a voting history.

Pollsters typically target likely, or “prime,” voters, defined as people who reliably turn out for elections. Aside from the problems of sampling bias, the pink ghetto undercuts the cogent hard data that’s screaming for attention, like registration rates and actual results: Six weeks after Dobbs, Kansas voters killed a ballot referendum that would have banned abortion, thanks in part to newly registered voters, 70 percent of whom were women. It was a blowout victory, with 59 percent voting no, and for a time there was chatter about its being a bellwether for November. Then the hand-wringing started, and not just among the centrist punditry. Bernie Sanders piped up in an October op-ed in The Guardian titled “Democrats Shouldn’t Focus Only on Abortion in the Midterms. That’s a Mistake.” Countering a straw man hypothesis that party consultants were advising candidates to campaign on abortion to the exclusion of all else, Sanders advised a heightened focus on the economy: “I believe that if Democrats do not fight back on economic issues and present a strong pro-worker agenda, they could well be in the minority in both the House and the Senate next year.” Never mind that abortion is an economic issue and that the Democrats kept the Senate and only barely lost the House, mostly because of unrelated failures in deep-blue New York.

The pink ghetto popped up again when Donald Trump made his announcement for president. In a huge improvement over the last cycle, news outlets like NPR and The Washington Post provided context about Trump’s crimes and corruption. The Post even concluded its story with a laundry list of his offenses: “He has frequently made racist and antisemitic remarks, mocked people with disabilities and denigrated developing countries, bragged about sexual assault and paid hush
money to a porn star, praised dictators, declined to disavow extremists, inspired his supporters to resort to violence and defend white supremacists and Jan. 6 rioters.”

In the six years since the Access Hollywood tape came out, more than two dozen women have detailed various sexual abuses by the former president, including E. Jean Carroll, who is suing him for rape under New York’s Adult Survivors Act. Carroll is a longtime advice columnist for Elle, a women’s magazine that covers fashion and beauty—i.e., “not serious” issues. Although some of these women’s stories have been discussed widely in stand-alone articles, general political coverage has routinely failed to note the sheer number of them. I’ve written extensively about these issues over the years, and I didn’t notice the omission until Jill Filipovic pointed it out on Twitter.

The postelection message is clear: Democrats should work to put abortion on the ballot in more states. Republicans have revealed their whole brutal plan to strip women of their humanity, and voters from Kentucky to Michigan to Montana to Vermont rejected it. News outlets have a critical role to play in examining why, much the same way they dispatched reporters to diners to interview white people about why they voted for Trump. Or we can keep treating women like a special-interest group stuck in the pink ghetto.

Any reader who thinks the gloom that darkened October (“Democracy itself is on the ballot”) was nothing but a silly mistake should stop reading here. I believe those preliminary fears were justified; that the Democrats have gotten American culture wrong for several years now; and that their lucky escape in November was owing mainly to the choice of untenable candidates by the rival party—a party still cowed by Donald Trump, who never had much interest in politics and who carried his repulsive election-denial program into Pennsylvania, Georgia, Michigan, and Arizona. Democrats ought to look again at the warnings they received in 2018 and 2020, since the likely effect of persisting in their errors could be read (even in 2022) in Ohio and Florida, and in the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Congressional Districts of Long Island. The final tally of the 2022 congressional races yielded the Democrats 47.8 percent of the popular vote, while the Republicans took 50.7 percent.

What has been hard for Democrats to realize is that they are no longer the party of the working class. Rather, they represent what John Stuart Mill called “the satisfied classes,” along with the needy, whom they patronize in return for votes. (Nancy Pelosi conceded as much when she pointed out that undocumented immigrants take the jobs nobody else wants.) Accordingly, the culture of the Democratic Party has the heft that goes with being the owners and proprietors of Silicon Valley, Hollywood, Wall Street, and a sizable share of the weapons industry, the major airlines, and professional sports. The satisfied classes, as Mill put it, “have the strongest reason possible for being satisfied with the government; they are the government.”

And yet the national majority the Democrats can now command adds up to 55 percent on a good day. They have no plan for dealing with the remaining 45 percent—only a small proportion of whom can be dismissed as conspiracy theorists, election deniers, and incurable cranks. A functioning democracy requires the consent, if not the votes, of a good deal more than half the country. How, then, will the 55 percent cope with disagreement on the following issues?

§ Immigration. The status of citizenship offers a sharp definition of the issue here. Our sense of what it means to be a citizen—the rights but also the concomitant duties and responsibilities—will affect any possible agreement about the openness or proper limits of immigration. To become US citizens, legal immigrants must pass a rigorous test on American history, laws, and institutions—a test many of the native-born would...
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certainly fail. Enormous pride attends this achievement, as anyone who has watched the ceremony will know. The current policy of poorly regulated immigration, which has overwhelmed border security, is hardly improved by the Biden administration’s very noticeable avoidance of the subject—this, in a year when Customs and Border Protection has made more than 2 million arrests at the southern border. The void of policy—the contrast between emollient statements from the administration and the pleas of local Democratic members of Congress like Henry Cuellar—cheapens the accomplishment of legal immigrants. The idea that their sentiments and votes are naturally bound to side with undocumented immigrants is itself a racist assumption.

§ Cultural identity. Many Asian Americans have long rebelled against the paternalist ethic that judges people by tribe or ancestral group rather than personal qualities; the North Carolina and Harvard college admissions cases, now before the Supreme Court, brought out the indignation that identity politics cannot help provoking in a society that values merit. Merit: the necessary qualification for the job you undertake—not to be confused with meritocracy, the bugbear of the cultural left. The shorter word denotes a recognition of demonstrated competence that is assigned to an individual and not an ascriptive group.

§ Majority rule and censorship. An idea gaining ground in left-wing circles is that enlightened majority rule may become the guiding principle of a true and unimpeded democracy. A Constitution reduced to an all-encompassing basis in popular sovereignty, with a considerably abridged Bill of Rights, appears to be envisaged here. No longer would the courts, the Electoral College, or the filibuster rule override the unexceptionable judgment of the 55 percent. Their leaders, from Harvard, The New York Times, Google, and Raytheon—in short, the people with the best ideas—would implement the best policies without obstruction by an outmoded minority of opinion. To expedite the process, the minority would be heard from less and less frequently in the mainstream media.

The familiar prop of the argument for majoritarian “good speech” against pluralistic free speech is the theory that words are violence. Once you grant this premise and see that questionable words, on a given occasion, embody a wrong idea, you will be led unavoidably to suppress the violence-bearing words, as well as the people who utter them. But the inconvenient truth of democratic liberty is that words have effects that are unpredictable for better or worse. To suppose otherwise is to take democracy off the ballot.

§ Climate change. Human survival—against the double peril of nuclear war and climate catastrophe—will be on every ballot for the next many election cycles. Here, if anywhere, a political and moral difference between the parties cannot be ignored; but Democrats have let the implementation outrun the explanation of their policy. By folding into climate-change reforms a host of “equity” measures, the Green New Deal only reinforced the suspicion that climate change itself was a chimera. Democrats will soon have to confront an inflexible reality, namely that this is not an issue the 55 percent can take on unassisted. Indeed, it will require a kind of international collaboration for which the world’s sole superpower has done little to prepare itself over the last 30 years. Not war but peace is a necessary condition of such collaboration. Meanwhile, with bipartisan unity on this point almost uniquely, the United States remains the world’s leading exporter of weapons and wars.
Ticket to Deride

BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

Leading musical act is attacking Ticketmaster. Condemning the company’s high fees and poor service, they are trying to mobilize their angry fans to force the government to end the ticketing giant’s dominance. The battleground is a highly anticipated tour with big money at stake. But the musician isn’t Taylor Swift, and it’s not happening now. It’s the grunge band Pearl Jam, and the year is 1994. The group wanted to keep ticket prices from rising above $20 (about $40 in today’s dollars), and that was impossible with Ticketmaster’s extra charges.

Whether it’s the musical trends (house) or the fashion statements (Doc Martens), the 1990s have been back in style for several years now. So it’s only fitting that Ticketmaster, the target of one of the most important antitrust fights of that period, is making headlines again. Today the company is even bigger than it was in the ’90s—but so too is the opportunity for change.

People have long been concerned about the power of Ticketmaster. As Stone Gossard and Jeff Ament of Pearl Jam explained before Congress in 1994, musicians have little choice but to use Ticketmaster because it “has exclusive contracts with most major venues for concerts and with almost all significant promoters of concerts,” so that “if you play any of these venues or if you deal with these promoters, Ticketmaster will claim that its contracts give it the exclusive right to distribute tickets for your concert.” Since it was “locking up all of the suitable venues and promoters,” the company “thwarted competition and left most bands without any meaningful alternative for distributing tickets.” Pearl Jam wanted antitrust enforcement against Ticketmaster, but that effort, like their attempt to tour for their 1993 album Vs. outside the company’s control, failed.

Today Ticketmaster controls even more of the music and entertainment industries than it did then. In 2010, the company merged with Live Nation, which owns concert venues and manages leading artists. This combination of ticketing and promotion enables a very specific kind of market abuse: Live Nation can retaliate against venues that don’t use Ticketmaster. The company can, as analysts from the American Economic Liberties Project described it, condition “the availability of its performers to independent venues on those venues using Ticketmaster’s ticketing services.”

When the merger was being approved, the Department of Justice understood the potential for abuse, and it required Live Nation to enter into a 10-year consent decree not to pressure venues in this manner. But the company, as many predicted, often ignored its own promises, and the DOJ extended the decree by five and a half more years. As it found in 2019, “Live Nation repeatedly and over the course of several years engaged in conduct that, in the Department’s view, violated” the prohibition on “retaliating against concert venues for using another ticketing company.”

That brings us to today. We know that one symptom of excessive market power is technological and innovative backwardness. There’s no reason to improve one’s products when you have the market locked down. It’s telling that as technology has revolutionized everything and brought down costs for services over the past decades, this corner of our economy has remained stagnant and far too profitable for owners. As the American Economic Liberties Project pointed out, “Tickets are expensive, and the added service charges can double the final price. Direct ticket sales for popular concerts are often sold out within minutes, but then they are somehow available secondhand for over 50 percent more than the original price. Simply put, Ticketmaster provides bad service at outrageous prices.”

But because the company’s Kafkaesque registration process to purchase tickets for Taylor Swift’s upcoming Eras Tour largely ended up benefiting scalpers and bots trading on Ticketmaster’s own secondary platforms, Live Nation may finally have created a PR nightmare from which it won’t be able to save itself by bullying businesses. The New York Times recently reported that the DOJ was again investigating the company. It’s clear that Live Nation isn’t following the pledges it made. Rather than try to nudge the company to act correctly through incentives, it’s time to reverse the merger and break up the Live Nation–Ticketmaster behemoth.

Mike Konczal
In his book *The Nineties*, the culture critic Chuck Klosterman neatly articulates this view of the era. “It was perhaps the last period in American history when personal and political engagement was still viewed as optional,” he argues. “Many of the polarizing issues that dominate contemporary discourse were already in play, but ensconced as thought experiments in academic circles.”

Klosterman’s proviso is an effective rebuke to his own argument. The centrist consensus might have been dominant, but it met with major challenges from the left, the center, and the right well beyond the precincts of academia (where, to be sure, figures like Judith Butler were preparing the ground for a major shift in thinking on gender). On the left, ACT UP used direct action to confront the bipartisan complacency on AIDS, while the environmental and labor protesters who disrupted the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle proved that many people were ready to take to the streets to oppose globalization. In the political center, Ross Perot’s presidential runs in 1992 and 1996 opened space for a new politics of discontent that blended conservative concerns about deficit spending with opposition to NAFTA and a free-floating anger at the bipartisan political elite.

But it was on the right that perhaps the most lasting political legacy of the 1990s would be felt. As the Vanderbilt Clintonian centrist utopia, presiding over a stock market boom, a new push for the globalization of trade, and a renewal of American hegemony under the banner of liberal humanitarianism and the “responsibility to protect.”

The very fact that the major domestic political crisis of Clinton’s presidency was an impeachment over extramarital fellatio speaks to the fundamentally trivial politics of the decade. (There’s no need to credit the transparent GOP talking point that Clinton was impeached over a violation of the rule of law.) If *Seinfeld*, the quintessential 1990s TV program, was “about nothing,” then the Clinton era offered a politics about nothing much.

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*Jeet Heer is a national affairs correspondent for The Nation.*

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University historian Nicole Hemmer demonstrates in her incisive and convention-challenging *Par-tisans: The Conservative Revolutionsaries Who Remade American Politics*, the decade of Bill Clinton was also the era of Patrick Buchanan. Buchanan ran for president three times in that period, twice competing for the Republican nomination (1992 and 1996) and once as the Reform Party candidate (2000). Although he never came close to winning, Buchanan belongs to the great American tradition of political losers who cast a longer shadow than many winners because they popularized ideas that were taken up later by more successful candidates—a pantheon that includes William Jennings Bryan, Barry Goldwater, and Jesse Jackson.

Even among those candidates who went on to lose big at the ballot box, Buchanan stands out as an odd figure. More a pundit than a politician, Buchanan had been a speechwriter and adviser to Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, in both capacities serving as a conduit between the administration and the hard right.

Buchananism was the bridge between Reaganism and Trumpism. More than anyone else, Buchanan signaled a change from the optimistic rhetoric of Reagan—whose racism was always carefully pitched in the form of deniable dog whistles—to a nativist and pessimistic message that openly embraced white Christian dominance. Reagan was supposed to be the Moses who led the American right out of the wilderness and into the promised land of political power. But a funny thing happened on the way to the milk and honey: Many on the right found Reagan less pleasing in practice than in theory.

It’s true that Reagan brought the right many gifts, including tax cuts for the rich, a massive military buildup for the hawks, and conservative judges to please the religious right. But despite these policy victories, the most passionate voices on the right felt they were losing the larger battle. A political pragmatist, Reagan never hesitated to trim his sails and compromise when necessary. He opened up negotiations with the Soviet Union after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. Though past victories in civil rights, feminism, and LGBTQ rights were being whittled away under his administration, it was nowhere near fast enough to please his base. On a fundamental level, the dream of the right was a cultural counterrevolution in which the legacy of the 1960s would be wiped out and America would return to the supposed tranquility of the Eisenhower era. But that was never a realistic dream: No matter how many Electoral College votes Reagan won, America kept becoming less white, women kept joining the workforce, African Americans continued to assert their rights as citizens, and more and more gays stepped out of the closet. Now that Reagan has been canonized as a conservative saint, popular memory has forgotten how angry much of the right was at him in the 1990s.

In 1982, Buchanan published a column decrying “the transformation of Ronald Reagan from a pivotal and revolutionary figure in American politics into a traditional, middle-of-the-road pragmatic Republican.” Buchanan would of course mute this criticism when he became White House communications director in 1985. But the sentiment never went away, even when it was left unspoken. Nor was Buchanan alone in voicing it. In 1985, Newt Gingrich, then a young congressman, insisted that Reagan’s planned meeting with Gorbachev was “the most dangerous summit for the West since Adolf Hitler met with Neville Chamberlain in 1938 in Munich.” As the Gipper tiptoed closer to an arms-control agreement, Howard Phillips, the founder of the Conservative Caucus, denounced him as “a useful idiot for Soviet propaganda.” Meanwhile, Hemmer notes, religious-right leaders like the televangelist Pat Robertson expressed “frustration” with Reagan because “on everything from school prayer to abortion, [he] said all the right things but achieved no real change.”

In 1987, Buchanan declared that “the greatest vacuum in American politics is to the right of Ronald Reagan.”

With the dawn of the 1990s—and Reagan’s disappearance from the political scene and descent into dementia—the momentum had arrived for the far right to launch a new push. Buchanan aimed to fill the vacuum he had identified—a project that also energized figures like Robertson, Gingrich, and a bevy of new right-wing members of Congress such as Helen Chenoweth, who became infamous for palling around with extremist militias. Robertson had already made a name for himself during his 1988 bid for the Republican presidential nomination. He lost to George H.W. Bush but did well enough to scare the GOP elite, which gained a new awareness of how strong the religious right was becoming. Gingrich, elected House minority whip in 1989, was the head of a new cohort of congressional Republicans who rejected what they saw as their party’s too easy cooperation with the Democrats. A master of demagogic attacks on real and alleged Democratic Party corruption, Gingrich rode popular anger at the political system to victory in the 1994 midterm elections and his own elevation to speaker of the House—a political journey that culminated in his push to impeach Clinton (a controversial move that lost the Republicans seats in the 1998 midterms and cost Gingrich the speakership).

What did this politics to the right of Reagan look like? On a theoretical level, it meant breaking with Reaganism on foreign policy, trade, and immigration. Reagan, whose thinking on politics owed much to the “fusionist” conservatism that was being developed in William F. Buckley’s *National Review* during the early Cold War, believed that the United States, in order to fight communism, had to be the cornerstone of international alliances like NATO, that it had to push for global trade...
agreements, and that it should be open to immigration (which would enrich the country with cheap, hard-working labor).

The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 proved a boon to those on the right who were already questioning whether prioritizing the Cold War still made sense. Circulating around small magazines like Chronicles and tiny think tanks like the Mises Institute, these people called themselves “paleo-conservatives” or, sometimes, “paleolibertarians.” The major figures among them included the political theorist Paul Gottfried, the polemical journalist Samuel T. Francis, and the anarcho-capitalist economist Murray Rothbard.

The paleoconservative argument was a simple one: If the Soviet Union was no longer a threat, did the United States really need NATO, free trade, and immigrant labor? In order to achieve the hierarchical white Christian society that the right desired, wouldn’t it make sense to have a more unilateral foreign policy free of foreign entanglements, combined with protectionist measures to preserve manufacturing jobs and immigration restrictions to keep America as white as possible?

This new paleoconservative politics—a kind of inward-looking nationalism—eschewed Reagan’s sunny talk of America as a shining city upon a hill that attracted immigrants from around the world. In an important 1992 essay, Murray Rothbard hailed Buchanan for giving up the shibboleths of National Review fusionism and returning to the truths of the “Old Right” that had flourished in the 1930s and ’40s—the isolationist right of the America First movement. “Buchanan’s race for the presidency,” Rothbard argued, “has changed the face of the Right-wing…. He has created a new radical, or Hard Right, very much like the original Right before National Review.”

This new hard right would also forgo Reaganite dog whistles in favor of explicit appeals to racism. In a 1989 column titled “Old Klansman, New Republican,” Buchanan offered up the erstwhile Klansman David Duke as a potential political model. “Take a look at Duke’s portfolio of winning issues; and expropriate those not in conflict with GOP principles,” he wrote. These issues included lower taxes, the criminality of the “urban underclass,” and the threat of “reverse discrimination against white folks.”

This racist hard-right politics reflected broader cultural shifts in the 1990s. Figures like Charles Murray, Richard Herrnstein, Peter Brimelow, and Dinesh D’Souza won national audiences for racist arguments, whether framed in terms of pseudoscience (Murray and Herrnstein), nativism (Brimelow), or a contempt for Black culture (D’Souza).

It would be tempting to place the blame for this new racism, nativism, and hostility toward the poor solely on the right. But putative liberals and centrists eagerly joined in. One of the main lessons of Hemmer’s book is that the reigning centrist consensus helped to elevate the radical right. The New Republic infamously gave its imprimatur to Murray and Herrnstein’s The Bell Curve—which claimed that there were racial differences in intelligence—by excising it (albeit with some critical accompanying essays). Bill Clinton himself praised Murray’s previous book, Losing Ground, which wasn’t explicitly racist but was a vicious attack on the welfare state and the supposed low moral culture of the poor. “He did the country a great service,” Clinton said. In 1992, as Hemmer notes, Clinton “openly courted white voters with his own anti-Black dog whistles, criticizing civil rights leader Jesse Jackson at a conference for his Rainbow Coalition and traveling to a correctional facility near Stone Mountain, Ga., to deliver his tough-on-crime message in front of a phalanx of incarcerated men, nearly all of whom were Black.” Stone Mountain, of course, is the birthplace of the second Ku Klux Klan. Buchanan also made a pilgrimage to Stone Mountain that year.

