

"It's Chomsky's Revenge!" — Slavoj Žižek

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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MAR./APR. 2020



ELON MUSK
and other stupid dorks

NORWEGIAN BLUES
how to get rid of them (it's socialism)

MYSTERIES OF GENDER
solved before your eyes



Miscellaneous Motley

DEATH TO ALL NON-SILLY THINGS

Robes Now Mandatory

Before the Crisis, it was permissible to wear any bold thing while reading this magazine. No longer. There is now only one proper garment in which to devour our pages: a stately and luxurious dressing gown, preferably in an ornamented jacquard with velvet trim. We do not require, but we encourage, the consumption of tea, coffee, and pastries alongside our print edition. These are negotiable, but one thing is not: a robe must be worn at all times. Anything else is obscene.



Bay-B-Clean

"Because Your Newborn Is Gross"

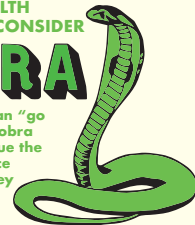


CONCIERGE

NO HEALTH INSURANCE? CONSIDER

COBRA

by which we mean "go to a zoo, lure a cobra into biting you, sue the zoo for negligence and use the money to pay for healthcare"



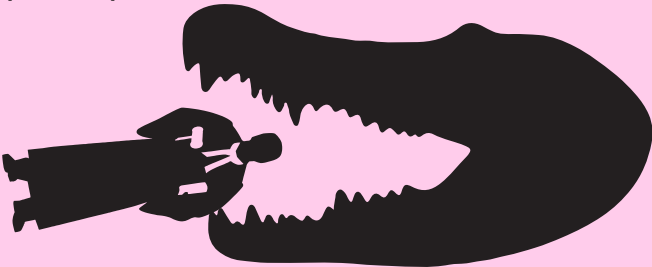
The Order In Which We Will FEED THE JUDGES TO EACH OTHER

A zoo in Germany recently horrified children across the country by doing an extremely German thing. According to the BBC:

Ms Kaspari at Neumünster Zoo said killing some animals so that others could live would be a last resort, and "unpleasant", but even that would not solve the financial problem. The seals and penguins needed big quantities of fresh fish daily, she pointed out. "If it comes to it, I'll have to euthanise animals, rather than let them starve," she said. "At the worst, we would have to feed some of the animals to others."

The zoo even said it knew the order in which animals would be fed to other animals, and that the polar bear "would be spared until it was the last animal standing." Now, readers, we admit that this is dark. But you cannot deny it is pragmatic. And so surely, with the nation facing emergency, it is in the interests of our own country to put together a similar list. However, instead of feeding animals to animals, our list should contain a list of federal judges and the order in which they will be fed to both wild animals and each other.

The difficulty here is not in deciding which judges should be eaten, for the answer is plainly "all of them," with Sonia Sotomayor spared until she is the last standing. Nor is there any difficulty in deciding to prioritize all animals over all judges, for the moral superiority of even the most unscrupulous carnivores over any given member of the federal judiciary is arguable. No, the tricky thing is: which animals deserve which judges? Is it animal cruelty to encourage a creature to eat a judge? With what should the judges be served? All of these, however, are technical questions, and can be sorted out in time. The first task is to secure a national commitment to the project and commission a feasibility study. We are confident that our proposal, if acted upon swiftly, will hasten human progress toward a world of peace and justice.



"Wisdom & Insight

Every cell in your body is made of either things you ate or things your mom ate. Every particle that is part of you was forged inside a stellar explosion and will continue to exist for trillions of years after you die. Every calorie you burn was built by a plant from dirt and sunshine in the relatively recent past.



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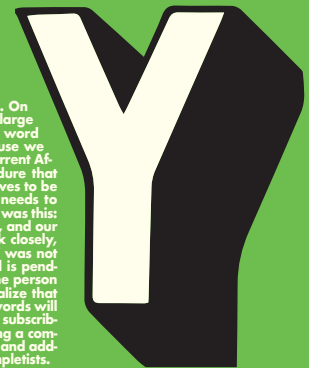
DELICIOUS FRUIT SALAD RECIPE:

combine fresh corn off the cob with chopped bell pepper, tomato, cucumber, jalapeno, and sliced arocado. Season with salt and pepper



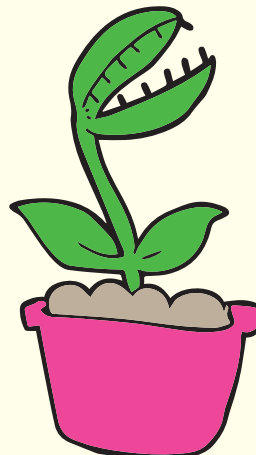
Free Y

In the last edition of the magazine, a Y was missing. On page two, the word "PREFATORY" was written in large letters. Except it wasn't. What was written was the word "PREFATORY," which means nothing. This is not because we misspelled the word. Au Contraire, each edition of Current Affairs is put through an intensive copy-editing procedure that results in zero official typos. (Anything a reader believes to be a typo is in fact intentional, and the reader simply needs to think harder about its meaning.) No, what happened was this: a magazine spread contains a "gutter" in the middle, and our precious Y slipped and fell into the gutter. If you look closely, you can even see one of its ears sticking out. (The Y was not wounded, though an OSHA complaint was filed and is pending.) We regret the mishap. We have ensured that the person responsible will no longer be making errors. We realize that readers of Current Affairs have come to expect that words will come with all of their letters attached. To compensate subscribers for the unexpected loss, we are therefore including a complimentary extra Y with this issue, that can be cut out and added to the Jan-Feb. Issue. We trust this will satisfy completists.



NOT A CORRECTION

In the last issue, the phrase "carnivorous plants" was printed in cursive script. Several readers wrote in with irate comments, under the mistaken impression that we had written "coronavirus plants." Plants, they informed us, cannot get coronavirus. Tigers, yes. Senators, indubitably. But plants, so far as we can tell, do not suffer. Nor does coronavirus "grow on plants." What, then, these readers asked, could we possibly mean by this curious expression? The answer is: we did not mean anything by it, because we never said it. It is regrettable that young people today are not taught calligraphy and the other "hand arts." But the stagnation of the American education system is not the fault of Current Affairs and we decline to take responsibility. Look closer. Not everything is about the bloody virus. Sometimes a plant is just a plant.



Letter

Dear SIRS,

I noticed that a recent edition included a square (■) reserved for nothing but pictures of shrimp, among which were sprinkled large question marks. I scrutinized this improbable diagram for hours but could not discern its meaning. I demand to know: what is this all about? What am I supposed to learn from this? Who is this for? Why have you done this? Without a satisfying answer I shall be forced to cancel my subscription.

ANONYMOUS
Plantain, FL

Dear SEXIST MYSTERY SUBSCRIBER: The illustration was self-explanatory. The editorial staff of Current Affairs are not here to explain every last piece of allegory and synecdoche that appears in our pages. If you do not know what a word means, we recommend consulting a dictionary. If truly you are mystified by an item of content, consider joining a local Current Affairs reading society and raising the topic for discussion there.

Magazine Meanderings

N O W L E S S R E L E V A N T T H A N E V E R



"WHY NOT TAKE AN ANGRY WALK IN A BEAUTIFUL FOREST?"

PRANK

TO PLAY ON A STRANGER: put a *current affairs* on their doorstep, ring the doorbell, run away!

Extra Mischief:

you can REALLY twist the knife by buying them a full year-long subscription!



CONTEST TO SEE WHICH SUBSCRIBER CAN IMITATE THEIR CAT THE BEST

We are pleased to announce our annual "Successfully Imitating A Cat" contest. Many of our subscribers have cats, and we are routinely sent photographs of these cats sitting on or appearing to read copies of *Current Affairs*. (Please continue sending these.) We therefore believe it makes sense to hold a contest rewarding those who can accurately imitate the behavior of cats. Winner will be honored in the magazine and possibly given a sticker. No further details available.



This Machine SOOTHES BABIES

Dear Editors,

I want to thank you for providing an excellent, albeit indirect, baby soothing tool. The other day, I was exhausted and at the end of my rope after a fussy day with my 6-week-old. As I was holding my restless baby, weeping a little and unable to do any more rocking/swaying/bouncing, I started to browse a back issue of *Current Affairs* given to me by a friend. "Regarding Octopus on Face" made me laugh so hard (silently, because I didn't want to startle the baby) that the shaking motion of my torso bounced the baby to sleep! I have now become a subscriber and look forward to future issues of your wonderful publication slash calmer of crying babies and adults.