Clinton’s praise of Murray and his trip to Stone Mountain were just two of the many ways he signaled that, as a centrist politician, he was willing to make overtures to right-wing voters. Clinton’s centrism was overdetermined, rooted partly in his slippery personal character (like a chameleon, he was quick to change his color to suit his environment) and partly in the historical juncture. The Democrats, chastened by having lost the last three presidential elections, were eager to placate an electorate they imagined as profoundly conservative. Labor unions, the historical bastion of economic liberalism inside the Democratic Party, had been battered by deindustrialization and by Reagan’s repressive policies. This left the Democrats looking for new sources of financial support in corporate America and among socially liberal but economically conservative suburban voters. After Clinton’s election, the Democrats got swamped in the 1994 midterms, and the GOP, under the incendiary congressional leadership of Gingrich, swept the House of Representatives. With the fire-breathing right in control of Congress, Clinton calculated that his political survival depended on triangulation: If he presented himself as the moderate alternative to both liberal Democrats and right-wing Republicans, he could regain control of the political conversation. Clinton’s triangulation strategy worked—but at the cost of further emboldening the right.

The reigning political dynamic of the 1990s was that, as Clinton moved the Democratic Party to the center, the space for Buchananite ideas to take hold in the GOP expanded. This was particularly evident with respect to immigration, as Buchanan became a pioneer in calling for a border fence.

In Hemmer’s account of the 1996 presidential campaign, GOP nominee Bob Dole “found his move to the center repeat-
Third Way to Nowhere

ACH AGE HAS ITS CLICHE,” THE HISTORIAN TONY JUDT DECLARED IN The New York Times in 1998. “Ours is the ‘third way.’” Judt’s pronouncement seems slightly strange from the vantage of 2022, when the “third way” has largely vanished from political discussion, even when it addresses the legacy of the ’90s.

Still, Judt’s comment captured how much the term loomed over everyday political discourse at the turn of the 21st century. It signaled the coming of age of a new generation that yearned to break free from the brittle orthodoxies of the old political order and develop a triangulation (to borrow another term from the ’90s centrist lexicon) of policy and rhetoric. This new formulation could purportedly resist both the laissez-faire orthodoxy of the right and the rigid statism of the left, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the long-standing hostilities of the Cold War. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair euphorically announced, third-way thinking was “not old left or new right, but a new center and center-left governing philosophy for the future.” In the late 1990s, Bill Clinton would join Blair and other European leaders at a series of international retreats that sought to solidify this project and create a new global political consensus.

But even as it gained cachet among this emerging class of centrist-minded visionaries, the third way drew skeptical appraisals from detractors both left and right, who justly assailed its ambiguity and lack of substance. The Economist derisively stated in 1998, “Trying to pin down an exact meaning is like wrestling an inflatable man. If you get a grip on one limb, all the hot air rushes to another.” Jeff Faux of the Economic Policy Institute likewise noted that while “Clinton and Blair are two of the most articulate politicians of the age…their definitions of the third way leave the observer without a clue as to what it means.”

Still, it would be a mistake to dismiss the third way as just another errant fad in a fickle decade. For all its imprecision and shallowness, the third way represented a genuine shift in thinking about the role of government and ideology. It emerged from the efforts of political thinkers and leaders across the West to move beyond the divisions of the Cold War and face the new challenges of globalization and the information age. Through it all, third-way thinkers and leaders insisted that they had also transcended the stingy and regressive neoliberalism of the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions. In reality, the third-way legacy clearly upgraded the policy assumptions of neoliberalism for a new era of information-age capitalism—and many of its central goals, from public-private economic partnerships to the lax regulation of the financial and tech sectors, continue to drive policy-making across the globe.

The third way also proved instrumental to another key post–Cold War undertaking: discrediting and marginalizing movement-based coalitions on the left, stigmatizing them as holdovers from the recently resolved—in capitalism’s favor—postwar clash of ideologies. In many ways, the most lasting legacy of the third way may well be its determination to consign the political left to the dustbin of history, setting the stage for the new millennial age of reaction and crisis.

THIS ISN’T A TURN OF EVENTS that was wholly foreseeable as part of the late-20th-century bid to reinvent modern liberalism. Indeed, that effort hadn’t initially presented itself as a new
post-ideological consensus; it was, rather, another in a long series of efforts to nudge the Democratic Party rightward. The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) spearheaded this effort after party strategists founded it in 1985 to reclaim the White House after Ronald Reagan’s landslide reelection. It was only after Clinton, the DLC’s chair in 1990 and ’91, won the presidency in 1992 that this new cohort of party leaders deemed themselves adherents of third-way politics.

Since the 1970s, centrist-minded Democrats had been trying to shift the political and ideological direction of the party in a more conservative direction. They still championed economic growth, but they distanced themselves from Great Society liberalism, which they caricatured as a disastrous lurch into statist bureaucracy and inefficiency. DLCers advanced this critique by targeting a stronghold of New Deal and Great Society reforms and politics: the industrial manufacturing economy and the labor unions that undergirded it.

Members of the DLC’s founding faction—who started calling themselves “New Democrats” once Clinton took the label up in his 1992 campaign—argued that the rise of a postindustrial economic order had shifted the focus of social progress. Democrats could now look to signature “New Economy” sectors like finance and tech to produce a new model of widely distributed global prosperity. They contended that the United States should harness the potential of the postindustrial digital economy with market-based policies and global trade accords, not only to create economic growth but also to deliver greater justice, increase individual opportunity, and expand human rights.

Meanwhile, in the realm of campaign politics, the DLC insisted that the Democratic Party had to modernize its base. Democrats could no longer afford to appear captive to the “special interest” groups that made up the old liberal governing coalition—and especially not organized labor. Al From, the former director of the House Democratic Caucus, helped found the DLC by bringing together a
group of white, male, and mostly Southern Democratic politicians who shared the explicit mission of devising a new electoral strategy, policy agenda, and ideology for the nation’s new political economy. The DLC’s goal was to introduce “fresh ideas” that would be distinct from those of both the “Old Guard Democrats and the Republicans,” as the DLC’s literature explained. Within the next decade, the movement’s leaders would dub this approach the “third way.”

In 1990, the DLC issued the New Orleans Declaration, a key component of the group’s bid to stage a “bloodless revolution” within the Democratic Party. Their strategy was to present a political program that would appeal to swing voters who had been drifting away from the Democrats ever since Reagan’s first campaign.

The declaration did not mince words. “The fundamental mission of the Democratic Party,” the document declared, “is to expand opportunity, not govern-ment,” because “economic growth is the prerequisite to expanding opportunity for everyone.” From there, it followed that the “free market, regulated in the public interest, is the best engine of general prosperity.”

The declaration laid out other key departures from liberal orthodoxy as the DLC understood it. It endorsed “equal opportunity, not equal outcomes”—a not-so-subtle rejection of affirmative action. It called for implementing social welfare programs that “bring the poor into the nation’s economic mainstream, not maintain them in dependence”—a clear swipe at general welfare programs like Aid to Families With Dependent Children, which conservative critics claimed discouraged work and saving. It argued that the purpose of the criminal justice system should be “preventing crime and punishing criminals, not explaining away their behavior”—a repudiation of the liberal plea to address the “root causes” of crime in material deprivation. The declaration also spoke of reinventing government by eliminating bureaucracy, empowering people, and increasing accountability—all phrases that would become watchwords of Clintonian policy-making.

Indeed, Clinton offered the ideal fusion of the DLC’s policy ideas and political strategy, and his appointment as chair marked an important turning point for the organization. But Clinton made it clear that he would not be a puppet or figurehead; he intended to play an active role in shaping the DLC’s message and policy proposals. At the DLC’s 1991 convention in Cleveland, he delivered a draft version of his 1992 stump speech, declaring that the Democrats had “to give people a new choice rooted in old values” and align behind a new political compact that “offers opportunity, demands responsibility, gives citizens a say, [and] provides them with responsive government.” The speech laid out clearly and concisely the messages and themes the DLC had been trying to promote for years. In fact, the DLC’s leaders decided that Clinton’s three key themes—“opportunity, responsibility, community”—so powerfully distilled the group’s philosophy that they made it their official slogan. That policy mantra would form the basis of Clinton’s presidential run, which he formally launched just a few months later.

A few enterprising politicians from Great Britain took note of Clinton’s rise and the DLC’s role in it. Soon after Clinton won in 1992, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and Jonathan Powell of the Labour Party flew to Washington to meet with From, who was leading Clinton’s domestic policy transition team. During the long meeting, Blair queried From on how influential the New Democratic themes and issues had been in reshaping the Democratic Party and winning the election. Since the early 1980s, when Labour had first fallen out of power, Blair had been developing his own inchoate third-way critique of the party, railing against its stubborn allegiance to the industrial-age past. He was keen to adapt the DLC’s stances on issues like private-sector growth and crime in order to modernize Labour’s policy-making. In the process, he also hoped to mimic the DLC’s success in courting new constituencies to extend the party’s appeal beyond its traditional working-class base into the affluent middle class.

The three-hour meeting deeply impressed Blair, who upon his election as Labour’s leader the next year rebranded the party as “New Labour” in order to distance it from its leftist, socialist, and union roots. Against the backdrop of a banner with the slogan “New Labour, New Britain,” Blair announced in his first speech as party leader that he wanted to rewrite an 80-year-old clause in Labour’s Constitution that committed the party to “the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange.” Blair’s redraft of the clause called for “a dynamic economy” built on the “enterprise of the market and the rigor of competition.” He announced as well that trade unions should expect “no favours from a Labour government”—a bold assertion indeed, given the party’s history.

Blair would also enthusiastically adopt the signature New Democrat ideas of opportunity, responsibility, and reinventing government. He framed them as an alternative to the heartless market neoliberalism of Margaret Thatcher and the now-discredited statism of the old Labour Party. As he made his pitch to become prime minister, he started calling this difference-trimming vision “the Third Way.” In the 1997 election, Blair and the Labour Party won by a decisive margin.

In November 1997, just a few months after moving into 10 Downing Street, Blair hosted a small transatlantic retreat for New Democrat and New Labour leaders at Chequers, the
British prime minister’s country manor. The group was tasked with developing a strategy to convert voters’ allegiances, as Blair feared the third-way movement would “win power but not the battle of ideas.” Hillary Clinton led the US delegation, which included From, Treasury Undersecretary Lawrence Summers, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Andrew Cuomo, and White House adviser Sidney Blumenthal. The British delegation included Gordon Brown (Blair’s successor as prime minister), Peter Mandelson (a trusted adviser to Blair), David Miliband (Blair’s head of policy), and the eminent sociologist Anthony Giddens.

Blair kicked off the gathering by waving his notes from his meeting with From almost five years earlier, showing where he had scribbled in large print “Opportunity, Responsibility, Community.” He went on to outline his understanding of these terms and their significance for the consolidation of third-way power across the Atlantic. As From recalled, Blair urged the gathering that “we need to brand our politics so we can occupy the territory.” It was an odd choice of words for the leader of one of the modern world’s most notorious territorial empires, but it captured Blair’s fierce determination to claim both the center and the left as proper domains of the savvy new third-way leadership cohort.

It was also a strange moment in what 1990s management consultants would call “synergy.” Blair was, after all, preaching the New Democrat gospel to the appreciative choir of Hillary Clinton, Al From, and the rest of the DLC.

“The Third Way should seem very familiar to New Democrats,” From would soon report back to DLC members. “It is our politics.” Until then, the DLC had erratically tried out the term—but now Blair had embraced it and essentially defined the group’s vision. In particular, he had clarified the DLC’s mandate as something more than just winning elections; it was committed to changing the core ideas underlying the Democratic Party’s agenda. An excited From returned from Chequers eager to launch the project Blair had outlined.

During the late 1990s, Blair proved to be the most enthusiastic promoter of the DLC’s philosophy and policy agenda. In his first years in office, he implemented a series of initiatives right out of the DLC’s “reinventing government” playbook. He arranged to contract out essential public services such housing, education, and the National Health Service to private-sector brokers. He also consolidated Britain’s regulatory regime. He would go on to enact programs like a children’s savings trust (or “baby bond”), which gave every child a small investment fund and had long been a pet idea of the DLC. Yet he was always careful to frame these policy reforms as more than just an extension of Margaret Thatcher’s privatizing neoliberal regime.

Blair’s approach didn’t win everyone over. Many British citizens resisted what they saw as an off-the-rack plan to Americanize British politics. Labour Party die-hards in particular chafed at Blair’s efforts to emulate a country with such rapidly increasing socioeconomic inequality. And a growing chorus of observers questioned whether the third way was actually all that new. Others deemed it “warmed-over neoliberalism” or, more pointedly, “Thatcherism with a human face.” Still others assailed third-way politics for its lack of depth and its refusal to stand for much of anything; they complained that its partisans defined themselves by what they weren’t rather than what they were.

Still, Blair and the third-way movement in Britain gained a good deal of legitimacy in 1998, when Anthony Giddens published The Third Way, a tract that sought to provide theoretical underpinnings to Blair’s rhetoric while also synthesizing the past generation’s effort to pull Labour out of its industrial-age posture of militancy. Giddens claimed that the term was valuable as a “framework of thinking and policy-making that seeks to adapt social democracy to a world which has changed fundamentally over the past two or three decades.” He contended that the aim of third-way politics “should be to help citizens pilot their way through the major revolutions of our time: globalization, transformations in personal life and our relationship to nature.” Giddens stressed that social democrats should “take a new look at the political centre,” but he also suggested that this center shouldn’t be regarded as empty of substance or as another term for milquetoast moderation. Instead, he argued, British politics should pivot on a “radical centre” that focused on “radical solutions” to meet the problems of the age. Blair would embrace this oxymoronic framing with a characteristically exultant gloss: “Our center is a dynamic center. It’s not the soggy center. It’s not just the lowest common denominator between left and right.... And I truly believe that it offers a new, different, radical, and better way forward for politics in the 21st century.”

Overblown rhetoric aside, it did appear that third-way thinking was migrating beyond the axis of Anglo-American power into the heart of continental European politics. When Germany’s prime minister, Gerhard Schröder, announced his own allegiance to the third-way project, its backers thought they were on track to forge a new global political order. Just before he won the 1998 election in Germany, Schröder—who espoused what he called the “new middle” in the reunited German republic—joined Blair in releasing a statement titled “Europe: The Third Way / Die Neue Mitte.” It drew on Giddens’s work, citing the need to modernize “social democracy” in order to meet “the challenges of the 21st century” and...
The WTO protests in Seattle brought a crucial point into sharp focus: The third way was never a genuine popular movement.

The political science scholar Curtis Atkins has observed, “The replacement of long-standing left commitments to equality, economic security, and solidarity represented a thorough ideological repudiation of the foundations of social democracy.”

Stateside, the DLC and the Clinton administration were preparing to make a similar move. Echoing Blair, Al From recognized that the international embrace of the third way could help them “occupy the territory” of the entire Democratic Party. In the summer of 1998, following up on the Chequers retreat, Hillary Clinton hosted a summit of sorts between representatives of the DLC and groups on the left, including the staff of *The American Prospect*, fellows at the Economic Policy Institute, and AFL-CIO head John Sweeney. The event was less an effort to find common ground than an attempt to recruit these skeptics to the third-way project. It brought home an increasingly apparent truth of the Democrats’ institutional realignment: The claim to represent the center-left was largely a ploy by the center to overpower and subsume the left.

The New Democrats’ appropriation of the term “progressive” was part of this strategy as well. In the late 1990s, From began calling the third way the “worldwide brand name for progressive politics for the Information Age.” By describing the third way as “progressive,” the New Democrats ensured that the left lacked a key term to define its own politics. It meant that groups on the left had little room to create meaningful dissent from the third way or the agenda it represented. Robert Reich, who was freer to speak his mind after resigning as Clinton’s labor secretary, observed in an interview with *The Nation’s* David Corn that if the third way did not gain more substance, it would “leave the progressive left in tatters and do little to rectify the social injustices experienced by modern capitalism.” An even bigger skeptic might think that was the strategy all along.

In contrast to such PR boilerplate, D’Alema, a former activist in the Italian Communist Party, delivered a far more incisive appraisal: “The third way is the result of a crisis of ideologies,” he argued, “not the victory of ideologies.” The remark fell flat before the Press Club crowd; the main run of the discussion followed the appointed rounds of end-of-history speculation. At most, the realignment of Western liberalism would give the left a token seat at the table, but not much of a real voice.

Third-way leaders held a series of events between 1997 and 2001, all ostensibly forums on the idea of “progressive governance.” In reality, they were mostly Blairite exercises in branding. The effort peaked at an opulent Renaissance palace in Florence, Italy, in November 1999. At this two-day summit, Clinton and Blair discussed the virtues of global trade and information technology in realizing third-way ideals of opportunity. Clinton stressed how companies like eBay offered “opportunities for people who don’t have access to traditional jobs to make money.”

Just a week after the Florence conference, the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle began. The protests’ organizers focused on trade bodies like the WTO and the International Monetary Fund, but the large demonstrations reflected a broader left-populist frustration with a global governing regime founded on closed-door conversations among elite world leaders.

The contrast between the protests and the Florence summit brought a crucial point into sharp focus: Unlike the WTO protests, the third way was never a genuine popular movement. Indeed, it tended to thrive mostly as a means of countermanding and discrediting popular movements from the left, such as Germany’s Green movement, the Bennite radicals aligned with the British Labour party, and the Rainbow Coalition that galvanized behind Jesse Jackson’s presidential runs in 1984 and 1988. Now that the third way’s brand of trade-based global capitalism was drawing mounting protests, it became clear that whatever residual support existed for the third-way vision was quickly fading.

After Florence, third-way proponents staged a few more forums and managed to incorporate leaders from Brazil, New Zealand, and South Africa in their efforts. But these gatherings felt increasingly hollow and lacked the sense of urgency that From, Clinton, and Blair had brought to the project. The debacle of the 2000 election in the United States, followed by the trauma of 9/11, made the notion...
of a globalized center-left political consensus very much a dead letter. In the ensuing years, most New Labourites and New Democrats quietly dropped the “new,” since their ideas no longer seemed that fresh. History wasn’t ending, and the apostles of information-age global capitalism were not the fearless and innovative vanguardists of their fond imaginings; instead, they represented a status quo wracked with deepening inequality, bitter sociocultural divisions, and resurgent right-wing nationalism.

Still, the next two decades saw efforts to revive the flagging faith, including the 2005 launch of Third Way, a D.C.-based think tank that would take up the standard after the DLC dissolved in 2011. In 2016, Global Progress, an offshoot of the lavishly resourced liberal think tank the Center for American Progress, kicked off with a reunion tour of sorts, bringing together the foremost promoters of the third way, including Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. Blair claimed that the notion was more relevant than ever—especially in Europe, which was still digging itself out from the 2008 economic meltdown. There, he explained, the right was calling for cruel austerity measures and the “old left” was resisting any structural reform. Clinton argued that a global polity would overcome “the economic inequality and divisive identity-based politics” plaguing much of the world. Yet these messages fell largely on deaf ears. By 2016, the left in both the United States and Britain was on the rise—as was a new populist right. Few had much interest in the technocratic and managerial bromides proffered by Blair and Clinton, which revealed a stolid refusal to engage the core issues of the moment—especially inequality and advancing political polarization.

In his 1998 critique of the third way, Tony Judt warned that unless its adherents found a serious social vision that unified a fragmenting public sphere around a true common good, they would “open a vacuum in public life, a space that will be filled by third way-ers of the older sort, whose populist and xenophobic prescriptions are already attracting interest.” But an equally troubling legacy of the third way was its foreclosure of viable left responses to the crises wrought by a newly globalized information-age capitalism. Today, the left in the United States has finally wrested control of the term “progressive” back from the New Democrats, and across the West, revived social movements are pushing to reclaim and redeem the neglected promise of social democracy. However, the biggest struggles of our new age of global inequality would be far less forbidding if so many leading lights in the Western liberal tradition hadn’t spent the past three decades dismissing them as the relics of an obsolete industrial-age political order.

(continued from page 15)
ed by Bill Clinton, who kept shifting to the right. In 1996, Republicans in Congress struck a number of deals with the administration, not only piling up victories for Clinton as he ran for reelection but boxing Dole in. The 1996 immigration bill made that clear: Clinton’s willingness to take a hard line on undocumented migrants meant that Dole, to differentiate himself, grabbed onto an amendment barring undocumented children from attending public schools.” Clinton also pushed a welfare reform program that imposed new requirements on recipients and dramatically curtailed benefits, fulfilling a campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it”; a free-trade program that bolstered corporate power; and a crime bill that escalated mass incarceration. With Democrats like Clinton in power, there was hardly a need for the Republicans to push conservative policies.

Clinton wasn’t the only centrist who inadvertently fueled the far right; the mainstream media also played a role. Pat Buchanan, like Pat Robertson and Ross Perot, belonged to a new species of presidential candidate: media stars with no political experience. Buchanan was a national figure because of his role as cohost of CNN’s Crossfire and his appearances on The McLaughlin Group; Robertson was the host of the long-running 700 Club; and Perot rocketed to fame thanks to his appearances on Larry King’s CNN talk show. Other rabble-rousers and provocateurs, such as Laura Ingraham and Ann Coulter, were also elevated once cable news became a 24/7 fixture after the Gulf War in 1991. And Fox News, which only started in 1996, wasn’t the main driver of this change. Rather, CNN, MSNBC, and Comedy Central were the real innovators in fusing entertainment with politics.

Buchanan’s manifest bigotry was long tolerated because he was good television and, for his colleagues in the elite media, a charming companion. As Washington Post columnist David Broder, the very Nestor of centrist conventional wisdom, noted in 1995, “He has been ‘Pat’ to so many of us who have known him since he was a traveling valet and speechwriter for Richard Nixon in 1966—the combative but personally congenial guy who was writing columns, or doing TV or flacking for Nixon or Agnew or Reagan—that it’s hard to imagine him as president.” For this reason, Broder concluded, the media treated Buchanan “lightly.”

Two decades later, another charismatic TV personality would take up Buchanan’s politics and be similarly treated with indulgence by the mainstream media because he was good for ratings and hard to imagine as president.

In a 2015 Washington Post interview, Buchanan anointed Donald Trump as his political heir. “On building a fence to secure the border with Mexico, an end to trade deals like NAFTA, GATT, and [most favored nation status] for China, and staying out of unwise and unnecessary wars,” he noted, “these are the issues I ran on in 1992 and 1996 in the Republican primaries and as Reform Party candidate in 2000.” This was no idle boast on Buchanan’s part: The embrace of globalism by the bipartisan centrist elite had created the space for Trump. “What Trump has today,” he continued, “is conclusive evidence to prove that what some of us warned about in the 1990s has come to pass. From 2000 to 2010, the U.S. lost 55,000 factories and 6 million manufacturing jobs.”

Buchanan laid the groundwork for Trump, not just in making trade an issue but also in terms of the racist demagoguery and the fusion of TV celebrity with politics. In forging this new politics, both Buchanan and Trump profited from the bipartisan centrist elite turning its back on American workers. That’s the true legacy of the 1990s.
To many, the cover is recognizable even at a distance: The lower half of a youthful, feminine face is darkened on one side by a purple shadow. The other cheek and jawline are lit up in neon pink. We don’t see the woman’s eyes, but her lips are pursed and painted red. They’re seductive—the focal point—but still more subtly set than any performative facial expression we see on social media these days. Those who have read and reread The Coldest Winter Ever know that this partly obscured face beckons readers into the story of Winter Santiaga, the teenage daughter of a Brooklyn drug kingpin and the character at the heart of Sister Souljah’s 1999 novel, a runaway success that would dramatize the hard-knock lives of New Yorkers immersed in the city’s drug culture for readers all over the world.

The book was published in April of that year with an initial print run of 30,000 copies, an optimistic bet on a debut novel from a Black author. But Souljah’s foray into fiction—she’d written a memoir in 1994—was an immediate success. The Black-owned bookstores, street vendors, and Barnes & Noble outposts where people flocked to buy their copies couldn’t keep up with the demand. My aunt, then an administrator at a Cincinnati social service agency, gave me a copy with her strong endorsement. The book was all the rage among her group of friends, other middle-aged, middle- and working-class Black women. More than two decades later, The Coldest Winter Ever has sold more than 1 million copies—and it’s easy to see why. The book is soapy and sexy, bringing readers deep into Winter’s world, carrying them along on her descent from pampered princess to inmate, yet another casualty of the War on Drugs. Mixed in with the trashy plot twists is a good dose of social and emotional realism. Readers get every designer brand and luxury car (down to the make and model) that Winter believes is her birthright. But we also get a critique of mandatory minimum sentencing, foster care, and the various institutions the girl must navigate once she’s forced to fend for herself.

Coldest is a cautionary tale about hustling, a novel that Black readers—particularly Black women and girls—hailed as an instant classic and propelled to the top of bestseller lists. It tells the story of a family at the top of the hierarchy in the Brooklyn projects where Winter's parents, Ricky and Lana Santiaga, are raising the teenager and her three younger sisters. Ricky moves the family to the suburbs in an effort to stay safe and hide their considerable wealth from the hungry up-and-coming gangsters who aspire to take his place. But a series of tragedies soon befalls the family, beginning with a violent attack on Lana and Ricky’s subsequent arrest and prosecution for drug-related crimes.

Souljah describes Winter’s physical beauty and sexual prowess in detail. The desire she elicits in the boys and men around her becomes Winter’s primary tool to get what she wants and, eventually, as her family falls apart, what she needs. Midnight, a rising star in her father’s organization, is the man Winter hopes to marry someday.
but he is repelled by her immaturity and selfishness. The push and pull in their relationship—the imbalance between Winter's narcissism and shortsightedness and Midnight's commitment to strategy and foresight—provide much of the novel's tension.

By the book's end, Winter has been convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

But beyond the engaging story line is the matter of the book’s author. Seven years before the publication of Coldest, Sister Souljah made headlines for her comments about the uprisings following the brutal beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers and the verdict that cleared them of wrongdoing. At the time, Souljah was an activist and hip-hop artist who’d made a name for herself as a youth leader through her anti-apartheid organizing and her efforts in support of unhoused families. She was a member of Public Enemy, the rap group whose political commentary was a soundtrack to the late ’80s and early ’90s. Her solo album 360 Degrees of Power was released in the spring of 1992, just months before the events that would make her a household name.

But her comments about the LA riots were blasted by Bill Clinton, who was seeking to distance himself from Black radicalism as he campaigned for the presidency. Souljah was on television screens and magazine covers nationwide. Then, following a period of relative quiet, she burst back onto the scene with Coldest.

In the novel, she appears as herself, a minor character who offers commentary on the greed and consumerism that permeate Winter’s world and fuel her reckless actions. As a character, Souljah is a foil to Winter, a public figure whose rhetoric the teenager intermittently encounters and rejects. In a 2021 interview with the writer Demetria L. Lucas, Souljah said of writing herself into the novel, “The reason why The Coldest Winter Ever started off with Winter Santiago saying she hates Sister Souljah was so that I could distinguish her voice, her life, her experiences, from my own. I thought that that was a metaphor for real life anyway, because the popular people are like pop culture, they're like mainstream. And then the activist person is like, somebody who either gets ignored or who aggravates people because she reminds them of what we all should be responsible for.”

Today, Coldest is among the 100 “most-loved” books featured as part of PBS’s The Great American Read series and “a Bible for a generation of Black women,” said Joan Morgan, the program director of the Center for Black Visual Culture at NYU’s Institute of African American Affairs. At the time it was published, Morgan said, books that realistically portrayed the lives of members of the hip-hop generation were “being dismissed as street lit.” Traditionally, the publishing world had used this phrase to describe popular fiction from Black authors who wrote about crime, drugs, and violence. The first major success in this category was Iceberg Slim’s 1967 novel Pimp. But those books rarely had the focus on values and profound questions of morality that were central to Souljah’s work. With Coldest, Morgan said, “Souljah gave an elevated version [of that genre] on a legitimate press. It’s become part of the Black girl canon for the 1990s.”

By the time Coldest came out, the country had a decade’s worth of experience with hip-hop as a mainstream cultural force. The genre had cemented itself as the primary way Black and brown youth communicated their politics and perspectives to the wider world. Throughout much of the 1980s, white liberals and the Democratic establishment had largely turned a blind eye to incisive, leftist political critique from young Black messengers. By the early 1990s, with hip-hop moving into heavy rotation on radio and television (Yo! MTV Raps debuted in 1988), this had become impossible. Groups such as Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy addressed the ways that crack cocaine was ravaging Black communities and took up the pressing and infuriating issues of the day: In 1989, five Black and Latino teenagers had been convicted of raping a white woman while she jogged in Central Park. (All would later be exonerated after it was revealed that the police had forced them to make false confessions.) That same year, an unarmed Black 16-year-old named Yusuf Hawkins was killed in Brooklyn by a white mob. In 1991, a Korean shop owner shot and killed 15-year-old Latasha Harlins in South Central LA over a bottle of juice and, though convicted of the crime, served no jail time.

Hip-hop became “Black America’s CNN,” as Public Enemy front man Chuck D put it, and artists quoted and sampled the voices of Black activists and thinkers like Frances Cress Welsing, Dick Gregory, Louis Farrakhan, and Jesse Jackson in their songs. The message often called for self-reliance (Black separatism in the eyes of critics), indicted structural racism rather than focusing on white Americans’ stated good intentions, and represented a departure from the assimilationist goals of an earlier era. Major civil rights legislation had passed three decades earlier, and yet access to good schools, good jobs, and full democratic participation still felt out of reach for many Black people. And hip-hop had something to say about it.

Few people at the time had Souljah’s rhetorical skills, but in 1992, after she found herself in the crosshairs of Bill Clinton, then the governor of Arkansas and the Democratic Party’s rising star, she looked to new avenues of intellectual expression that would enable her to avoid censure and reach her intended audiences. The biography she includes on her website indicates the urgency she felt: “Before the political shutdown and attack on American 1st amendment rights, she was the young voice in NY radio that spoke to the hip-hop audience about politics, culture, business, and social organization. Many people attempt to silence, isolate,
interrupt or alter Sister Souljah’s powerful voice.” After Clinton made an example of her to advance his political career, Souljah gave the world Coldest as well as five subsequent novels built around the first book’s cast of characters. But the highly sought-after political commentator who had so unsettled the Democratic mainstream in the early ’90s had been sidelined.

The woman who became sister
Souljah was born Lisa Williamson in the Bronx in 1964, to parents who divorced when she was a child. In her 1994 memoir No Disrespect, she writes of moving to the projects with her mother and siblings and having to navigate a world filled with drugs, sexual harassment and assault, joblessness, and returning Vietnam veterans who struggled with mental health crises. The family eventually moved to Teaneck, N.J., where Souljah showed extraordinary academic talent. In high school, she excelled in “the skillful running of [her] mouth,” she writes. She was identified as gifted and attended a preparatory program at Cornell University before enrolling at Rutgers, where she earned a bachelor’s degree. Her organizing work put her in front of crowds, delivering keynotes at community groups’ events and offering analyses of education, police brutality, and Black—or “African,” as she would say—culture.

In May 1992, Souljah was quoted in The Washington Post describing the mentality of the people who rioted in LA: “I mean, if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?” Clinton, then campaigning in the Democratic primaries, seized on these words (which Souljah said had been taken out of context) during a speech at an event hosted by the Rainbow Coalition, the Rev. Jesse Jackson’s civil rights organization, which had featured Souljah as a speaker at an earlier event. Attempting to distance himself from a liberatory Black politics that he felt might endanger him at the polls, Clinton compared her to David Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan. With this false equivalence, Clinton helped propel himself to victory as a centrist by attempting to throw the 28-year-old Souljah into the dustbin of history.

By the time Souljah and her agent began looking for a home for her novel, something was shifting in the publishing industry. Prior to this period, writers of Black popular fiction either self-published or joined the roster at an independent Black-owned press. But the ’90s marked the first time that four Black women appeared on the New York Times bestseller list at once, when Terry McMillan, the author of the enormously successful Waiting to Exhale and other romance novels, joined Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou on the list. “Trade publishers jumped on the bandwagon and attempted to publish into this niche,” the industry veteran Tracy Sherrod wrote in a recent article in Publishers Weekly. Sherrod was an editor at Henry Holt & Company in 1998 when Souljah brought her an early draft of The Coldest Winter Ever. “The first time I read the manuscript, it made my heart race and the hairs on my body stand up,” Sherrod remembers. “The voice was so incredibly honest.” Sherrod wanted to acquire the book, but she immediately ran into problems.

Herself a young Black woman near the start of her career, Sherrod would witness the lasting effects of what came to be known as the “Sister Souljah moment.” “My publisher wouldn’t read the manuscript, because the head of publicity said that Souljah was racist. Apparently she believed that because of what Bill Clinton had done,” Sherrod told me. In response, she resigned and let the higher-ups know exactly why. “I felt like the only people who were being called ‘racist’ at that time were people of color, and I found that problematic.” Sherrod took a job at Pocket Books, then an imprint of Simon & Schuster, where editor Emily Bestler had recently acquired Souljah’s novel. There, she got to see The Coldest Winter Ever become the sensation she’d expected.

“Souljah changed the landscape of Black women’s fiction, because the characters that she put on the page were people that city centers were definitely starting to see, and households were experiencing the repercussions of the drug culture,” Sherrod said. “Souljah took us right into the mentality, the consumerism, [straight through] to incarceration and how this culture was destroying our families.”

While some readers focused on Coldest’s value as a cautionary tale, others reveled in the pleasure of reading about a complex Black girl antihero, a relatable protagonist who prioritizes her own pleasure and isn’t afraid to seduce and scheme, as Mia and Shawna of the HBO series Rap Sh!t would put it today.

The year Coldest was published, Simon & Schuster put out another book that would become an essential read of the late ’90s and early aughts: Joan Morgan’s When
Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down, a collection of essays in which Morgan explores gender, race, and the culture in which she came of age. Explaining why Coldest affected her deeply, Morgan echoes what many Black women say about their devotion to the novel: "There’s a lot of Winter Santiaga in a lot of us." She credits Souljah with creating a high-stakes world that felt to many readers like real life and creating a protagonist of great complexity and vulnerability.

"I have known and loved many a dude who is a drug dealer. I have loved many a dude who has done time," Morgan said of the parallels between her life and the protagonist’s. "What [Souljah] captures really well in the book is what the seductions of that life are and why you might choose it even if you might have other options."

Morgan remembers sitting on panels with Souljah in the ‘90s as they promoted their books, each sharing her take on what it was like to be a young Black woman and part of the hip-hop generation, and she witnessed Souljah’s transition from political firebrand to novelist. "This person who has been talking about structural racism and is so incredibly verses in American capitalism and these systems of oppression also had this very observant, artistic eye," she said. That commitment to interrogating oppressive social forces remained consistent from Souljah’s early ‘90s message to her debut novel later in the decade, but at least one thing had changed. Because she’d built Coldest around a young Black woman, and because the experiences of other Black women and girls are central to the book, Souljah was now seen as part of the canon of contemporary Black feminist thought. Previously, she had often been the sole woman in a sea of men advancing Black nationalistic and Afrocentric ideas. She had indicated a change in her focus in her 1994 memoir. "I am especially concerned with the African female in America, the ghetto girl whom nobody ever tells the definition of womanhood, or manhood for that matter," she writes in No Disrespect. "So she slips in and out of relationships, getting chopped up psychologically, spiritually, and sometimes even physically."

In 2010, the scholar Salamishah Tillet taught The Coldest Winter Ever as part of an English course at the University of Pennsylvania called “The Black Woman: Post–Civil Rights African-American Women’s Literature.” Souljah’s novel appeared on the syllabus alongside work by Black feminist writers like Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, and Audre Lorde. More than a decade after the book’s publication, Tillet’s students recognized Winter. Coldest offers a Black girl’s coming-of-age story that puts Winter in the same category as Celie in Walker’s The Color Purple or Pecola Breedlove in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, but whether Souljah’s novel is a feminist text is debatable, Tillet said. Winter is shallow, fickle, and brash and pays serious consequences for the choices she makes. Souljah doesn’t celebrate her character’s desire for sexual freedom and exploration. Instead, the author holds Winter up against a standard of respectability and illustrates all the ways she’s fallen short.

Like all the Black women I spoke to for this story, Tillet came to know of Sister Souljah before Coldest was published. She remembers the steady stream of events that put race and gender in the headlines during her senior year in high school: In October 1991, Anita Hill testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee after Clarence Thomas was nominated to the Supreme Court. In the spring of 1992, Los Angeles residents rebelled after a jury acquitted the officers who’d attacked Rodney King. In June, Clinton would pilory Souljah and then go on to win the presidency. The following year, he would nominate Lani Guinier, a Black University of Pennsylvania law professor, to head the Justice Department’s civil rights division, only to withdraw his support when her scholarship drew criticism from the right.

“Sister Souljah and Lani Guinier were both Black women who were sacrificed to put forth a more centrist Democratic agenda.”

—Salamishah Tillet, Rutgers University

"Sister Souljah and Lani Guinier were both Black women who were sacrificed to put forth a more centrist Democratic agenda."

Like all the Black women I spoke to for this story, Tillet came to know of Sister Souljah before Coldest was published. She remembers the steady stream of events that put race and
men, who have been written off or abandoned by white society," as Adam Serwer wrote in a 2018 Atlantic article about the organization's complex legacy. In the '90s, Farrakhan was denounced after making anti-Semitic comments, as were Ture and Jeffries. Souljah also had to answer to accusations of negatively characterizing Jewish people after she was reported to have used two stereotypically Jewish last names as a shorthand for her white critics during a 1990 talk at Columbia. Leaders whose organizing efforts were steeped in messages of Black self-reliance and Afrocentrism frequently faced accusations, sometimes valid, of anti-Semitism and xenophobia. However, unlike Farrakhan or Jeffries, the 1990 incident was the only such accusation I found aimed at Souljah.

Like Sherrod, Clemente saw a pattern in who got called “racist” by mainstream institutions. For her, Souljah was a truth teller who was not inclined to mince words. When Clemente, now a PhD candidate in Afro-American studies at UMass Amherst, read Souljah's notorious quote in The Washington Post, she heard her asking a different question altogether: “Why do we keep dealing with the symptom and not what created the symptom?” Clemente asked rhetorically when we spoke. “That’s what she was saying. Some of us were saying it.”

In 1992, Clemente had been disgusted by a sunglasses-clad Clinton playing saxophone on The Arsenio Hall Show and by the media's breathlessness over his popularity with Black voters. By 1996, she was well aware of the 1994 crime bill Clinton had signed into law and had no interest in supporting his reelection. “He said that shit about Sister Souljah,” she told me, describing her thought process at the time. “I’m not voting for his moment, so he really Willie Hortoned her,” Mayo said. “I just miss her.”

To my e-mail requesting an interview, she didn’t make herself available. I imagine this reflects a desire to put certain parts of the past behind her. In a March 2021 interview in The Atlantic, she expressed a need to move on from Clinton's misrepresentation of her position. “If you obsess over that...you’re losing your ability to build, to connect and do things with other people,” she said. “I try not to live my life...in reaction to racism.” But people I interviewed expressed nostalgia for the '90s icon's presence in public life. “I miss her grace. I miss her strength. I miss her passion. I miss that commanding-ass voice,” Joan Morgan said. “I just miss her.”

“I miss her grace. I miss her strength. I miss her passion. I miss that commanding-ass voice. I just miss her.” —Joan Morgan, NYU’s Center for Black Visual Culture

Sister Souljah is no longer the incisive orator who had Americans glued to their TV screens 30 years ago, but she hasn’t disappeared. She’s been writing sequels to Coldest at a steady pace since 1999. In 2021, she published Life After Death, her sixth novel, which picks up Winter’s story as her prison sentence comes to a close.

Kierna Mayo, executive editor at One World, an imprint of Random House, understands the yearning that many who experienced Souljah in the early '90s still feel. Mayo’s own introduction to Souljah came in the late 1980s, when she attended a Harlem event where the activist was a featured speaker. “I don’t recall a time before and maybe not since seeing a young girl take to a podium and shut shit down,” Mayo said. “I get goose bumps even now thinking about it.” Souljah would have been in her 20s at the time. “With that baby face and the ponytail and the perfect skin and the total hip-hop gear, she was giving Black youth all day,” Mayo recalled. But it wasn’t just the look that was captivating. Souljah’s demand for Black self-determination energized the crowd. Mayo remembers the event being at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, which meant that Souljah’s presence as a young woman on the dais was even more unusual. In so many Black institutions, women were not often the ones on the mic. But there, even Black men and elders who were standard-bearers of the old guard honored her wisdom. Souljah spoke truth not just to power, Mayo told me, “but to us.”