All my best,
Jade (Durham, NC)



do you love being the boss? are you a petty tyrant? join your

HOA!

HOME OWNERS ASSOCIATION

Policy Proposal

as you announce you are running for president, parasites invade your body and eat your soul

2 # of issues since last terrorist plot inspired **2**



UNIVERSAL BASIC CACTI ALLOWANCE

"It just makes perfect sense!"



EDITORIAL STANCE

Human food should be simply referred to as «wet» or «dry» the same as cat food.

are plants mocking us?

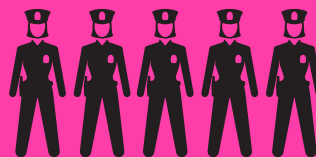
Find out in the next issue.



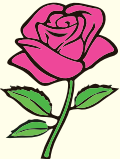
COLLECTIVE NOUNS FOR GROUPS OF

Terrible People

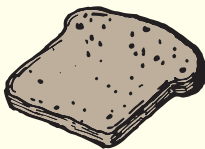
- ✦ A pustule of cops
- ✦ A uselessness of liberals
- ✦ A hydra of hedge fund managers
- ✦ A crustification of pundits
- ✦ A diarrhea of landlords



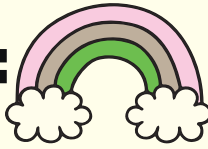
it's just math!



+



=



ALL GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT IS JUST A BIG MISUNDERSTANDING



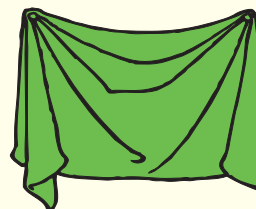
BATMAN & ROBIN



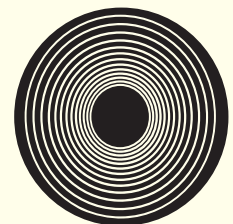
It has taken many months of intense and at times acrimonious negotiations. But, readers, we have done it. We have officially licensed "The Adventures of Batman and Robin" to print in the magazine. It was not easy. TABR is a hot intellectual property, and its owners demanded a hefty fee. We have been forced to place a mortgage on the *Current Affairs* building, and to sublet floor space to dubiously ethical companies. We do not wish to discuss the sum we spent (though it can readily be found in the deals section of industry publications), but it amounts to over 150 percent of what we typically expend in a full year on printed content. We are confident, however, that holding exclusive rights to one of the world's most popular comics will be well worth it in the long run for the boost in circulation that it provides. The first installment we have received from the artist, "The Bat-Man and the Robin Take An Unexpected Journey," can be found on page 75. Installment #2 will be printed in our summer edition. We hope that your enjoyment of this seminal franchise more than compensates for the exorbitant sum we have been forced to spend licensing it!

Coronaffairs

It has come to our attention that readers are in search of solace and assistance during quarantine. In addition to the words of comfort that litter our pages, we are pleased here to provide a "lockdown survival kit" that we believe will usefully aid the maintenance of your sanity during Difficult Times. Cut out the objects and use them at your discretion.



GREEN SCREEN BLANKET TO LAY ON YOUR COUCH SO YOUR ZOOM VIRTUAL BACKGROUND WORKS BETTER



PORTABLE VOID TO SCREAM INTO

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It's Time For New MONUMENTS

by ROBERT GREENE II

“THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN remembrance of history and reverence of it.” New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu uttered these words as part of a speech in 2015, explaining why he favored taking down a monument in New Orleans dedicated to the white supremacist paramilitaries known as the White League, who attempted to overthrow the Louisiana state government in 1874. For him and his supporters, taking down the monument not only responded to modern debates around monuments dotting Southern state capitol grounds and town squares, but made sense as an attempt to imagine a better South. The debate over the statue was tumultuous, and workers who were assigned the task of taking down the statue had to wear defensive flak jackets, working by night under police protection. New Orleans’ decision to take down statues like these, dedicated to the white supremacist legacy of Southern history, stands out as an outlier. Thousands of other statues dedicated to the worst of American history continue to stand. The debate about these statues continues to be a robust one. However, it may be time for those on the Left to not only argue for why statues should be taken down, but why new ones should be put up.