When Clinton came for Souljah in 1992, Mayo rushed to her defense. For the new hip-hop magazine The Source, she wrote an editorial emphasizing Souljah’s ardent love for Black people and arguing that Clinton had tried to turn a legitimate grassroots leader into a bogeyman. “Clinton was looking for his moment, so he really Willie Hortoned her,” Mayo said. She remembers being incensed that mainstream America would come to know Souljah through Clinton’s misrepresentation of her ideas. Mayo felt a similar disconnect in 1999, when Coldest hit the shelves to rave reviews. Even the complex world Souljah had created around Winter wasn’t a sufficient stand-in for the righteous anger the author herself had displayed just years before. “It was hard for me to make space for what I saw as two Souljahs,” Mayo said, noting that this was in a time before the framework of intersectionality had fully seeped into the consciousness of Gen-X women, allowing them to claim all aspects of their identities. “It felt not right that this is the way you’re coming to know her, just through Coldest Winter. It was still a fraction of the full.”
Gender

Breaking Down the Binary

A grand performance: The author (right) and her twin sister in 1990, the year Gender Trouble was published.

How a book by philosopher Judith Butler transformed the conversation around gender and queerness.

by Naomi Gordon-Loebl
S

pring of 1990 found me not yet 3 years old, but already clear about who I was—in some ways. I refused dresses, wanted my hair cut short, liked to run around with no shirt on, and requested to be called Jason. My parents embraced these choices and, crucially, did not shame me for them. Some 30-plus years later, I am still basically Jason: I get a skin fade every two weeks, I haven’t worn a dress since I was 13, and now that I’ve had top surgery, I take my shirt off every chance I get.

The same spring that I was running around my parents’ backyard in Brooklyn with no shirt on, a 34-year-old philosopher at Johns Hopkins University published a book that would transform the conversation around gender and queerness. That philosopher was Judith Butler, and the book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, sold more than 100,000 copies, was translated into more than a dozen languages, and continues to be taught in college classrooms across the United States. It catapulted Butler to international fame—as *The Cut* reported in 2016, the scholar’s office at the University of California, Berkeley, was eventually moved to the art history department to escape the crowds—and introduced new ways of thinking about gender, not just to academic discourse but to popular culture.

It would be impossible to do justice in a single paragraph to a 250-plus-page text that is famously dense and complex. One also suspects that Butler, a staunch critic of anti-intellectualism, might object to the very concept of such reductionism. Nonetheless, a layperson’s summation of the book might go something like this: *Gender Trouble*, whose title is in part a reference to the 1974 John Waters film *Female Trouble*, attempts to complicate our notions of gender—what it is and where it comes from. Written as an intervention into the heterosexism then dominant in feminist theory, the book begins by questioning the idea that the identity at the core of feminism, “woman,” is a fixed category. Gender, Butler argues, is not some internal truth, some irrefutable fact of our existence, but rather a performance that we produce through “stylized repetition.” In other words, gender is not something that we are, but something that we do. Further, Butler points out that “woman” is a category that has been handed down and defined by the very power structure (patriarchy) that feminism hopes to disrupt—and thus, Butler suggests, a problematic foundation on which to build a movement.

The above may read as a bit humdrum in 2022 (“Gender is a construct? You don’t say!”), but it was anything but controversial in 1990. It helps to set the stage: In 1990, Laverne Cox, Elliot Page, and Caitlyn Jenner were not household names. There was no *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and even *Boys Don’t Cry*, with all its problems, was nearly a decade away from hitting theaters. Matthew Shepard was alive. Ellen DeGeneres, Rosie O’Donnell, and George Michael were in the closet. And sodomy was still illegal in parts of the United States, to say nothing of gay marriage or gay adoption.

This is not to say that queer and trans people were not very actively living radical, gender-fucking, status-quo-upheaving lives at the time, as we always have been. In 1990, the ballroom scene was thriving in cities across the United States, lesbians were publishing erotica in the pioneering magazine *On Our Backs*, and artists like Marlon Riggs and David Wojnarowicz were making work that challenged every heterosexism definition of propriety in existence. But the world—and the discourse—into which *Gender Trouble* emerged was unquestionably a different one, and the assertion that the very concept of womanhood was up for debate was a bombshell. *Gender Trouble* was celebrated in some circles, but it also drew sharp critiques from thinkers ranging from the feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum to the libertarian provocateur Camille Paglia. Butler’s work was destabilizing to the feminist movement, some critics argued. How could feminists organize without a shared identity? Others questioned the accessibility of Butler’s prose: “It is difficult to come to grips with Butler’s ideas,” Nussbaum wrote in *The New Republic* in 1999, “because it is difficult to figure out what they are.”

Still, the book’s ideas spread through academic and nonacademic communities alike. By 2007, when *Gender Trouble* landed in my hands in a classroom at the University of Michigan, its basic tenets, while not without their dissenters, were firmly embedded in feminist and queer politics. They had certainly touched my life: I was 19 years old and identifying as gender-queer, performing with a drag troupe who took as its central challenge—and delight—the inherent flimsiness of gender. Maybe the best illustration of the landscape in the mid-2000s is that I read *Gender Trouble* the same year I read Kate Bornstein’s *My Gender Workbook*—a play-
ful, irreverent guide and a defining text in its own right that, in its author’s words, “provides a practical approach to living with or without a gender.”

And yet, even if it didn’t explode my world, Gender Trouble made a mark on me. It encouraged me (and still does) to let go of the obsession, pervasive in my college years, with finding the right words for my internal “truth”—was I genderqueer? Transmasculine? Butch? A dyke? Did I still identify as a woman? Was I a boy? As Butler writes in the preface to the 1999 edition, our culture treats gender as “an interior essence that might be disclosed,” when in fact it is an “expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates.” Maybe it didn’t matter so much whether I could pinpoint the exact language of who I “truly” was; maybe I just had to make decisions about how I wanted to live my life.

Earlier this fall, I returned to Gender Trouble for the first time in 15 years. Reading it in 2022 is an uncanny experience. If Gender Trouble was in the water in 2007, it’s in the air we breathe now. It’s not just that some of the book’s arguments seem so self-evident that it’s hard to believe they were ever controversial. It’s that they’ve been put into practice everywhere, from the language we use to the gender-troubling lives so many of us are living (which, notably, counters the charge by Butler’s critics that the work is too abstract to be politically useful).

I am thinking in particular of the book’s argument that gender is a performance, something that, in Butler’s words (and to give a taste of the scholar’s prose), “must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” This concept has become ubiquitous in our culture: RuPaul reminds us that “We’re all born naked and the rest is drag”; Jonathan Van Ness tells Out that “somedays I feel like a boy and somedays I feel like a girl”; and pop psychology articles illuminating gender performance for the average reader abound. We have largely internalized—setting aside the homophobic and transphobic right wing for just a moment—the idea that gender is something manufactured; that it is a culturally specific performance that is not set in stone.

I am reminded of the famous “cerulean” scene in The Devil Wears Prada, in which Meryl Streep, playing the terrifying fashion magazine boss Miranda Priestly, dresses down the nerdy Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) for thinking that the fashion world has no influence on her. “You think that you’ve made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry,” Miranda says to the reddening intern, referring to her lumpy blue sweater, later identified as a descendant of Oscar de la Renta’s iconic “cerulean” collection. “In fact, you’re wearing a sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room.”

In some ways, Gender Trouble is cerulean: If you’ve ever encountered the idea that gender is a performance, you have, like Andy and her blue sweater, been touched by Gender Trouble. (I should note that Butler has taken pains to emphasize that the ideas in the book were not just hypothetical thought bubbles conjured in a vacuum; rather, they were in part a reflection of the communities that Butler belonged to in the years leading up to the publication of the book. It stands to reason, then, that this particular cerulean does not belong solely to Butler, but also to the communities who were already transforming our notions of gender in the 1980s.)

And yet: while some of Gender Trouble’s ideas have clearly entered the mainstream, rereading the book in 2022 offers the odd sensation that others have made it only halfway through the door.

Gender as performance is perhaps the most famous concept associated with Butler. But the other half of Butler’s argument in Gender Trouble is that the performance produces its subject and not the other way around. “Gender,” Butler writes, “ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time.” Put more simply: “The various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.”

As a college student, I found this part of Butler’s argument liberating, but it’s a hard sell in 2022. Queer communities have integrated the idea that gender is a construct and the binary is a myth. We reject the claim that “man” and “woman” can be strictly defined (if at all), and we have adjusted our language: Gender is assigned at birth; instead of a binary, it’s a spectrum; some of us are gender-fluid. But we also live in a cultural moment that places great emphasis on the idea of the “true self”—some sacred, immutable essence within each of us. This emphasis is not unique to queerness, but it may have a particular hold on us.

It’s worth considering where this idea may have come from. In 1990, when Gender Trouble was published, the concept of “normalcy” was largely closed off to queer people: Our sex was illegal, our identities were shameful, and our very humanity was up for debate. With no hope of becoming just like everyone else, we had to—and had room to—imagine other possibilities. But in the early ’90s, during Gender Trouble’s first few years on the shelf, this began to shift. Bill Clinton met publicly
with gay advocates and eventually delivered them the chance to serve in the military—if they hid their identities—with the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. And the hard battles fought by radical queer organizers—many of them AIDS activists—in the 1980s and early ’90s were beginning to bear fruit in the form of increased visibility. The door to normalcy, in other words, began to crack open, and some LGBTQ folks were eager to shove a foot into it—by claiming that we are, just like everyone else, “born this way.” As the historian Hugh Ryan remarked to me recently, “Of course we say we were born that way. That’s what we’re told our whole lives—you’re born a boy or a girl. It’s straight culture!”

Today, the concept of an innate truth buried deep inside each and every one of us is more woven into queer culture than ever. Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” celebrates this notion, and the discourse around coming out—for both queer and trans folks—also frequently reflects it. “My brain is much more female than it is male,” Caitlyn Jenner told Diane Sawyer when she came out as trans in 2015. “It’s hard for people to understand that, but that’s what my soul is.”

This notion of a gendered soul, which we then externalize through performance, seems potentially at odds with Gender Trouble, which describes gender as a product of performance rather than its root. So—what do we do with this apparent dissonance between a defining queer text and the queer world, influenced in part by that text, we find ourselves living in today? Does Gender Trouble leave space for the conversations around identity that we are having in its wake?

In thinking through this tension, it helps to go back, once again, to the world that Gender Trouble was born into. The language of the book, with its rejection of gender as a fixed category, maps easily onto conversations about trans identity, and we might very reasonably argue that it helped lay the groundwork for trans people like me to come out some 20 years after its publication. At the same time, the words “transgender” and “cisgender” appear nowhere in the original edition of Gender Trouble. The word “transsexual” appears twice. As Butler (who now identifies as nonbinary and uses gender-neutral pronouns) acknowledged in the preface to the 1999 edition, the years since the book’s publication brought “evidence of a kind of gender trouble that the text itself did not anticipate.”

One kind of gender trouble that the text could not have anticipated was, alongside three decades of some of the most significant progress in LGBTQ rights in US history and an explosion in visibility for trans and gender-nonconforming people, a vicious backlash—including, crucially, a targeted assault on our very right to exist. The phrase “gender-affirming care” had not yet entered our lexicon in 1990, but as I write this, more than a dozen states in the US have banned or are actively considering bans on gender-affirming care for trans youth. Some states have even considered extending restrictions to adults. This is to say nothing of the child-abuse cases brought against parents who have supported their trans children, the trans adults who have been fired for coming out, the conversion therapy that has been forced on trans teenagers, and the near-constant violence visited upon our community, so severe that we mark it every November with the Transgender Day of Remembrance.

These attacks, from the legislative to the interpersonal, have called upon trans people to prove our identities. Even mainstream news outlets regularly question our legitimacy: In October 2022, The New York Times ran a piece noting, and at times tut-tutting, an increase in top surgery among young people, even as it admitted in a brief aside that cosmetic breast surgery was more common than top surgery among adolescents. (According to the article, some “3,200 girls age 18 to 19 received cosmetic breast implants in 2020.” Breast implants, of course, are just as “irreversible” as top surgery but are far more prevalent—and are performed without the expectation that the patient prove, through therapists’ letters and diagnoses, an unassailable link between the physical change and the inner self.)

It’s no surprise, in other words, that as a community we’ve developed a public relations strategy that relies heavily on a hard-wired, essential self—if not assigned at birth, then at least dating back to it. How else to respond to the belief—which, according to a Southern Poverty Law Center poll this year, is held by a majority of Republicans—that we are “trying to indoctrinate children” into our “lifestyle”? If the current flavor of transphobia is a fear of trans identity “spreading,” the safest defense is that we are born this way, and thus our identities are not contagious.

Of course, it would be a grave mistake to attribute our self-conception to defensive posturing—or to assume that all of us think of our identities in the same way. But it’s worth remembering that the stakes for claiming a gender are astronomically high in 2022. Thus a complex, intra-community conversation about our identities—a conversation that should unfold in a free, empowered, and fundamentally curious space—becomes a hinge on which our very rights depend.

Butler, for their part—who, despite criticisms of an ivory-tower remove, has been frequently and readily accessible to interviewers over the years—has made their views on this subject abundantly clear. “Some people believe that I see gender identity "spreading," the safest defense is that we are born this way, and thus our identities are not contagious. (continued on page 48)
A cautionary tale.

by Joanne McNeil

The Web 1.0

AOL

Raneree Barker was having a great time in the back of an Uber as her driver entertained her. It was November 2016, and the former Facebook executive and Lean In flack had just arrived in Ohio to canvass for Hillary Clinton.

“Welcome. You’ve got mail,” the driver said with spirited enunciation and a smooth, familiar cadence.

“No way! Do it again!” Barker cried from the back seat. She captured this exchange and posted it to Twitter, where the video—tagged “#GOTVforHRC”—was widely shared, receiving over 1 million views.

The Uber driver turned out to be none other than Elwood Edwards, the voice actor behind the second-best-remembered sound of America Online in the 1990s (after the crackling modem squeal that announced a user’s passage from the log-in screen). In recent years, Edwards has been indulging the nostalgia many feel for what was once the nation’s largest online service, reciting these lines on *The Tonight Show With Jimmy Fallon* and in the 2018 documentary series *That’s So ’90s*. When *Cleveland* magazine caught up with him in 2009, Edwards was working as a news graphics and video editor for WKYC, a local television station. Later, *Inside Edition* followed up on Barker’s tweet and profiled him. Edwards was paid only $200 for the AOL recordings, he recalled. “Everywhere I go, people say, ‘Do you get residuals? Did you make a lot of money from it?’ And the question is always answered with ‘No.’” His wife at the time was working for AOL, which is how he learned about the opportunity. Edwards recorded all the now-iconic phrases, including such bangers as “File’s done” and “Goodbye,” on a cassette recorder in their living room.

Compressed into that single encounter between Edwards and Brandee Barker is a short history of the mainstream Internet: an old mascot of the 1990s online service, now an à la carte servant through gig-economy apps, chauffeuring a millionaireess from the Web 2.0 empire. In many respects, AOL was the Facebook of its day. Another walled garden of proprietary community features, AOL had message boards that functioned like Facebook groups. AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) directly inspired Facebook’s Messenger, and Meta now owns the patent AOL filed for its Buddy List graphic of online contacts. AOL, like Facebook, brought a mass audience to the Internet. But that’s where the comparison ends. While AOL positioned itself as complementary to noncommercial Internet applications, Facebook aims to subjugate the Web as another facet of its vast empire.

America Online debuted in 1991, the same year that the World Wide Web opened to the public. With revenue from advertising and subscriber fees, AOL had a market cap that soared past $150 billion at its peak in 2000. Meanwhile, the World Wide Web, invented in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee, then a researcher at CERN, was and is noncommercial and decentralized: Anyone with an Internet connection and a Web browser can visit a website. Its protocols and standards are maintained by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), which has been
hosted by a consortia of universities since its founding in 1994. Together, these two Internet developments offered a taste of the social media we know today. The Web made it easy to create and share text and graphics; AOL familiarized users en masse with the Internet experience, which had earlier been an esoteric pastime. The World Wide Web populated the Internet with content, while AOL populated it with users.

After hearing Edward's greeting, an AOL user in the '90s would arrive at the main menu, which listed topics to explore, such as sports and entertainment, via blocky hyperlink buttons. Inside were “channels” exclusive to AOL subscribers, made in partnership with cable networks, magazine publishers, and organizations like the AARP. These channels included message boards, chat rooms, and articles. Some offerings revealed the diversity of the AOL subscriber base, including the Gay & Lesbian Forum, the DisABILITIES forum, and NetNoir (“Your Home for Black Interactive Culture & Entertainment”). Other channels appealed to cyclists and Star Trek fans. Many of the defining early interactions on AOL happened on the Romance channel, with online personals and the “Love@AOL” cybersex chat rooms. “AOL is about pop culture, not pocket protectors,” Wired magazine declared in a 1995 feature. By 1996, there were 7 million subscribers.

“Hook up to a world of fun and excitement! It’s free! It’s easy! It’s fun!” read the copy on the 3.5-inch floppy disks that AOL mailed out to prospective customers beginning in 1993. Although the software was preinstalled in many personal computers, the company poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into direct mail campaigns and distribution. Suddenly the disks were everywhere: stuffed in cereal boxes, dispensed in supermarkets and Blockbusters. They were an ever-present reminder of the Internet to users in America had broadband at home, according to the Pew Research Center. AOL had failed acquisition. The two companies formally split in 2009; AOL Time Warner was later acquired by Verizon and companies formally split in 2009; AOL and Verizon Time Warner is now taught in business schools as a case study in management and strategy.

The collapse of online advertising was not the only factor in AOL's decline. The merger with Time Warner is now taught in business schools as a case study in failed acquisition. The two companies formally split in 2009; AOL was later acquired by Verizon and is now a subsidiary of Yahoo. As it changed hands, the online service spiraled into obscurity. By 2004, 39 percent of Internet users in America had broadband at home, according to the Pew Research Center. AOL had failed to branch into high-speed Internet, and to this day it delivers only dial-up service (to a reported “thousands” of customers). The chat rooms and forums inside AOLs enclosure withered after the volunteer moderators exited. AOLs media partners also moved on. Playbill closed its AOL channel in 1997, citing the difficulty of maintaining separate forums on multiple online services, a common sentiment among channel hosts. Theater lovers on AOL couldn’t hang out at the Playbill message boards on Prodigy, and vice versa. The publication consolidated its audience by building a website with chat rooms and forums accessible to any Internet user with a browser. AOL channels, which for novice Internet users had been helpful guides and (continued on page 48)
In early April 1994, when the genocide began in Rwanda, the meetings started in Washington. “They couldn’t say we were not going to do anything, because that’s bad policy,” recalled Prudence Bushnell, then the deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs. “So we were tasked to meet every single day in secured video conferencing, lest we be seen as doing nothing.”

The United States, still smarting from the casualties in a peacekeeping operation in Somalia depicted in Black Hawk Down, had no intention of spilling more American blood on African soil. But Bushnell latched onto an idea, circulating among activists at the time, that she believed could stop the violence: jamming Rwanda’s airwaves.

It was meant to be a meaningful half-measure at a time when the most powerful officials on those video conferences were committed to taking no measures at all. It would end up haunting US foreign policy—and distorting how we understand ethnic violence—for decades to come.

A tiny country that had just recently become a democracy, Rwanda had two major radio stations, and one of them—founded by the leaders of an extremist, ethnocentric political party—broadcast vitriol against Tutsis, the country’s minority population. Its presenters stoked fear in listeners already on edge from years of civil war and called Tutsis “the enemy,” often describing them as “cockroaches.” As the mass murder spread, the station encouraged people to join in, sometimes naming individual Tutsis who had escaped the violence and Hutus who opposed it, urging its audience to hunt them down.

Human rights activists in Washington lobbied hard on the unique power of radio in Africa to do harm, but Bushnell believed it could also do good. Just weeks before the genocide began, she’d been in Burundi, where there was sporadic violence between the same ethnic groups. Officials at the US Embassy told her the fighting often subsided when important foreigners were in town, so they put her on the radio. “The next day, a woman came up to me and said, ‘Thank you for what you said. Because you were on the radio, no one was killed last night,’” Bushnell told me. “That’s why I thought I could stop a genocide. Can you imagine?”

Today, Bushnell thinks she was naive, but in 1994, she said, she pushed her colleagues to use a military aircraft to broadcast signals that would jam Rwanda’s radio frequencies. Her colleagues pushed back: The lawyers said interfering with radio frequencies was illegal; the Pentagon said Rwanda’s hills would weaken the jamming signal, making it an uncertain tool at best, and that the price tag was too high—the only aircraft capable of doing the work cost $8,500 an hour. Finally, Bushnell said, a senior defense official put it plainly: “Radios don’t kill people. People kill people.”

In the end, the US took no action to slow or stop the genocide, engaging in semantic gymnastics to avoid even using the word out of fear it would trigger a legal obligation to intervene. More than 800,000 people died in what became known as the Genocide Against the Tutsi. It ended only when a Tutsi rebel group led by the country’s current president, Paul Kagame, won the civil war.

Refusing to jam the frequency for Rwanda’s “machete radio,” as an international tribunal later called it, has become a symbol of US indifference to genocide. As a story, it appeals for its irony: the enormity of the violence, the simplicity of the solution. But as a genocide-prevention strategy, stopping radio broadcasts was always a fantasy—one that the American imagination clings to because it affirms a foundational myth of US power: The white world runs on politics, and everyone
else is a mob away from “tribal violence.”

“For those of us who didn’t know about Rwanda, [there was] this idea they listen to a radio and then go out and grab a machete or a rock or a spear,” said Scott Straus, a professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley. “Jamming the radio might have delayed the violence, but it wouldn’t have changed the outcome.”

Straus interviewed more than 200 of Rwanda’s convicted genocidaires and found that, while most of them knew about or listened to the infamous broadcasts, hate radio was not the reason they joined the killing. Rather, they said, men with power or authority had recruited them face-to-face, and they participated because they were afraid—of both the rebel group with whom Rwanda had been at war for four years and their own leaders, who they suspected might brutally punish them for refusing to participate. “They were making calculated choices about survival and how best to protect themselves and their families,” Straus told me.

DATA SUGGESTS THAT WHERE GENOCIDE has occurred, political elites—those with the power to turn genocide from possibility into policy—made similar calculations, under similar circumstances. Benjamin Valentino, a professor of government at Dartmouth and a founder of the Early Warning Project at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, has found that genocide has a clear, if perverse, logic: Often, genocidal regimes begin with rulers who feel at risk of losing power, usually to a minority group and often one already engaged in armed rebellion or insurgency, and eventually decide that genocide is their best, and sometimes only, path to survival—political, cultural, existential. “Once we understand the goals and interests of the people in power, we can see them reasoning toward that radical solution,” Valentino said. “Without that decision, you may get low-level violence, and you’ll almost certainly get repression, discrimination, and exclusion—but you won’t get genocide.” That is, genocide is a policy choice, not an explosion of negative passion.

Yet hatred remains a powerful causal hypothesis. Uncomplicated by context, hatred feels as visceral and impulsive as the violence itself. Enmity is also easy for outsiders to recognize and understand, even if they don’t know much about the local dynamics. In 1994, the Western media settled easily into a script about ancient hatreds, upsetting actual Rwandans with access to foreigners’ narratives about their home and history. “I am profoundly offended by...news reports describing what is being perpetuated in Rwanda as some mindless ‘ethnic slaughter and tribal violence,’ instead of the politically motivated, long-planned systematic mass extermination of an entire people by those Presidential Guards and the death squads acting under their orders,” wrote Louise Mushikiwabo, a Rwandan living in Washington, D.C., whose brother had been among the first to be murdered, in a letter to The Washington Post published in 1994. (Mushikiwabo later became Rwanda’s minister of foreign affairs.)

Journalists weren’t the only ones to describe the violence as if it were a grassroots reflex that happened to find tacit government approval. US State Department memos recounted historical massacres of Tutsis, as if the country’s past necessarily mirrored its future. In one of her regular telephone calls to a top Rwandan military official, later called the “mastermind” of the genocide, Bushnell warned that he and his soldiers would be seen as “complicit” for “aiding and abetting civilian massacres”—massacres that were, in fact, planned and coordinated by the military itself. American activists, meanwhile, insisted that hate radio was delivering orders—they rarely specified from whom—as if to a willing audience of automatons.

None of this is to deny the importance of radio to Rwanda’s genocidaires. Straus found that extremist broadcasts did influence the most violent perpetrators. Even if radio didn’t catalyze the masses or ignite the genocide, he identified occasions when the broadcasts helped elites to coordinate their campaign of killing. Hate propaganda can normalize the dehumanization that is often observed in societies where genocide occurs, and it can make violence seem more “natural” once it begins.

But normalizing violence, despicable as that is, is not the same as causing it. As Valentino told me, “You can’t just observe that hate speech is common in society and assume that that society is more likely to have a genocide.” Valentino monitors political violence in more than 160 countries for risk indicators, and he observes genocide in less than 2 percent of the cases he registers annually. “It’s accurate to assume that genocide is unlikely, even in countries where many of the risk factors are present, whatever you might think those factors are,” he said.

AMERICAN GUILT ABOUT RWANDA—AND THE BOOKS, FILMS, AND ADVOCACY campaigns that have dissected our inaction—distorts where, and how often, we think we might see genocide. Those distortions have had painful consequences. In 2011, during the presidency of Barack Obama, the United States spent $1 billion to overthrow Moammar Gadhafi, motivated, the administration insisted, by a commitment to protect civilians whom Gadhafi had threatened to kill “like rats.” The intervention, which Obama reportedly referred to as a “shit show” in private, only exacerbated Libya’s civil war.

In 2015, Obama’s ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, accused a senior official in Burundi of using “language of horrors the region hasn’t witnessed in 20 years.” At the height of a political crisis in Central Africa—one that Westerners, who remembered “Hutu” and “Tutsi” from 1994, were quick to sketch in ethnic terms—Power accused the official of threatening the population with “extermination,” because he’d used the verb that Rwandan extremists had employed as a euphemism for killing in 1994—at a different time, in a different country with a different political history.

It was a mistranslation in every sense of the word, and not a benign one. Power insisted her counsel on Burundian politics was apolitical, but she ignored that the other people involved—namely, Burundians—did indeed have politics. Her accusation served the interests of the country’s political opposition, but it shocked other Burundians, who felt the ambassador’s personal preoccupation with genocide—with A Problem From Hell, she’d
Democrats got tough on crime in the ’90s. Now there’s an aging crisis in prisons, and efforts to address it have barely made a dent.

Victoria Law reports on the intersections of incarceration, gender, and resistance.

De Anda’s extreme sentence is one of hundreds of thousands handed out in the 1990s as politicians, racing to be the toughest on crime, passed laws enhancing and extending prison sentences. Although crime rates were actually declining, the number of people sentenced to prison rose from 789,610 in 1991 to 1,252,830 in 1998—a 59 percent increase.

In 1994, Democratic lawmakers championed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which built on the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984. The 1994 crime bill encouraged states to pass more punitive sentencing laws and awarded federal funding for new prisons and jails in exchange for dramatically limiting “earned time” credits for incarcerated people. This provision meant that, no matter what strides a person had made behind bars, there was virtually no time off their sentence awarded for good behavior (or self-transformation).
The act also stripped Pell Grants from college students behind bars. During that decade, a new prison opened every 15 days.

Under California’s Three Strikes law, people convicted of a third felony, regardless of its severity or how long ago their previous felonies had occurred, were automatically sentenced to 25 years to life. Some of these third strikes included acts as minor as stealing pizza, possessing crack, or stealing $20 worth of coffee from a church kitchen. (In 2012, California amended the law to make the third strike apply only to serious or violent felonies. Those who were already serving a third-strike sentence could petition the court to reduce their sentence to a second strike.) By 2000, the number of people serving a sentence of life with the possibility of parole had nearly doubled—and that number continued to climb throughout the 2000s.

It wasn’t just in California, either. In 1995, prison populations nationwide rose by 9 percent, or 88,400 people, to what was then the highest number of prisoners to date: 1.1 million. That figure would be eclipsed again and again throughout the 1990s, as prosecutors reached for the most serious charges and judges were required to impose lengthier sentences. It would peak in 2008, when one out of every 100 Americans was behind bars.

Today, the United States continues to have both the world’s highest number of prisoners and its highest incarceration rate.

As early as 1994, researchers were warning that these draconian punishments, so popular in the 1990s, would precipitate a crisis of aging behind bars. Their warnings went unheeded but have proved prescient. Between 1995 and 2010, the number of incarcerated people age 55 and older nearly quadrupled. At the end of 2020, more than 22 percent (or over 261,000 people) of the nation’s prison population was 50 or older. And the problem is getting worse: Experts estimate that by 2030, one in three people in US prisons will be over 50.

Outside prison, 50-year-olds are no longer considered senior citizens. But incarceration, which often brings with it years of poor nutrition, infrequent opportunities for exercise, inadequate medical care, and constant stress, chaos, and violence, accelerates the physiological aging process and can shorten life expectancy. Research suggests that a year in prison can shorten a person’s life expectancy by two years. At the same time, prisons are facing an explosion in geriatric needs. Prison medical systems, already ill-equipped to address many basic needs, now face patients with declining mobility and
cognitive abilities. They report a steep increase in conditions such as arthritis, pulmonary and heart disease, and cancer.

As Ashley Nellis, senior research analyst at the Sentencing Project, warned, “The worst of this aging crisis in prisons is yet to come.”

When De Anda learned in 2020 about the state’s new age threshold for older prisoners, she knew an elder parole hearing could mean the opportunity to return to her family before another decade passed. Her four children, who were ages 7 to 13 when she was arrested, were now adults. Her youngest was expecting her first baby and De Anda’s fifth grandchild. De Anda’s mother, in her 80s and struggling with failing eyesight, needed help getting around, a role that De Anda, after decades away, longed to fill. She had gotten sober, completed dozens of prison programs, and was now a facilitator of the prison’s support group for domestic violence survivors, so she was confident that the parole board would see how much she’d changed.

But in September 2021, De Anda learned some devastating news: The law excluded not only those sentenced to death or life without parole, but also those convicted of a second or third strike under the Three Strikes law. That meant De Anda, who’d been sentenced on a second strike, wouldn’t be eligible to apply this year, as she and her family had originally thought. There was a small silver lining: The court-ordered elder parole mandate had moved her parole eligibility to May 2024, a decade earlier than her original sentence.

De Anda is far from the only older person in California’s prisons whose hopes were stoked by the new legislation but crushed by the reality of the law’s application. The Nation and Type Investigations analyzed California’s elder parole data for the years since 2014 and found that neither the court-ordered provision nor the legislation that followed has resulted in a substantial decrease in the state’s aging prison population—the result, in part, of exemptions like the one that has delayed De Anda’s hearing.

“Part of the reason the law isn’t working as we had hoped is that it’s actually narrower in scope in terms of who it applies to,” said Emily Harris, policy director at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, in an interview.

Just as significant, the parole board retains complete discretion over whether a person gets released ahead of completing their maximum sentence, and it has proved exceedingly difficult for those who are granted hearings to convince the board that they’ve changed enough to be released. Between February 2014 and September 2022, California’s parole board held 7,434 hearings for those eligible for elder parole. It granted 2,112 releases (28 percent), denied 4,650 applicants (63 percent), and stipulated that another 672 applicants were unsuitable for review.

An additional 4,457 scheduled elder parole hearings were waived, postponed, continued, or canceled. Counting those significantly decreases the number of people actually released to 18 percent of the 11,891 parole-eligible applicants.

Though the law requires parole commissioners to consider an applicant’s age, it does not specify how much weight to give to their age, time served, or the ways in which they have spent their years behind bars. Thus, the results are unpredictable: The commissioners might deny one applicant based on their history of fighting and lack of program participation, but also another who has participated in dozens of programs and has no record of violence during their decades in prison. “[The law] needs more teeth in terms of considering age as a factor,” Harris said.

California’s parole hearings typically last multiple hours, with two to three commissioners questioning applicants at length about their crimes and pressing them about any variation from court transcripts or their responses at previous parole hearings.

As one commissioner explained during a 2016 hearing, “We’re trying to ascertain whether you understand what happened, whether you have identified how you got to that point and whether you have addressed all the demons that got you here.... I think the perfect hearing is when we ask a simple question and allow you to speak, because it’s all about us trying to ascertain your understanding.”

That may sound reasonable on paper, but in practice it results in standards that are often impossible to meet, said Keith Wattley, the founder and director of UnCommon Law. “This process depends on the subjective opinions of people who, for the most part, have spent their careers locking up people that we, as a society, have been taught to fear.” (Seventeen of California’s 20 parole commissioners have previously worked in law enforcement, the courts, or the state’s prisons.) “As a result,” Wattley noted, “we see that people who are Black, brown, gender-nonconforming, differently able, are most likely to be denied parole.”

A 2019 study of 426 parole hearings for those who were under the age of 26 when they’d committed crimes found that the board was 2.7 times more likely to grant parole to a non-Black applicant than a Black one. While the law required parole commissioners to give “great weight” to the diminished culpability of youth, the study’s author, law professor Kristen Bell, noted that it did not define “great weight.”

“Because the board has so much discretion in how it makes these decisions, the grant rate

Prison medical systems, already ill-equipped to address many basic needs, now face patients with declining mobility and cognitive abilities.
Scarlett has been imprisoned since the late 1980s for fatally shooting her adult daughter. She suffers from degenerative disc disease, spinal stenosis, and arthritis of the spine. She has had open-heart surgery to implant an artificial valve. She uses a walker to get around the prison, and even then she’s unsteady and prone to falling. During the pandemic, she did fall—hard enough to require surgery.

Scarlett became eligible for parole in her mid-50s, but at each hearing she has been denied. At her latest hearing, in 2021, she stated that she has participated in numerous prison programs, including ones recommended at previous hearings, that have taught her better ways to address conflict and anger. During her decades in prison, she has had no history of violent behavior, not even a fight. Now, when she’s confronted with a conflict, Scarlett told the parole commissioners, “I turn and walk away.”

But what continues to carry the most weight at these hearings is the fact that she killed her adult daughter in what she admits was a jealous rage over a man. It is something that, no matter how many programs, counseling sessions, and other classes she takes, Scarlett can never change. “I cannot look back and take back what I have caused,” she admitted at her last parole hearing. “I have looked back on that day many, many times in the past 34 years and realize what a monster I truly was and how selfish I had been.”

Scarlett’s parole attorney noted in the hearing that she had no prior history of violence or arrests. “This is not somebody who was likely to go back to the person she was and commit crimes in the future, should she be paroled,” he said. At the hearing, he also pointed out that during her decades in prison, Scarlett had never committed a single violation of prison rules. “People who are prone to falling. During the pandemic, she did fall—hard enough to require surgery.

The ADA described the details of Scarlett’s crime, then stated, “The inmate said today that the only reason she is not dangerous is because of her physical infirmities, but you know what? She can still hold a shotgun.”

In fact, Scarlett had not cited her physical infirmities as the sole reason she was for adults,” she said.

While no similar study exists for elder parole, Bell is part of a research team that is reviewing 50,000 parole transcripts for bias in California’s parole decisions.

Parole commissioners focus heavily on whether the applicant demonstrates insight. “‘Insight’ is one of the most overused, least understood terms that we talk about in this subjective parole process,” Wattley said. It can include whether the applicant is able to recite the details of their crime, the number and name(s) of their victim(s), and the ways in which the victims were harmed, as well as the applicant’s expressions of remorse.

But, Wattley continued, reliance on insight is problematic. For instance, parole commissioners will question a 56-year-old who has been imprisoned for a crime they committed as a teenager about the choices they made at that time. “Whether or not someone can answer that question has no bearing on their violence risk at age 56,” he observed. “But the board says, ‘If you don’t understand why you did these things at that age, you’re likely to recommit violence.’ That’s just not true, but it sounds good.”

Indeed, research indicates that people age out of crime and that the rates of recidivism, or being returned to prison, drop dramatically in a person’s later years.

California’s recidivism rate was 44.6 percent for the years 2015–16 (the latest data available). For people age 55 to 59 with a serious offense, the three-year conviction rate was 28.1 percent. And it was 14.4 percent for those 60 and over. For people convicted of murder, the rate was even lower: A Stanford University study found that of 860 people convicted of murder and later paroled, only five (or less than 1 percent) were reincarcerated for a new crime.

Of the 110 people who were granted elder parole in 2015–16 (the latest year for which data is available), only one person (or 0.9 percent) returned to prison.

Many incarcerated people who have faced multiple parole denials are reluctant to speak publicly about their experiences, fearing repercussions at future hearings. “Scarlett,” who is now in her 70s, was one of the few willing to speak with us, on the condition that we not publish her real name.

“People who are Black, brown, gender-nonconforming, differently able, are most likely to be denied parole.”
—Keith Wattley, founder of UnCommon Law

Prison medical systems report a steep increase in conditions such as arthritis, pulmonary and heart disease, and cancer.
any of Scarlett's efforts at self-rehabilitation. When denying her parole, the commissioners stated, “We considered that you are at an age that statistically reduces the probability of recidivism…. We also took into consideration your advanced age, your long-term confinement, your diminished physical condition, and, taking these factors into consideration, we do find that these mitigate your risk. However, it does not totally preclude you from violent-ly reoffending if you choose to do so in the future.”

That year, California's parole commissioners denied 657 (or nearly 65 percent) of the 1,017 elder parole applicants who appeared before them.

While California has changed its approach to elder parole—at least on paper—New York has no policy in place for prisoners age 50 and older, who constitute 24 percent of its prison population, according to the state comptroller. Organizing under the slogan “If the risk is low, let them go,” advocates—including imprisoned people themselves—have been working to bring about an elder parole statute similar to California’s for the past several years.

Stanley Bellamy, who turned 60 this past July, is one of the people pushing for the law in New York. He spent most of his 20s and the entirety of his 30s, 40s, and 50s in New York’s maximum-security prisons.

In 1985, Bellamy, then 23, was involved in a gun deal that took place beneath an overpass in Queens. Bellamy, his younger brother Joseph, and a friend were selling guns to two other men.

Then Bellamy heard a gunshot. “I’d been shot before, and I was not getting shot again,” he explained. He fired his own gun, hitting one of the would-be buyers. That man survived. The other man was also shot and later died from his wounds.

At trial, the survivor testified that Bellamy’s brother was the one who’d fired the fatal shot, though Bellamy insists that it was his friend who did. Nevertheless, Bellamy was convicted of felony murder, a charge that allows prosecutors and judges to punish people for killings that occur during the commission of a felony, even if that person did not directly cause the death or anticipate that it would happen.

Bellamy had a previous conviction for attempted robbery, for which he’d served eight months on Rikers Island. That rendered him a second-time offender, and the judge sentenced him as such.

Bellamy was shocked when the judge handed down his sentence: 62½ years to life. He said that he could not turn around and even look at his mother and sister, who were sitting on the benches behind him. “I don’t think I said anything,” he recalled, “I never heard such a sentence like that.” (Joseph was sentenced to 58 years to life. The brothers have not seen each other since 1991.)

During his first two years in prison, Bellamy became involved in prison drug dealing—and got entangled in all its accompanying ruthlessness and violence.

“I had the sentence, and I didn’t care,” he recalled. “I abdicated my humanity.”

In 1989, he said, he learned that his ex-girlfriend, who was the mother of his two young sons, had become addicted to crack. “I made the decision that I need to get myself together in order to be a father to my kids,” he said. Because of his decades-long prison sentence, he added, “they no longer had a father out there. And now [with her addiction], they no longer had a mother either.”

Bellamy vowed to change his life. He enrolled in Black and African American studies classes, striving to become a role model not only for his sons but for the younger Black men around him.

In 1995, after the state Legislature slashed the funding for New York’s remaining college-in-prison programs, Bellamy helped set up a computer literacy program. He also began facilitating anti-violence seminars and organizing events in which incarcerated men raised money for gun buyback programs, school supplies, and other ways to give back to the communities they’d harmed.

Informally, he also mentored men entering prison, hoping to keep them off the same tragic path he’d traveled. And there were many to mentor: During the 1990s, nearly 22,000 people entered the New York prison system. By 1999, when the state prison population hit its peak, nearly 73,000 people were incarcerated.