The fight over statues and historical representation across the nation may seem, especially now, like a waste of time and resources. “If you pull down the statue but you do not pull down the statutes, the laws that support them, we still have issues,” argued Reverend William Barber II in 2017 during the height of the debate over Confederate statues after the Charlottesville murder of Heather Heyer. This is definitely true—the fight against white supremacy will not be won until the ideas that buttress such a system are so thoroughly discredited as to never again pose a threat to American society. However, putting up *new* statues across the South can help in this regard, as it changes the lens through which so many Americans understand their own past. It is long past time

for the building of new monuments to several important leaders in the struggle for civil, political, and human rights across the South, many of whom have been largely ignored by mainstream histories of the South and the United States.

Historians have pointed to the history of Confederate monuments as a chief example of how white supremacy has been upheld through cultural practices since the end of the American Civil War. Karen Cox, one of the leading historians on the rise and utility of Confederate monuments, has linked the proliferation of these statues to modern problems with racism and prejudice in modern society. Her book *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* has become a landmark in the field of what can be called “Confederate Studies”—an attempt to reckon with how a short-lived attempt to build a new nation has reverberated for generations. In an op-ed for the *New York Times* in 2017, shortly after the Charlottesville march, Cox explained how these statues and the ideology behind them have long had a political cost. “Confederate ‘heritage,’ as a unifying theme for the South,” writes Cox, “also obscures the way that white elites use the white working class to do their bidding by pitting them against those with whom they have more in common economically than those in power.”

Cox and other historians have brought context and analysis to these statues, many of which have marked the Southern landscape for generations. David Blight in *Race and Reunion*, or Adam Domby in *The False Cause*, among many other scholars, have pointed to the long-standing links between the movements to raise these statues, and the tendency throughout Southern history towards the defence of white supremacy. Instead of thinking of them merely as statues that tell the history of the Southern past, the statues themselves—like so much of Southern society—uphold a version of white supremacy that erases virtually all resistance to that society.

There is already talk, for example, of building a monument in South Carolina to famed American Civil War hero Robert Smalls. (Smalls, who as a slave led the capture of the Confederate naval vessel *The Planter* and navigated it safely to a Union fortification, became a noted politician and activist for civil rights during the Reconstruction era). A movement towards a more inclusive idea of who should be memorialized, however, will also mean an honest and forthright reckoning with the past. This means not just remembering our past, but also includes tying what has happened in the past to events in the present—something which was, in fact, at the heart of many ceremonies dedicating Confederate and other statues across the South in the late 19th and 20th centuries, but would today mean properly honoring freedom fighters who resisted white supremacy and oppression.

FOR A HANDFUL OF SOUTHERN STATES, I SHALL recommend at least one person who deserves a statue. These heroes and heroines of the past acted in solidarity with other oppressed groups and peoples, and were usually *persona non grata* in many parts of the South. Some figures will likely be known to at least a few readers of this magazine. Others, however, have still not received their full due as members of the long struggle across the South to save the region from the white supremacy and crushing hypercapitalism that has long defined the region.

Coming back to South Carolina, several figures emerge as potential candidates for recipients of a statue. Freedom fighters such as Modjeska Simkins and Septima Clark both deserve a statue on the Statehouse grounds of Columbia, South Carolina. Simkins was a critical leader in the fight for human rights in South Carolina throughout the twentieth century, often sought after as an ally by civil rights advocates for decades. She often connected the Civil Rights Movement to human rights struggles across the world. Argued Simkins, “The masses are crushed by politicians who don’t understand homelessness or poverty.” When she was

accused of working with Communists during the Cold War, Simkins instead defended her need to work with anyone trying to destroy the pernicious regime of Jim Crow. Septima Clark, likewise, was a stalwart for education and Black freedom throughout her life, leading citizenship workshops that educated African Americans across the South about their rights as American citizens. Born and raised in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, Clark would receive training at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and, after losing her teaching job due to her activism, became a prominent proponent of the importance of literacy for hundreds of thousands of Americans to be able to practice their rights as citizens.