The reason for the jump in New York’s imprisonment rate was similar to one that sent California’s skyrocketing during this period: Despite a nearly 50 percent drop in violent crime, state lawmakers passed a slew of tough-on-crime laws. The Sentencing Reform Act of 1995 increased minimum sentences for a first felony, eliminated parole for those with previous convictions involving violence, and required that a person convicted of a third felony be given a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. In 1996, lawmakers passed an act that allowed judges to tack an additional five-year sentence onto any felony in which

Scarlett uses a walker to get around the prison, and even then she is unsteady and prone to falling. During the pandemic, she did fall.
N AUGUST 7, NATIONAL REVIEW PUBLISHED AN ARTICLE LAMBASTING THE US DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE’S DECISION, ANNOUNCED IN MAY, TO BROADEN THE PROHIBITION OF DISCRIMINATION IN FEDERALLY FUNDED NUTRITION PROGRAMS, INCLUDING THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM, TO INCLUDE SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY. THE WRITER’S ARGUMENT CENTERED ON A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL IN TAMPA, FLA., THAT, HE WROTE, WAS BEING “FORCED BY THE GOVERNMENT TO CHOOSE BETWEEN ADHERENCE TO THE LAWS OF MAN AND THOSE OF GOD.”

There is disagreement over what the broader prohibition actually means, with the department insisting it is aimed only at ensuring that LGBTQ+ students and others are not denied access to these nutrition programs, either explicitly or through intimidation. But many conservatives say the change opens up schools and other institutions to lawsuits for not having gender-neutral bathrooms or for using pronouns that correspond to biological sex.

There is much here to unpack, but that’s for another day. The relevant story, for our purposes, is in the op-ed’s headline: “A New Low in the Radical Left’s Culture War: The Weaponization of Food.”

The “weaponization of food” is nothing new, of course. For as long as there has been human conflict, food has been used as a weapon. The Romans starved Carthage. The Germans starved Leningrad during World War II. The English destroyed crops and poisoned wells to suppress revolt in India. The CIA force-fed hunger-striking prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. And just this year, Russia bombed the Ukrainian port of Odessa to disrupt grain exports.

National Review, though, was getting at something different: food as a front in the nation’s ongoing culture war, a proxy for larger issues of character, morality, and patriotism.

The magazine’s finger-pointing at “the radical left” notwithstanding, it was the right that pioneered the use of food to smear its opponents—in this case, to frame liberals and progressives as “elite” pushers of the nanny state. The strategy took hold in the 1990s and evolved over the ensuing decades, as what we eat and how it’s produced became a national debate, and as culture clashes—over affirmative action, school curricula, abortion, and so on—seeped into every corner of our lives.

As the final decade of the 20th century dawned, the nation’s politics were changing. There was a growing clamor on the right, led by Georgia Representative Newt Gingrich and firebrand pundit Pat Buchanan, to abandon what they described as the “morning in America” pragmatism of the Reagan era and exploit the cultural divides that had opened up a generation earlier around the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the environmental movement.

Buchanan summed up the sentiment in 1988: “The Republican moment slipped by...when the GOP refused to take up the challenge from the left on its chosen battleground: the politics of class, culture, religion and race.” Buchanan’s GOP convention speech in 1992, in which he invoked a fight for the “soul of
While the right was reorienting around a politics of grievance, America’s relationship to what it ate was also undergoing a seismic shift.

It would have been easy to dismiss this new food fight as little more than a fashionable twist on routine political posturing. But as the conversation around food got bigger in the ’90s, the stakes got higher. Mounting evidence that the American way of eating was causing serious health problems spurred talk of reform. Obesity, which had risen sharply over the previous decade, was deemed a national crisis. Rather than engage with reformers, however, the right simply broadened its culture war around food, politicizing the debate in ways that had significant consequences, not only for public health but, eventually, for the nation’s response to climate change. Indeed, the weaponization of food would escalate beyond partisan name-calling, becoming a matter of life and death. (To read the full article, please visit the online version at TheNation.com/90sFoodFight.)
no one in top physical shape needs more than four hours’ sleep a night and described him, in between sips of Coca-Cola, yelling at a student who missed one day of class that “24 hours without me, it’s no wonder you can’t sleep and are having a bad day.”

In Choudhury’s version of his life story, he had emigrated to California, by way of Japan, in the early 1970s after a successful career as a bodybuilder and competitive yoga champion—a discipline he discovered after an accident with a barbell shattered his femur. Believing that only “false yogis” charged money for their wisdom, he began teaching yoga for free at Los Angeles’s Ambassador Hotel and at weight-loss spas. But by 1974, realizing that wealth signified status in his adopted country, he opened studios in Hawaii and Beverly Hills. With the heat turned up to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, Choudhury sat atop a red plush barstool he called his “throne,” guiding students through his signature series of 26 postures and breathing exercises over 90 minutes. He wrote a 1978 mass-market book, *Bikram’s Beginning Yoga Class*, and appeared on *The Tonight Show*. By the ’80s, his Beverly Hills studio was reportedly bringing in $1,000 a day. Celebrities such as Shirley MacLaine, Raquel Welch, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar sang his praises. Choudhury credited this ascent to fame and fortune to his most prominent pupil, Richard Nixon, who helped him get a green card after his yoga therapies saved the president from a leg amputation due to thrombosis. Choudhury’s narrative is unsubstantiated—from the yoga championships, which did not commence in India until the mid-’70s, to the Nixon anecdote—but its uncritical repetition contributed to his material success, which was undeniable.

By the early ’90s, Bikram’s Yoga College of India was up and running, and in 1994 it began offering teacher trainings. Thirty-five enthusiasts showed up initially, paying $5,000 each for 12 weeks of instruction and a certificate granting them “all rights and privileges to teach Bikram’s Yoga System.” These programs soon swelled to over 300 registrants per offering, consolidating Choudhury’s wealth and firmly establishing the connection between spiritual refinement, physical exertion, and unspiring instruction. His network of affiliated schools exploded in number, from 10 in 1996 to nearly 700 worldwide by 2003, and hotels, recreation centers, and health clubs from Miami to Brattleboro, Vt., and the Jersey Shore advertised “Bikram-style yoga” even if they possessed no formal credentials or license to do so.

He sued former student Raquel Welch for ripping off his series (they later settled), but the sheer number of pretenders was becoming unmanageable. Since the launch of his teacher certifications in 1994, Choudhury had wanted to franchise his schools, but advisers had dissuaded him with warnings of red tape. In 2002, aware of the value of his brand and angry about impostors cutting into the profits to which he now felt entitled, he took action. Choudhury trademarked his name and “the sequence,” the series of postures that he had adapted from his own teacher, Bishnu Ghosh. He then went after imitators. But in a move many thought befitted a consumer goods manufacturer more than an enlightened yogi, he also franchised his business and relentlessly expanded it, with displays of “anger and capriciousness,” per a 2003 article in *Yoga Journal*, that alienated many.

Inspired by the fitness industry, Choudhury set the standard for the “ultimate commodification” of transnational yoga by establishing its most recognizable brand, making it inextricable from commercial fitness culture and defining yoga as a consumer product. (To read the full article, please visit TheNation.com/Exercise90s.)
You only had to look at the titles to see that something was up: “Atmosphere,” “Morning Factory,” “Brighter Days.” There was a new dawn in America, and the rising sun was house. Like any unearthly force, house music takes many forms, unified by the steady pulse of the bass drum: four mighty beats played again and again, triggered by a machine standing in for human limbs. For skeptics, this can be a barrier to entry; there are those who encounter this music and can only hear the bass. I pity them. For those who know, feeling the beat is not being battered, it’s being baptized. Surrounding that endless rhythm is an endless palette of possibilities, which tell the stories of house music’s many points of origin: in Chicago, levitating pianos or strings; in Detroit, alien textures alongside snatches of humanoid soul. At its most electronic, and at its maximum beats-per-minute, house becomes techno, which can make you feel like you’re being beamed aboard the Mothership while having a heart attack. It’s serious stuff.

We still hear it in today’s music, even if in degraded forms. In 2022, Beyoncé released the curiously titled album Renaissance, building pop confections off the house blueprint. Back in 2016, Kanye West sampled Chicago producer Mr. Fingers for his hit single “Fade.” The following year, Drake tried to layer some Detroit cool into his voice by sampling the maverick house producer Moodymann’s distinctive flow. But before all of this retromania, the very producers whose work is now being plundered by superstars were cataloging Black sounds in real time, reaching toward a future utopia.

Picking up the pace set by disco, house created an escape route to a far-flung future where the mechanisms of social control became democratized, with drum machines as space vessels. You could rewire society in a way that you wanted it to be. As the British journalist Simon Reynolds wrote in his book Energy Flash, house music was “born of a double exclusion,” as a cultural practice associated with the social activities of gay and Black communities in Chicago. “Its refusal, its

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cultural dissidence, took the form of embracing a music that the majority culture deemed dead and buried," Reynolds wrote. “House didn’t just resurrect disco, it mutated the form, intensifying the very aspects of the music that most offended white rockers and black funkateers: the machinic repetition, the synthetic and electronic textures, the rootlessness, the ‘depraved’ hypersexuality and ‘decadent’ druggy hedonism.” Like prophetic science fiction, house music fused myth with earthly reality, refashioning technology to cast a cocked eye on those who identified progress with the smooth operation of the machine. As you watch one version of yourself looped back into the matrix, the stuttering drums clap awake your second body, the one that can dance.

If the contribution of house to contemporary music is so pervasive that it’s hard to trace, it’s equally hard to pinpoint its exact birthplace. The problem is compounded by the proliferation of scenes and subgenres that followed the initial documentation of drum machines and synthesized bass at Chicago’s Warehouse club with local DJ Jesse Saunders’s 1984 record “On and On.” As Reynolds recounts, “When British A&R scouts came to Chicago to investigate house in 1986–7, they discovered that many of the top-selling tracks were actually from Detroit.”

The Midwest may have gotten there first, but there were deep waters in New Jersey. Take Kerri Chandler. He rose up in Zanzibar, a Newark club that fused the energy of the legendary New York disco club the Paradise Garage with the neon-gospel roots of his hometown. Soul and R&B had already been on a digital tip for a while, after futuristic funk bands like Parliament added layers of electronics to syncopated structures, and Chandler simply embraced the machine. It all started with a teenage internship at a local music studio that recorded the likes of Kool & the Gang. “People would come in off the street to rent studio time, but it was just the average Joe who thinks he can make a record and has no idea of the process,” Chandler said in an interview with Attack Magazine. “A lot of rappers and a lot of R&B singers. We didn’t have too many musicians coming in. They didn’t have a producer, didn’t have a track… Being a kid, I was like, ‘OK, I’ll make you something.’”

The airwaves were where these sounds spread. In Detroit, it was the shadowy late-night radio DJ the Electrifying Mojo. In Jersey, Tony Humphries was the man with the message, one that commanded dance floors all over town. In 1988, a singer Chandler had worked with gave a recording to Humphries. Next thing Chandler knew, his tracks were on the radio, and by 1990 he had crossed over with the hit record “SuperLover/Get It Off.” “I realized there was a buzz around it,” Chandler recalls, “and everything started to fall into place.”

The slowed-down chord changes of this type of house paired well with the noisy textures of Detroit techno—it was something deeper than house. Somewhere along the line, those who loved it christened it “deep house.”

*T here was a spirit of change in the air, and sure, let’s call it revelation. Not all the music that came out of this era stuck strictly to the template; it was a process of fermentation and of eventual growth. Those who grew the deepest did it underwater: The mythos of the Detroit group Drexciya is one of aquatic conception. The duo of Gerald Donald and James Stinson made music that hinted at a grander world under the sea, splitting the beat in half and pushing synthesizers beyond replicating the sounds of musical instruments. Drexciya’s 1992 EP Deep Sea Dweller is presented as a collage of found recordings from an underwater tribe descended from enslaved people who escaped the Middle Passage to find their freedom in the ocean.

If you went up and over the Atlantic, as opposed to diving into it, you’d hear the sounds of UK drum and bass doing a run on the dollar. The European love affair with American house music that began with the scouting missions of the 1980s was blossoming, by 1988, into what the British press called the “Second Summer of Love,” forever associating house’s heartbeat with the social phenomenon of rave culture. In the early ’90s, house collided with the Caribbean influence on Black British culture, with producers distilling the Babylonian strains of Jamaican reggae to their lowest frequencies and increasing the tempo past the point any human drummer could sustain.

Rave culture on both shores was a scene of travelers—or, let’s say, missionaries. They went from place to place looking for a party they could get into, and then they would, depending on your perspective, either ruin the culture or revive it. In Energy Flash, Reynolds speaks of assemblies in unmarked locations, where the young became drugged-out cherubim and were reborn as holy ghosts. He assures us that Wisconsin’s 1996 Even Furthur festival, where the ravers actually burned a wicker man, was not quite “an epic pagan gathering of the tribes of Evil,” but he also warns of an environment with “no security” and “no lighting.” To get there, you had “to stumble through the mud by the fitful illumination of other people’s flashlights and the glint of bonfires dotting the hill slope.” It was Old Testament and New Testament at the same time: the false idols and desertlike atmosphere, the youth leading the way through the darkness, with only the light they made for themselves.

Each story of rave culture that Reynolds presents has this biblical feel. In his telling, the pure rave was realized in the UK and was corrupted stateside by drug abusers, cynical Silicon Valley freaks, and corporate record labels. “America is also a more hostile soil for rave,” he claimed. “For rockers who still think ‘disco sucks’ and who hate English ‘haircut’ synth bands, rave is self-evidently inauthentic, a phoneyfad. This prejudice is not entirely without foundation. Exempt from the picture the black house traditions in Chicago, Detroit and New York (all of which pre-date rave), and it’s striking that the white rave scene in the USA has so far failed to generate a uniquely American mutation of the music.” It’s a classic case of looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place. By the mid-’90s, as house, or something like it, exploded through the world—on open fields, in warehouses, even on the pop charts—the Chicago-Detroit axis itself underwent a quiet resurgence.
After a stint in art school, virtuoso DJ and producer Theo Parrish found himself making cars in Detroit; somehow the car sounds got into the music. It probably helped that Parrish spent his time scouring the streets of Detroit, looking for an auditory palimpsest of city life. Fellow visionaries also used the landscape as a canvas. For Moodymann, Detroit is its own planet: Like Pluto, it’s been underestimated by the powers that be, demoted to the status of dwarf. But Moodymann lives in the dark and embraces what’s been left behind, building structures of hope out of disco remnants and shards of broken automobile glass. Parrish’s 1995 track “Lake Shore Drive,” first released by Moodymann’s label KDJ, is named for the expressway in Chicago that runs alongside Lake Michigan, the body of water that sits between the two states of house music’s birth. The track’s drained-out disco chords and spinning synths feel like getting hit in the head in exactly the right way.

It continued to be local DJs who drove the music. Rick Wilhite seemed to tread a ground between Detroit and the outer reaches of space, by blending jazz improvisation with thick, concrete-like drum machine hits. Another former auto worker, Omar-S, wades these waters in the present day, connecting techno to house in his forays into the deep. Ron Trent, who rung in the ’90s with the rave classic “Altered States,” makes rhythms that are more meditative than direct. Moodymann, who came of age in the ’90s, and my first steady job in journalism was as editor of a small left-wing magazine that subsisted on atrophying subscriptions and crashing arts grants and was, in those years, perpetually on the verge of publishing its last issue. The publication, called This Magazine, was founded in the 1960s, when left ideas were a roaring cultural fire. But by the mid-’90s, the fire was down to its embers, and it felt as if all we could do was blow to keep it from turning to dust. At one of my first story meetings, I suggested we stage a public funeral procession for the left, just to mourn the passing of so many of its core ideas. Instead, we screamed ourselves hoarse insisting that Francis Fukuyama was wrong and history was not over; that Margaret Thatcher had lied to us—there were and always had been alternatives; and that corporate trade deals were not “free” but came at a terrible cost to workers, ways of life, and the natural world.

I was an ‘80s kid and all the things I loved, from raving to dance music to punk to the counterculture, were right out of the same playing field. But America turned out to be the best place for an underground to develop because the aboveground was and is just so terrible.

With rave, that decay radiated outward, finally hitting the kids in the suburbs whose parents thought they had moved away from all of that. It was escape music for whoever wanted it—no, needed it—and many people did. “The only escape was drugs or music,” Chandler says. “I always picked the latter of the two.”

One can only assume that if the pop gods are suddenly obsessed with the survival mode of house music, then something truly awful must be bubbling up. This is music for those who need to dive underwater and to stay there. It can drive you insane trying to catalog each song you hear when you saw Rick Wilhite, standing in a booth in a crowded club, making light emerge in the dark, and did anyone notice that there was a point where it seemed like the man was levitating or was that just me?

The truth of the matter may simply be this: The rave will outlast us all. It is the flood overtaking the earth. Listened to Drexciya. Grow gills.
There were exceptions, of course—people still willing to talk of socialism and revolution. But they were mostly sectarians who held on to the frozen analysis of capital that the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in his landmark 1988 autopsy of the British left, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, described as “historically anachronistic.” The political theorist Wendy Brown, writing a decade later, diagnosed a left “caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.”

My first book, *No Logo*, came out a few months later, defiantly dressed in capitalism’s own shiny clothing. Its analysis was far from perfect, but in attempting to find the weaknesses in the new generation of disembodied brands manufactured through a web of plausibly deniable subcontractors, at least its spirit wasn’t ghostly. It tried to engage with the world that was emerging in the rubble of the left’s losses rather than with a world that might have been.

In 2020, the year the world locked down to stop the spread of a novel virus, *No Logo* turned 20 and I turned 50. The convergence of those round numbers felt heavy to me; holding them helped me to see that we are once again in a new era, and it is no time for frozen analysis. Capitalism has changed again. Our physical world is changing fast; the right has changed in new and frightening ways.

The good news is that the left has changed too. It is no longer a ragtag crew of anachronistic die-hards. Its analysis is becoming more mainstream and its numbers are vast. Left leadership is finally as diverse as it always should have been, with a new vision and boldness flowing from hard-won experience at the front lines of capitalism’s many barbarities.

The left’s greatest challenge, I would hazard, is that the colonization of our world by capital has been so complete that market logics, including the logic of corporate branding, are now deeply embedded inside the left itself. These ways of being and thinking now shape our individual identities, group identities, and organizational identities—not to mention the informational arteries that bind us all in conversation. The shedding of these cruel logics—and their replacement with ethics of care, reciprocity, and love—must be the next great liberation movement. Only then will we know the ’90s are gone for good.

Naomi Klein is an award-winning journalist, author, and activist. Her first book, *No Logo*: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies, was a defining work of 1990s political analysis.
a gun had been brandished, even if it had not been fired.
While the number of people in New York serving a sentence of life with the possibility of parole never surpassed the number in California, it nevertheless more than doubled, from 5,867 in 1987 to 12,854 in 2004.

And in both states, the prison population has grown older over time. As of September 2022, there were 4,741 people in New York’s prisons who were 55 or older. During the past decade, more than half of the deaths in New York’s prisons have been in this age group, a 504 percent increase since the 1980s. According to the state’s Department of Corrections, at least 842 people over the age of 55 have been imprisoned since 2007 but are not yet eligible for their first parole hearing. More than half must wait until 2030 for that chance.

The legislation that Bellamy and others in New York have been fighting to pass would change that. The bill, introduced in the state Assembly in 2017 and the state Senate in 2018, would require parole hearings for incarcerated people 55 and older who have served at least 15 years of their sentence. As with California’s law, the elder parole process does not guarantee release. Parole commissioners would still decide whether the person poses a threat to the public and whether their behavior inside prison demonstrates a changed mindset. Fearmongering about rising crime rates continues to weigh against applicants’ chances of approval.

Both the Assembly and the Senate bills have remained stalled in their respective corrections committees since April 2021. Still, Senator Brad Hoylman, the lead sponsor of the Senate version, said he’s confident the bill will pass this session. “Reports of abuse in prisons are skyrocketing, and our elder population in prisons remains in increasing danger,” he told The Nation and Type Investigations via e-mail. “For many, passing this bill is quite literally a matter of life or death.”

If elder parole had become law and gone into effect immediately in 2021, 1,021 people would have become eligible for a parole hearing by the end of the year, according to an estimate by the Vera Institute for Justice. Nearly two-thirds of those newly eligible would have been people of color. Unlike the California law, the New York bill has no exclusions, meaning that people serving life without parole and those serving determinate sentences (currently excluded from parole hearings) would become eligible.

“I benefited from the skills, experience, wisdom, and patience of elder incarcerated mentors throughout my 38 years of incarceration,” Jose Saldana, the director of Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP), said in an interview. Saldana was paroled in 2018, at age 65. “I would not be the same human being I am today if they were not a part of my transformation. I am one of thousands whom they helped become better human beings. Such men and women and nonbinary people are an asset to society and should not die in prison.”