Georgia will likely one day build a statue dedicated to adopted native son and legendary activist John Lewis. While most Americans today remember his heroism on the Edmund Pettis Bridge during the “Bloody Sunday” police attack on protestors in 1965, such a statue should also mark how radical Lewis was in comparison with other civil rights leaders. His speech at the 1963 March on Washington, for example, was seen by many civil rights leaders and the John F. Kennedy administration as being too radical. Lewis refused to let Americans forget the true stakes of the movement for freedom and justice in the 1950s and 1960s. Lewis thundered in front of the Lincoln Memorial, “My friends, let us not forget that we are involved in a serious social revolution.” Lewis continued on in his speech to condemn both major parties. “But what political leader can stand up and say, ‘My party is the party of principles’? For the party of Kennedy is also the party of (James) Eastland. The party of (Jacob) Javits is also the party of Goldwater. Where is our party?” “Where,” Lewis lamented, “is the political party that will make it unnecessary to march on Washington?”

Florida could, finally, erect a statue to Harry T. Moore and Harriette V.S. Moore. This husband and wife crusading team were murdered on Christmas night, 1951, by a bomb that destroyed their home. The two were important leaders for civil rights activism in Florida, a state that is often overshadowed in the histories of civil rights that emphasize Alabama or Mississippi. Harry Moore founded the NAACP chapter in Brevard County, Florida, and led the Progressive Voters League, an organization dedicated to mobilizing African American voters. Both were instrumental in strengthening the state NAACP organization in the late 1940s. Both worked as educators, and both lost their jobs due to their activism. In 2016, the *Orlando Sentinel* opinion writer Beth Kassab called on the state legislature to erect a statue to Harry Moore, arguing that he “was ahead of his time.”

A statue offers an opportunity to not just memorialize someone for their actions, but it is also the best chance to educate more Americans about the nation’s checkered past. A monument to the Moores would be a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice some civil rights activists had to make in the fight against white supremacy. The Moores led the Brevard County chapter of the NAACP during an era of both entrenched defense of Jim Crow segregation, and another Red Scare that threatened to drive out numer-



“Vote! This guy!”

ous devoted members of the movement. Socialists, Communists, and others on the Left were the most stalwart of allies for members of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1930s and 1940s, but were often the first ones targeted by reactionary politicians during the early Cold War era for purging from these movements.

The history of the American South is one that often erases people who resisted white supremacy, regardless of their own race. Somewhere, a statue should be dedicated to the 100,000 white Southerners who fought for the Union during the American Civil War. General George Thomas, a white Virginian who (unlike Robert E. Lee) fought for the Union, has a statue in Washington D.C. Individual states, however, should also devote some space in their memorial exhibits to people who did not desert the nation in its hour of greatest need. Their presence would move along the process of acknowledging the bravery and sacrifice of those who fought for a nation where there was at least a chance of African American freedom and advancement.

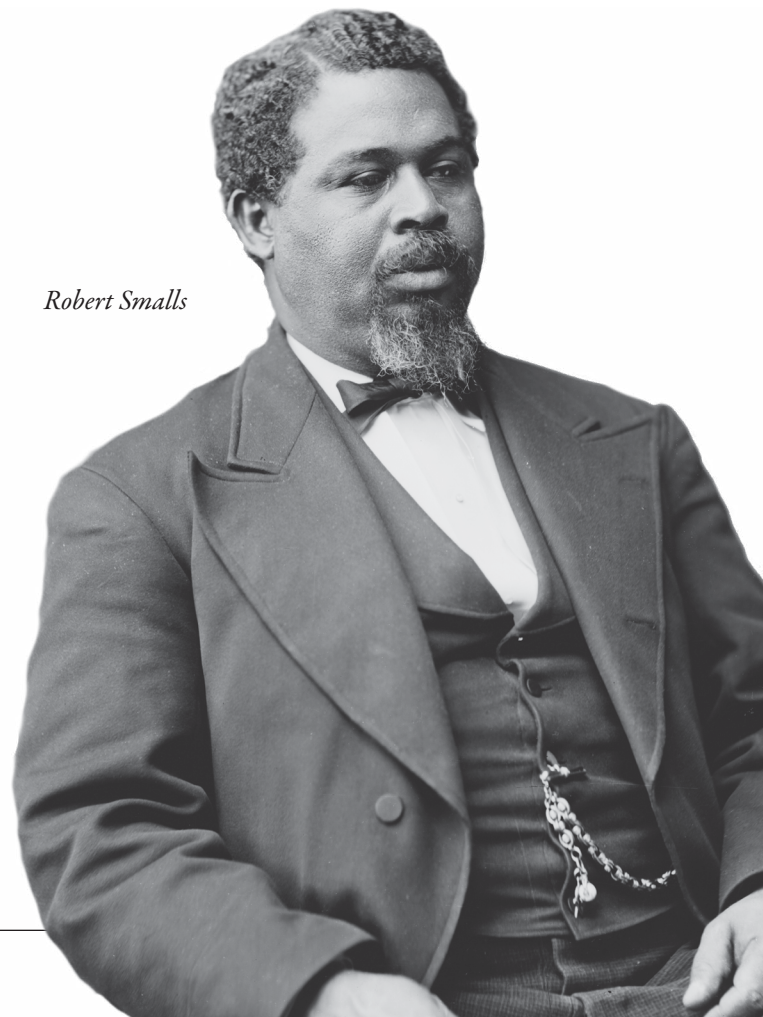
THE POINT OF ERECTING THESE MONUMENTS would not be to “erase” the past, an accusation often lobbed at those who wish for Confederate statues to be torn down, as some who argue against taking down statues point out. Instead, it would be to provide a balance to the narrative—a way for people to understand that, contrary to what popular culture and some versions of mainstream history tell you, the American South has not merely been a place of white supremacy, terrorism, and fear. There have always been Southerners who fought back, doing their best to resist *and* save the South from its worst impulses. Giving people an understanding of the past that centers movements of revolution and change pushes Americans in the here and now to consider what *they* can do to make a difference.