That includes Stanley Bellamy, with whom Saldana cofounded several programs while both men were incarcerated at Sullivan Correctional Facility.

“If elder parole passes, and I or my brother [who is 57] are granted parole, it will not only give me a chance to spend time with my sons and grandsons, but also give my 89-year-old mother a chance to see her sons come home before she dies,” Bellamy wrote in an e-mail.

But without elder parole, Bellamy will have to wait until December 2047 for his first parole hearing. By then, he will be 85 years old.

(McNeil, continued from page 33)
in cloud-based operations, including a monthly paid service to assist users with identity theft and malware.

New Internet empires, from social networks like Facebook to streaming services like YouTube, were founded as websites, offering content without paywalls or subscription fees. But these are private companies, selling ads as AOL did. These “free” services come with strings attached, including advanced tracking applications like cookies and scripts that harvest personal data and monitor user activity across the Web. Yet even with such pernicious tactics, social media companies are not invincible. Twitter as a company, while considerably smaller than Facebook or AOL in its prime, nevertheless shows how fickle ad-backed online communities can be. Immediately after Elon Musk took control of the company in October 2022, there was a mass exodus of users, and advertisers also jumped ship. Brands like Volkswagen, REI, and United Airlines suspended their ad buys, which Musk, in a tweet, acknowledged as a “massive drop in revenue.”

As Twitter falls apart, there’s something of Dot-com Crash 2.0 underway as well, between the insolvent crypto platforms and start-ups like Peloton whose stock prices are plummeting. Unlike AOL, Facebook’s monopoly power will help it weather a calamity in the tech sector. Facebook’s reach, including almost 3 billion active users, extends well beyond North America. Instead of being defined by hobbyist forums and fun, Facebook is entrenched in everyday life. Workplace, religious, and municipal activity takes place on Facebook; users log in to find out whether school is closed because of snow or to buy a kitchen table secondhand. Facebook wields its gargantuan size through regulatory capture and lobbying, including the pressure it exerts on W3C, to enable Web tracking and ads.

Facebook has arguably swung elections. Brandy Barker might have made a difference in 2016 if, instead of canvassing in Ohio, she had knocked on her old boss Mark Zuckerberg’s office door back in Menlo Park, Calif. Bill Clinton had the screen name “clinton pz” on AOL, while his challenger Bob Dole reportedly conducted a cyber chat with voters in 1996—and that was pretty much it for digital campaign strategy back then.

The empire that Elwood Edwards’s Uber passenger helped construct is not merely a walled garden like AOL, but a cage. Plenty of Facebook users, like the AOL users before them, don’t know what a website is: The company has actively sought to muddy the public’s understanding of where Facebook ends and the rest of the Internet begins. Could this change with stricter regulation of the social network, such as a ban on targeted advertisements? What if Facebook users were shown an exit? The World Wide Web is only a click away, just as it was on AOL in the ’90s. (Moore, continued from page 35)

literally written the book on US inaction in Rwanda—torqued her interpretation of their language. Though human rights groups documented political violence, including disappearances, no mass killings took place in Burundi. Power’s advocacy, however, convinced the ruling party that the international community was far from impartial, and in the ensuing years, it kicked out UN human rights observers, World Health Organization officials, and international humanitarian organizations.

Even during a bona fide genocide, the memory of Rwanda warps US foreign policy. In the mid-2000s, the Save Darfur movement pushed American officials to avoid “another Rwanda” in Sudan, where government-backed militias emptied villages and killed hundreds of thousands of people. The government was run by Muslim Arabs; the violence was perpetrated against Black Sudanese, many of them Christians. With that, the script was written.

Activists “looked back a decade earlier to a different country, to a conflict that had different dynamics driving it, thinking that if they could copy-and-paste to Darfur…you’d get success there, where Rwanda had been a failure,” Rebecca Hamilton, the author of Fighting for Darfur, told me. In Rwanda, US officials avoided the word “genocide”; in Darfur, activists pushed them until the State Department used the label. US officials had gutted the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda; Darfur activists demanded US support for a UN deployment with the authority to use force to protect civilians. US officials had privately scolded Rwandan leaders for seeming complicit in the slaughter; Darfur activists pushed for public accountability; and Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, became the first sitting head of state to be indicted for genocide. But none of those measures ended the conflict, which continues to this day, and scholars have argued that some of them, particularly the indictment, made it worse by deepening Bashir’s resolve to stay in power. ( Sovereign immunity has generally protected sitting heads of state from being arrested, even if they’ve been indicted by the International Criminal Court.)

“There was so much energy focused on moving [the] US political system, and a total discounting of the work that local [Sudanese] political dynamics were doing and could do,” Hamilton said. “People could have named the key players for making things happen in the US political system before they could name any Sudanese actor, other than Bashir himself.”

Meanwhile, US activists overlooked Sudan’s own protests against Bashir, whose violence in Darfur was no outlier; he built his 30-year grip on power by destabilizing the poorer regions of the country and strengthening the wealth and infrastructure of the capital. “The Sudanese were, certainly in the initial stages, completely discounted. And yet at the end of the day, it was the Sudanese people themselves who managed to actually overthrow Bashir—something that those who were advocating from outside of Darfur could only ever have dreamed of,” Hamilton said. Bashir was ousted in 2019, after months of protests across the country and a weeks-long peaceful sit-in in downtown Khartoum.

International activists failed in Darfur because they ignored the same thing diplomats ignored in Rwanda: that Africans, too, have politics. It’s no accident that the story most Americans know about the genocide in Rwanda is about America. Here, we believe, we have politics; over there, we quietly assume, primal instincts crowd out political thought. Even when American human rights advocacy fails, it erases African agency. How else, after all, could we still seem powerful enough to solve the problem from hell?
Suburban Arcades

What was the shopping mall?

By Melvin Backman

The shopping mall has a great many antecedents: the opulent markets of Victorian London, the arcades of Paris, and the department stores in the United States that could swallow an entire city block. But the mall as we know it has only one daddy: the architect Victor Gruen. A Viennese socialist, Gruen had established a tidy practice designing residential projects and shops before the Nazis seized Austria in 1938. Gruen’s forte was making the quotidian a bit lovelier: A typical tweak of retail spaces might have involved relieving the tight, cloying atmosphere of a tiny perfumery by placing mirrors on the ceiling. After fleeing to the United States, Gruen dipped his toe...
in wage drudgery before deciding to unpack his drafting desk and return to his bread-and-butter work of transforming shops into open and welcoming spaces in a freelance capacity.

What made Gruen’s designs distinct was the way they were able to add small pleasures to the act of shopping. An early American commission came from another recent émigré, the Polish chocolatier Stefan Klein, who was looking to bring fancy chocolates to New York. Having been an admirer of Gruen’s handsomely designed shops in Vienna, he set the architect loose to create a home for his fledgling Barton’s Bonbonniere. With lots of glass and light and reflective surfaces, Gruen’s work drew passersby into the store’s vestibule with window displays that put the candies in front of customers much like a jeweler might lay out a set of precious necklaces. The candy store quickly found a following, and soon Klein had hired Gruen for so many expansion jobs that he could copy and paste Gruen’s designs for his quickly proliferating stores and still remain innovative.

Before long, jobs outside of New York began to roll in, including from Grayson’s, the women’s wear chain, and the West Coast department store Milliron’s. Gruen started crisscrossing the country to supervise the construction of his growing portfolio. On one of those intercoastal flights in 1948, a dense fog forced him to make a layover in Detroit. Spending some time in the city’s commercial center, he found the shopping lousy: Thanks to the city’s historically car-friendly layout, consumers treated shopping as mere product acquisition, driving from store to store and curb to curb to pick up their wares from stand-alone shops marred by garish signage that put attention-grabbing ahead of conveying a proper vibe. That is, until Gruen found his way to Hudson’s, the city’s preeminent department store. There, he recalls in his memoir Shopping Town, he cooed over the “exquisite features and rich range of goods” he encountered within its 13 floors. This gave Gruen an idea: What if he could help this retail marvel export its magnificence to Detroit’s growing suburbs and impose its high standards on every merchant within arm’s reach? He managed to finagle a meeting with Hudson’s general manager, Oscar Webber. To combat flagging sales and take advantage of Detroit’s decamping wealth, Gruen proposed that the company establish a suburban outpost that would be an all-encompassing beacon of shopping excellence. Six years earlier, Gruen had sketched out his idea for the mall as we know it today, and now he had a chance to make it happen. Webber was convinced and spared no expense to realize Gruen’s vision.

What resulted in 1954 was Northland Center, a gleaming white monument to Texas luxury, where art, curation, and aesthetic discipline again united to create a powerful draw. The Nasher family purchased heaps of artwork for their mall, including a giant Beverly Pepper sculpture that was “designed to be admired from a car in motion,” Nancy Nasher told the Dallas Morning News. “Drive by and see it. Then park and come in.” The mall’s sizable staff, led by a design director who hovered over details as small as the comfort of a store’s seating, constantly preened and primped NorthPark, searching for ways to keep customers mesmerized and refreshed. From Northland to NorthPark, if you want to pull thousands of people miles away from their homes for the pleasure of parting with their money, you had better make the experience worth it.

But Gruen and his forebears could not have predicted what the mall would become, something Gruen himself admits in his memoir: “Shopping centers were initially successful because they were designed on the basis of idealistic motives. But now they have simply become too successful, in the same way the car has become too successful. They are so overwhelming that nothing is able to restore the balance.” This contradiction sits at the center of Lange’s book: The mall is beautiful and soothing, but its pursuit of profit steers it away from truly serving us.

Lange’s previous book, The Design of Childhood, focused on the ways that playgrounds and other built environments shape the behaviors of young people, and Meet Me at the Fountain similarly swings its focus between the buildings that house the shopping to the people who do the shopping: She draws our eye to the constant presence of children on the plinths and pools of a fountain outside the Neiman Marcus store at NorthPark. But she also dives into the ways that people use malls outside of commerce. The Nashers, for instance, project civic magnanimity by opening up NorthPark for public use, including a children’s branch of the Dallas Public Library and Lunar New Year celebrations.

Another subset of the public Lange discusses is the elderly, who find in malls the predictability and safety that they can’t get in other...
environments. For example, we meet Carolina Knutson, who in her 50s became possibly the first serious mall walker, and we realize that walking around a bunch of indoor stores is actually a perfectly reasonable hobby. “The mall, in its quiet early hours, provides affordances most cities and suburbs cannot: even, open walkways, consistent weather, bathrooms, and benches,” Lange writes. Even the best public parks can’t guarantee all of those anymore. It’s a draw so powerful that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention put out a resource guide to encourage more mall walking for older people. What Lange articulates in passages like these is that the mall is no longer a mere accelerant of urban disaggregation; the city in America has become so atomized and privatized that malls are often a key provider of social goods.

Mall walkers aside, the mall has also long carried an association with youth. For many years, when a teenager wasn’t in school or at home and didn’t have some sort of extracurricular pursuit, it would be a good bet that you’d find them shopping (or, more likely, loitering) at a mall. In a lot of places, there’s really nowhere else to go. Though John Hughes’s *The Breakfast Club* follows a group of teens spending their Saturday in detention at a suburban high school, Lange diagrams the film’s stairs-and-banisters shots, which resemble an escalator-littered atrium, to show how strongly they lean on the viewer’s muscle memory of their local mall. But developers associate young people with problems, as well—they’re too loud, too wild, and don’t spend enough money—so teen magnets like video-game arcades get stashed on the mall’s higher floors or in remote corners, to quarantine their troublesome occupants. The feeling of safety so beloved by the mall walkers is guaranteed by the violence of the mall security apparatus, embodied by strict dress codes, cameras, mall cops, actual cops, curfews, anti-loitering rules, and outright bans on those below a certain age unaccompanied by chaperones. (Ironically, when Lange looks over the research of the artist-designer Chat Travieso, who convened a bunch of Bronx teens to figure out the best not-home, not-school, not-work environment for young people, she finds that “their ideal space came to sound very much like a mall: protected from the elements, with Wi-Fi and seating. Access to affordable food. Public bathrooms. Places to play. Open late.”)

Lange notes that these issues aren’t confined to malls but have become a growing problem for nearly all public spaces, which are increasingly given over to private interests. This capture is manifest throughout the history of the mall. After his Northland work, Gruen was asked to shape the shopping experience of the white-flight, racially covenanted Country Club project near Kansas City. There is also the example of the awkward friction at Denver’s Sixteenth Street Mall, whose proprietors couldn’t abide many of their own customers. Lange speaks to a former mall manager, Yvette Freeman, who recalls that her bosses wanted her to clear out a bus stop at the corner of the
mall where too many mostly Black and brown people ("these people") were gathering. She tells Lange, "I had to explain they have as much of a right to be here as anybody else."

There have been efforts over the years by people fighting for their right to hang out at the mall, but we know how this country feels about rights that weigh on revenues. In 1968’s Amalgamated Food Employees Union v. Logan Valley Plaza, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote the opinion that found that striking grocery store workers had the right to picket within the bounds of the shopping center and not just on the nearby public roads, since for all intents and purposes the shopping center existed as a truly public place. But then, four years later, that decision was overruled in Lloyd Corp., Ltd., v. Tanner, when a more conservative court ruled that Lloyd Center, a mall built on public-cum-private land, was free to decide what political speech was acceptable (presidential debates) and not acceptable (anti-war pamphlets) on its property. It’s a framing that has persisted ever since. When thousands of demonstrators showed up at the Mall of America in 2014 to protest police brutality in the wake of Michael Brown’s fatal shooting, the mall’s giant display monitors announced in all-caps: “This demonstration is not authorized and is in clear violation of Mall of America policy,” before 25 protesters were arrested.

The mall is not dead—plenty of people still go to them, and plenty of new ones are getting built—but it is not the commercial behemoth it once was. Thanks in no small part to the rise of Amazon and other e-commerce giants, the mall has fallen so far from the center of our shopping lives that in the recent Netflix documentary White Hot: The Rise and Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch, one of the film’s talking heads treats the mall as though it’s already a mysterious artifact: “Imagine, like, a search engine that you could walk through,” he intones.

The empty mall is the specter that haunts Lange’s book, especially in an age of increasingly online, disintermediated stuff-getting. Gruen’s seminal Northland, for example, fell into obscurity and disrepute before it closed in 2015. In northern New Jersey, the gargantuan American Dream mall has emerged as a rough omen for the institution’s declining status in the United States today. Opening in the shadow of MetLife Stadium just months before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has struggled mightily to get a business foothold. Neither its Nickelodeon theme park, nor its Dreamworks water park, nor the Avenue, its Instagram-friendly, 300,000-square-foot paean to luxe wares, has been enough to sustain it. Which is to say that it’s not just the Internet that is killing malls. Not only have consumer habits changed over the past two decades in favor of the artisanal and direct-to-consumer specialists, but we have also seen a sort of reverse flight from America’s more distant suburbs, draining many of these once wealthy areas of their capital and their eager-to-spend consumers. If you’re going to get in your car anyway, why not go all the way downtown instead of to the burbs?

In Meet Me by the Fountain’s introduction, Lange tells the story of her first mall, the Northgate Mall in Durham,

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**Congo: Curriculum Vitae (excerpt)**

[When one of us goes]

When one of us goes to the other world, we gather and weep so that the ocean of our tears may take the deceased to their final resting place.

[The path of life]

The path of life: a long river that flows, indifferent to our time, our wristwatches, our glances. We are only minuscule reflections of this long river.

[We watch the coffin disappear]

We watch the coffin disappear, our shadows are reflected on the bier—but are these our shadows or the spirits which already are waiting for dusk in order to haunt us?

ALAIN MABANCKOU
(Translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson)
N.C. It was a basic, L-shaped, small-town strip mall—Sears on one end, Kroger on the other—whose enclosure was itself an innovation to keep up with nearby competitors. Her second, South Square, near Chapel Hill, was fancier (a Gap!), and her third, Raleigh’s Crabtree Valley Mall, was even fancier and became the Research Triangle’s consumption lode-star. But chasing that top shopper dollar isn’t easy: Crabtree Valley stood firm, but South Square closed in 2002 and was demolished before being resurrected a few miles away as the swanky indoor-outdoor Streets at Southpoint; Northgate shrank its ambitions to local businesses instead of national chains but is nonetheless now slated for demolition.

What might bloom in the husks of dead or dying malls might not be squa-lor, Lange writes, but opportunity. Rather than tear them down, she argues, let’s reimagine their use of public space. That malls are no longer efficient engines of pure moneymaking is perhaps a good thing. Yes, their empty shells are an invitation for decay, crime, and ruin pornographers, but she makes the case that all the thought that went into their construction should not go to waste. The mall in its heyday may never have realized its promise as a public square, but perhaps it can do so now in its afterlife. In Wayzata, Minn., for example, senior housing, apartments, and a hotel have emerged from the tomb of a shopping center. In Austin, a foreclosed mall has become a community college. Given that so many malls sit atop wetlands and other environmentally sensitive areas, Lange notes, the properties could simply be returned to nature to create a more traditional kind of public space, as in Meriden, Conn., where a park and an amphitheater have replaced a moldering mall.

Whatever moral or economic or land-use injury the enclosed shopping center inflicted in the past, the buildings are here now, and Gruen’s hope that they would become exemplars of high-minded urban planning—which has remained dashed ever since the permits for Northland’s airport-like loop for buses and taxis got lost in the mail—could still be fulfilled. As Lange observes, “Any travelers in the world of dead malls must ask themselves whether they are prepared to fight to put people back into the gutted buildings, or if they merely intend to pick over the aesthetic bones.”

Unsettling Tensions

Nell Zink’s California

BY ALANA POCKROS

ROUND COLLEGE APPLICATION TIME, AN ACADEMIC counselor at West High School in Torrance, Calif., asks Bran—the narrator of Nell Zink’s new novel, Avalon—what she plans to do after graduation. Bran tells the counselor that she’s going to move to Australia to live with her biological father. It’s a plausible plan of action, but the truth is, she’s not actually sure he still lives in Australia—or whether he even moved there in the first place. In reality, Bran hasn’t planned things out beyond the next few weeks.

As readers soon find out, Bran doesn’t have the luxury for that. She’s too busy hustling through life’s physical and emotional labor. Her father’s departure was one of many traumatic disturbances in her youth: When she was 10, her mother fled to a Buddhist monastery in the Sierras to explore her spirituality, leaving Bran to live and work at a topiary nursery with her “common-law stepfather,” Doug Henderson, as well as his father, Larry; his son, Axel; and a rotating crew of migrant workers whom the family calls “Eric” or “Roger,” depending on the day.

Bran’s high school classmates are all headed to universities like UCLA, UCSD, Cal Poly, and Yale, while Bran appears destined for a life that is not all that different from the one she is current-
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ly living: working on the farm, manicuring plants with a pair of gas-powered hedge clippers, and accruing sooty calluses. Bran doesn’t quite know how she will avoid this fate, but for the rest of the book, we follow her attempts to do everything in her power to escape it. Bran moves in with a friend’s parents, falls in love with an aspiring Rhodes scholar, and ultimately does what a lot of people in Los Angeles end up doing: She tries her hand at screenwriting.

Avalon is Zink’s sixth novel, and it could be described as something of a Trojan horse: Its exterior has the appearance of a classic bildungsroman, but it contains a wry and biting critique of social mobility, labor exploitation, and creative work in Southern California. This last type of work, the novel suggests, has been sucked of its inherent value by the profit-making machine of Hollywood and also by the Internet, which we increasingly turn to in order to make sense of what kinds of art and creativity are valued and valuable. Avalon is not an inherently political book, but it has a political message nonetheless. As we accompany Bran on her journey, we are constantly presented with a big, gaping question: How does a young person become an artist in a world that caters mostly to the rich?

The elite of Southern California might not be Wall Street wealthy, but in Zink’s view, they are something perhaps even worse: They use their capital to advance themselves in cultural domains as well as economic ones. The denizens of Zink’s California use their money to pursue art, and they use that art to make more money. There is Hollywood, there are lights, but only the rich are allowed to enjoy them.

Avalon is Zink’s first novel set in California, but it is not the first time she has examined the ways in which the American economy inhibits young, creative people from living comfortably or successfully within it. The book joins a compendium of novels and short stories by Zink whose artist characters find it difficult to make ends meet. In “Marmalade Sky,” a short story adapted from her 2019 novel Doxology, we meet a group of poor, grungy musicians who have decided to start a band in 1980s New York City. Mostly, these musical hopefuls end up working predatory contract jobs or night shifts to pay the bills and never really achieve much on the musical front, as life and a lack of professional connections get in their way. In another of Zink’s stories, “Bonebreaker,” a journalist couple flee Detroit for Europe because they’re months behind on their rent and credit card payments and owe upwards of $90,000 for their student loans. Getting by, let alone becoming an artist, is a tall task in a society that rewards the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

Zink’s second and perhaps most famous novel, Mislaid, picks up on similar themes, this time through the lens of Peggy, a college-age girl living in 1960s Virginia. Peggy, the lesbian daughter of a well-off Episcopal priest, ends up having children with a gay poetry professor after a love-at-first-sight dalliance. When their relationship crumbles, Peggy runs away. She wants to live as a playwright in New York but never gets there. Instead, she moves to the South, where she changes her identity, fails to finish writing her plays, and ends up selling roadkill and nude magazines for cash.

In Avalon, Zink keeps the plot focused on her protagonist’s uphill struggle to become an artist, though this time the setting is her native West Coast in the 2010s. Zink’s California has some resonances with Joan Didion’s, chock-full of unsettling tensions that are difficult to unravel. But the contradictions in Zink’s rendering of the state are more economic than cultural. In Avalon, businesses in Torrance, the city where Bran and her family’s topiary farm are based, survive off migrant day laborers who work for nearly nothing. Meanwhile, just up the 405, Bran’s best friend Jay is taking expensive private flamenco lessons with a blind dancing coach named Loretta.

Bran’s challenges are in front of her every day, and she navigates them with grit and inventiveness, offering us a tour of the Southern Californian economy along the way. Saving enough money to buy a cheap car, she eventually vacates the topiary farm after Larry Henderson—“Grandpa Larry”—tells her to take her shirt off at a barbecue. She ends up living in the guest room at the home of her friend Will’s parents, a wealthy lawyer and doctor who are more than happy to fill their empty nest. But Bran has bigger ambitions than just escaping her stepfather’s farm. Once she moves in, her friend Peter and a John Gregory Dunne book inspire her to embrace a new goal: She will become a screenwriter in Hollywood.

To break out on her own, Bran gets a job at a coffee shop in a strip mall and picks up some house-sitting and yard work gigs. She also falls in with an artsy and literary set at nearby UCLA. Jay, her friend from high school who studies dance and later film there, becomes one means of entry into this exciting new world of art and ideas. Jay’s brainy, New England–raised friend Peter proves even more formative. Bran quickly falls for him, reading what he recommends and finding herself endlessly debating ideas with him: postmodernism, fascism, and the work of Milton Erickson.

Peter is equal parts condescending and manipulative. He’s the kind of guy who sits beside a pool shading his eyes with an unread issue of The New York Review of Books as he mansplains the concept of tragedy. After he applies to transfer to Harvard, he gets engaged to a wealthy girl named Yasira while continuing a long-distance flirtation with Bran. Peter admits at times that he feels blasé about his partnership with Yasira, but he believes her family will provide him with prestigious professional connections, and so, he tells Bran, she makes for obvious marriage material. Bran often has moments of clarity in which she recognizes that “I was being fucked with.” But as anyone who has once been young knows, this doesn’t necessarily make her crush any less urgent.

As Bran grows closer to Jay and Peter’s intellectual and artsy circle, a distinction becomes clear to the reader: Her friends all strike heady poses, but they are also tireless in their pursuit of lucrative jobs. Jay wants to produce films
in Hollywood; Peter wants to sell a book while also doing something that will send him to high-profile conferences; Will wants to use technology to unlock the potential of South American bugs; and most of their other friends are interested in vague careers that will offer the opportunity to “meet rich people.” For them, technological innovation—social media included—is one more way for them to get ahead, amplifying the specter of limitless self-optimization. As Peter mentions one day, complimenting Bran for being different, most of their peers are “cyborgs training themselves to be bots,” whom must deal with “the agony of reconciling algorithmic packaging with the living body.”

Bran also wants to succeed, but without much more than a hand-me-down cellphone, she must focus on becoming a writer the hard way, working on honing the right story arcs and “meditating over paragraphs like mantras” instead of tweets and Instagram posts. She’s not expecting much monetary reward for her creations, or even much success, but she’s invested nonetheless. Perhaps for this reason, she actually makes some headway on her writing projects. Yet her screenwriting “career,” we discover, mostly involves anonymously collaborating on a series of scripts with Jay, who was born into a world that gives him the kind of access that Bran does not have.

The pair write a screenplay about an alien apocalypse that Jay submits in one of his classes and earns praise from his professor. This leads Jay and Bran to collaborate on another screenplay and then another—one of which helps Jay get accepted to a graduate school focused on films about “social change.” The last project we hear of is a screenplay based on an old project of hers and Jay’s that she writes for Jay while he’s on vacation with his parents in Wyoming. Bran may have become a screenwriter of sorts, but not one who gets paid or even garners that much attention. By the end of the book, she has driven up the coast to meet Peter at a literary party in Santa Cruz. He has assured her that it will be an opportunity to meet important writers and improve her career prospects. What the two of them find there is not exactly the professional buoy they were hoping for, but they do gain a new entry point into their romance. We are left hoping that Bran finds her way out in the real world, but a little unclear as to whether this hope will be redeemed.

Avalon is in some ways a work of historical fiction, re-creating the immediate past of the 2010s for Bran and her cohort of friends. But at times Zink has some lapses. Having myself graduated from high school in the 2010s—in Southern California, to boot—it seems that in some places Zink doesn’t quite get the history right, washing together a series of years marked by distinct cultural developments. In 2012, for example, 19- and 20-year-olds with Internet access weren’t worried about, or even yet aware of, how the algorithms of social media were remaking their lives. People were still on Facebook; recreational Twitter was for sharing inside jokes with friends, and Instagram was still in its youth, not yet hawking us advertisements for the coffee maker we were just thinking about. Social media was certainly consuming us, but we enjoyed it more for its entertainment and connection value than its capacity to help us get ahead.

But these days, social media does serve as a funnel for careerism, which is part of why Bran tries to avoid it, and also what makes Avalon more of a parable about the artist in a capitalist society struggling to make art and enjoy life despite a lack of financial, institutional, and supportive resources. In this sense, Zink may not get the 2010s right, but she does paint a rather authentic image of Southern California, one that elucidates how—not only there, but particularly there—financial and cultural capital have become so intertwined that someone without the former can’t reasonably have access to the latter.

The incisiveness of Zink’s portrait of Southern California is perhaps also the result of her own proximity to it and to the kind of life that Bran leads. Growing up in a zip code an hour or two east of Torrance, Zink has had a life, like Bran’s, full of itinerancy and economic insecurity. After moving out of California at age 8, she moved to Virginia, and after graduating, she became homeless in her college town, storing her belongings in different people’s houses for as long as she could. Through-out her life, Zink has worked at a string of odd jobs to get by, including bricklaying, waitressing, secretarial work, technical writing, and translating. She’s moved around the world, living in Tel Aviv and then moving to Germany in 2000, where she lives now, an hour outside Berlin.

Zink’s work has been critically acclaimed, but she’s never been part of the Ivy League or MFA circles typical for contemporary novelists, and she has mostly tiptoed around the rim of the literary world. The tensions between meritocracy and art-making, and capitalism and culture, have been central preoccupations in her life as well as her fiction. “There’s never a market for true art,” she once told The Paris Review. “So my main concern was always to have a job that didn’t require me to write or think.”

Since Avalon’s release, Zink has acknowledged that the novel is autobiographical, while also noting that her life has not exactly been the same as “poor little Bran’s.” Perhaps the best way to understand the book, then, is not as a portrait of the artist, but as a playbook for how to be one. Like many artists, Bran is forced to struggle to make her way in a society where financial resources, family connections, and institutional credentials seem to matter more than how well you make the damn thing. If Didion offered us a view of California that was often critical of its bohemian milieu, Zink presents us with one that is far more sympathetic: For her, California is a place in which the economic stratifications that Didion was mostly unconcerned with have not only hardened but now dictate the cultural spheres, too. For Zink, there is such a thing as an artist in Southern California—just not a very good or genuine one. Real art can persist, but only at the margins.

This might justify the way in which Zink understands her place in the world vis-à-vis writers who struggled less to find their way into fiction writing. But Zink also appears to be making an argument about why one might pursue a life as an artist: not to have a career at all, but simply to create something of artistic value. This is a carefree way of thinking—one that, while perhaps too illusory and utopian to adopt in practice, is also too idealistic and beautiful not to imagine for oneself.
Clear and Urgent Action

A graphic history of the International Brigades

BY BILL FLETCHER JR.

OMETIME PRIOR TO MY EIGHTH BIRTHDAY, MY great-grandfather, the poet, writer, and anthologist William Stanley Braithwaite, bought me my first comic book. For reasons that I have long since forgotten, we walked to a pharmacy on the corner of Edgecombe Avenue and St. Nicholas Place in Harlem. While there, I was looking over the comic books and chose The Illustrated Story of the Coast Guard as the one that I wanted. My great-grandfather asked no questions and purchased it for me. I still have it somewhere in my house.

Thus began my love affair with comic books, an affair that lasted into my early teens, when it rather abruptly stopped. It no longer seemed “cool” to read and own comic books—and I had a range of them, from war comics to superheroes. Although I kept them stored in a box in my basement, any thought of them recessed to the edges of my memory. It was only years later that I rediscovered comic books—as well as, these days, graphic novels—as something that had a value exceeding mere entertainment for younger people. In Latin America, in particular, they became an important instrument for progressive and left-wing political education over the years. Increasingly, such comics have been reintroduced into the United States too, though so much of the industry is dominated by the superhero genre.

It is with this context in mind that I turned my attention to Miguel Ferguson's ¡Brigadistas!, a fascinating—indeed, gripping—look at the experiences of one young leftist from the United States who volunteered to go to Spain in 1937 to fight the fascists there as part of the International Brigades. Specifically, this young volunteer was in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, one of many such units from countries around the world.

Before I discuss the book, it is worth reminding the reader that the Spanish Civil War was a dramatic precursor to World War II, along with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the Japanese invasion of
Manchuria in 1931 and the rest of China in 1937. The Spanish Civil War galvanized international opinion against the growing fascist threat—but such opinion was insufficient to influence the governments of Britain, France, and the United States to support the legitimate Spanish government, which faced a military coup attempt by Gen. Francisco Franco, followed by the direct intervention of forces from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Franklin Roosevelt is fondly remembered by many Americans today as the president who led the charge against fascism in World War II, but at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Roosevelt felt insecure in tackling the largely right-wing isolationist movement to such a degree that he took no public effort to come to the aid of the Spanish Republic. Thus it was the global left that mobilized and sent thousands of volunteers to serve in the cause of freedom and anti-fascism.

¡Brigadistas! examines this key historical moment through the perspective of a young Jewish radical named Abe Rubenoff, who, as a result of his organizing work in New York City, becomes enraged by the right-wing uprising in Spain and the refusal of the liberal democracies to confront the very real fascist threat. Based on a true story, the graphic novel follows Rubenoff as his anger leads him to volunteer. Enlisting in the International Brigades, he and a group of friends ship out to Spain in 1937.

Overseas, Rubenoff joins the spirited and defiant army of the Spanish Republic, which—though poorly organized and poorly equipped in its fight against the well-armed military insurgents of Franco’s Nationalist Army—is determined to do all it can to keep the forces of reaction from taking over Spain. Franco’s forces are actively supported by the Italians and Germans, who used the conflict as a testing ground for military equipment, strategies, and tactics that would later be employed against the rest of Europe. (One example was the massive bombing of civilians in Guernica, an event made famous by Pablo Picasso’s painting of the same name.)

It takes nothing away from the story to say that it ends with the International Brigades being withdrawn from Spain in what many people understood at the time to reflect nothing more than a magical hope by the Spanish government that the removal of these foreign fighters would allow the League of Nations to insist that Germany and Italy withdraw as well. Yet the League did nothing, and the Republican government collapsed in March of 1939. Germany invaded Poland in September and launched the rest of Europe into a world war.

Using an illustrated format to tell Rubenoff’s story is a brilliant approach. For one thing, much of the history of the Spanish Civil War has been forgotten or even actively suppressed over the decades. Those who volunteered to fight against Franco and the Nationalists came to be referred to in mainstream US circles as “premature anti-fascists”—that is, they should have waited until the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, before taking up the cause. Such a view reflected the hope in some portions of the ruling elite of Britain, France, and the United States that Germany and Italy could be encouraged to attack the Soviet Union instead. Indeed, there was also considerable interest within these three countries in the Fascist and Nazi approaches to economic reorganization and suppression of the working class (and dissent).

¡Brigadistas! provides a useful vehicle to tell the other side of that grim story. Ferguson deserves to be applauded for incorporating nuance into both the characters and the narrative of ¡Brigadistas! instead of hitting the reader over the head with political messaging. Don’t get me wrong: This is a very political book. But not everything about the characters and how they interact with one another is “politically correct,” making this a far more realistic drama than one might expect.

As with other well-written historical works, ¡Brigadistas! leaves one hoping for a different ending. That does not mean a different ending to the book, but a different ending for what turned out to be the tragic defeat of the Spanish Republic in 1939. One feels the sense of loss and disappointment experienced by those who volunteered to fight in the International Brigades when they are forced to withdraw from the country, only to witness the collapse of the Spanish government in the face of the fascist onslaught.

¡Brigadistas! is not just the story of a historical moment; it also offers an important opportunity to consider the international character of anti-fascism. Although the International Brigades were a particularly dramatic illustration of anti-fascism and international solidarity in practice, there have been many other such examples, including the volunteers from the United States who stood in solidarity with guerrillas who fought against Portuguese colonialism in Africa in the 1960s and ‘70s, as well as those who supported the Nicaraguan government in the 1980s war against the US-backed contras.

Yet there is a deeper question to examine here—or perhaps a set of deeper questions. What is the character of today’s far right, and what are our tasks in response? What forms should the international solidarity of the oppressed take in today’s world, with its myriad struggles against authoritarianism and aggression? And why should anyone concern themselves with global issues when there are so many struggles at home? ¡Brigadistas! does not answer these questions, nor does it set out to do so. But it puts these questions before the left, reminding us of a time when the answers demanded clear and urgent action rather than mere resolutions.

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The art monsters of Todd Field’s Tár

BY PHOEBE CHEN

We first meet Lydia Tár waiting in the wings of an auditorium, called to the stage and lavished with a listing of her accolades: She is a lauded composer, a trained concert pianist, one of only 15 people to score an EGOT, and the holder of a PhD in musicology from the University of Vienna, where she specialized in the Indigenous music of eastern Peru’s Ucayali Valley. These laurels are recited by Adam Gopnik, who is introducing Tár for a talk at the New Yorker Festival, occasioned by the upcoming publication of Tár’s memoir and her live recording of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic, where she has been chief conductor for seven years. Her on-stage musings are dense with esoterica, and stilted affectations mark her speech, as if she has rehearsed the cadence of profundity. Lydia Tár, if it is not already clear, is a very, very serious artist. Seriousness and the spirit of extravagance, to cite Susan Sontag, are the hallmarks of camp, and they give us a clue about the tonal mysteries to come: Like its title character, Tár turns out to be extravagantly serious.

But before we hear Tár (played by Cate Blanchett) deliver her prestige-laden salvo, we are primed for the film’s incongruous mix of affects by an opening that is equally oblique.

After a brief shot of Tár in mid-sleep disarray, caught via smartphone livestream—the first of social media’s many intrusions—the film pivots to what we’d normally expect at the end: The entire closing credits unfurl on the screen, set to a lilting icaro sung by the Shipibo-Konibo shaman Elisa Vargas Fernandez, whose voice is layered with birdsong and humming cicadas. The provenance of this audio is never explained, though it’s likely a field recording made by Tár, since we hear her cajole the performance from the singer in a frustrated staccato: “No… just… ignore the microphone, act as if it’s not there; sing as if it’s not there.” These preliminary gestures announce Tár’s sprawling concerns—the ethics of artistic genius, the miasma of institutional corruption—while setting us up for the almost incalculable critique that follows, as punch lines ricochet with disorienting fervor.

Tár carries the vestiges of Blanchett’s performance in Carol (2015), her other titular sapphic role as a moneyed and repressed urbanite straining against the force of her own want. But here, Lydia Tár—who surrenders so intuitively to her desires that she could never see their pursuit as predation—strains against a life built on delusion. Every frame in Tár is as contrived as the person it follows: Field’s compositions are arrayed with enough luxury commodities for a feature in Architectural Digest. Most of Tár’s clothes are made-to-measure by tailors at Egon Brandtetter, every buttoned-up collar and pin-tucked trouser pleat yielding to the peculiarities of her body in motion. She drives an electric Porsche sedan, gliding through the streets of Berlin like a sleek silver shark, and inside the brutalist apartment she shares with her partner, Sharon Goodnow (Nina Hoss), and their adopted daughter, Petra, the prosaic domestic scene becomes another site for flaunting her discernment.

A life this hermetic is no solitary
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Tár does not obscure the fact of its antagonist’s guilt.

UCH IS the promising but vexing trick that structures Tár and invites easy misreadings: The film hews to its central character’s perspective while denying its audience the information requisite for empathetic identification. Field places us into the immediacy of Tár’s day-to-day life—rehearsals, board meetings, manic bouts of exercise—and her interiority surfaces only in the psychic detritus of nocturnal visions and phantom sounds that pierce her sleep and send her searching in the ink-black night. That we are locked in present-tense action and entirely closed off from Tár’s past is part of the distancing necessary for the film’s partial ambiguity, though it offers a frank enough stance on one point: The particulars of her past abuse might be suppressed, but she is clearly abusive.

By withholding memory and any substantive evocation of Tár’s childhood, Field avoids the rationale of a backstory. Her abhorrent behavior is never given a legible motivation and therefore partial
absolution. The few scraps of her biography divulge no formative trauma beyond the usual class shame: in her escape from a cramped home in the suburbs of Staten Island, her birth name (Linda) gained a syllable and her accent a Mid-Atlantic cadence. Even as swelling trails of correspondence with former mentees become damning enough for litigation, the full picture of Tár’s transgressions remains a looming shadow, the number of her victims untold. We are aligned with her insofar as she seems pathetically, desperately human, but never worthy of pity or redemption—something that she herself does not appear so witless as to expect. For all its calculated opacity, Tár does not obscure the fact of its antagonist’s guilt.

While the film’s piecemeal portrait is part of the point, it tests our ability to put up with another kind of cloistered insularity that runs through Tár’s life: All those meticulous interiors—polished concrete and glass; the beechwood-paneled concert hall—are displays of aspirational Europhilia. In these stark confines, made icier by a muted blue light that washes every frame in a clinical pall, the putative “Other” becomes conspicuous: Tár’s snide remarks about the “Chinese market,” the BIPOC student she bullied at Juilliard, even her daughter, who is a Syrian adoptee. The presence of these racialized figures is marked by an ambivalence that feels discomfiting. In a film shaped by its sense of claustrophobic whiteness and the prejudices of its antagonist, it becomes hard to tell who is in on the joke, or if one is even being made at all. Depiction, as the axiom goes, is not endorsement, but in following a white liberal’s fettered cosmopolitan gaze, the film can only replicate the very constraints of that perspective. Even if the emphasis on Tár’s ethnomusicology fieldwork is a reflexive comment on the seizure of Indigenous knowledge by the academy, the film ultimately invokes Shipibo-Konibo culture as little more than ornamental flourishes—cryptic dreams that foment intrigue; a line in Tár’s CV; a stylized photograph of a shaman mounted in her home like so much decor.

Tár’s fraught handling of the so-called Other moves to center stage in the final act, when her downfall takes her to an unnamed Southeast Asian country. She’s there for a conducting job, but we find her, for the first time, lingering in the open air: boating down a glassy river, seeking respite in a thunderous waterfall, annotating her score at a street food stall in lieu of an office. If she feels demeaned by her new milieu, we never see her express it, and for a moment her relocation seems to reveal some kernel of genuine integrity, a devotion to conducting so intense that she’d go anywhere in its pursuit. But before her ostensible humbling, before she has even left the Western metropole, there is a scene that slyly undermines the arc that follows. In the briefest of meetings with a crisis management agency, we hear the gist of a PR strategy: “Right now, it’s a reset,” an adviser cautions Tár. “That means we need a new story.”

Beneath the surface curations of her life an undertow of disorder surges.

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