This would also provide an impetus to craft a statue to Anne Braden in Kentucky. Braden was a long-serving activist who fought for human rights for decades, often alongside better-known activists such as Coretta Scott King. One element of Braden’s story that is especially important is that, as a white woman who grew up in the Jim Crow South, she was not afraid once reaching adulthood to question what she once accepted as the typical way of doing things. Her revolt against Southern white supremacy was slow, but it became a hallmark of her adult life. Braden’s story is also critical to know because, like the many others in this list, it pushes forward the knowledge of how much sacrifice has to be made in order to make significant change in society. She and her husband, Carl Braden, offering aid to an African American family trying to purchase a home outside of Louisville, Kentucky, were branded as Communists and charged along with several others for sedition. While the charges against them were eventually dropped, that only happened after a lengthy and excruciating legal process—which included Carl himself being sentenced to fifteen years in prison before the charges were overturned.

Southerners, black and white, have long prided themselves on a regional identity that, at times, can seem perplexing to the rest of the United States. For African Americans and progressive whites alike, this pride in being a Southerner means looking the past square in the eye and declaring that history alone will not decide our fates. “My grandfather and my great-grandfather,” noted Martin Luther King, Jr. in a 1967 sermon, “did too much to build this nation for me to be talking about getting away from it.” Here, King delivered a rebuke to Black nationalists arguing for repatriation to Africa—but it was also a classic refrain for African Americans who love the South but can’t stand what the South has been. Or, as South Carolina State Representative Joe Neal argued in 2015, when in the aftermath of the Charleston massacre the state government debated taking down the flag: “My heritage is based on a group of people who were brought here in chains. Who were denigrated, demagogued, lynched and killed, denied a right to vote, denied the right even to have a family.”

Building a truly “new” South means incorporating a new pantheon of heroes and heroines. This doesn’t mean they’ll be exempt from criticism and analysis. On the contrary, the point should be to make sure that future generations of Southerners understands the need to continually fight to remake the South—even if it requires a deeper interrogation of what it means to be a Southerner. To do that, we need new figures to look to, and new heroes that everyone can emulate. ♣

Robert Smalls



ADVANCED PLANS & PREMIUMS



by Steve & Beth Gwizzlywink



In a grim turn of events, the evil warlock **Pharma the Big** has rotted healing magic itself, leaving thousands to die from preventable illnesses and once-curable wounds. **Pharma**, may his genitals be ever cursed with pus-filled boils, has now built a dystopian world where healing not only costs coin, but demands a harrowing journey through an accursed and bureaucratic countryside. You must defeat **Pharma** to restore justice and heal the sick - but one of your comrades has fallen victim to **the slaverer's plague**! Conquer the hellscape to heal your party member and prepare to face **Pharma** in the next module!

Fax machine and working knowledge of CPT codes required to play; 1-8 players

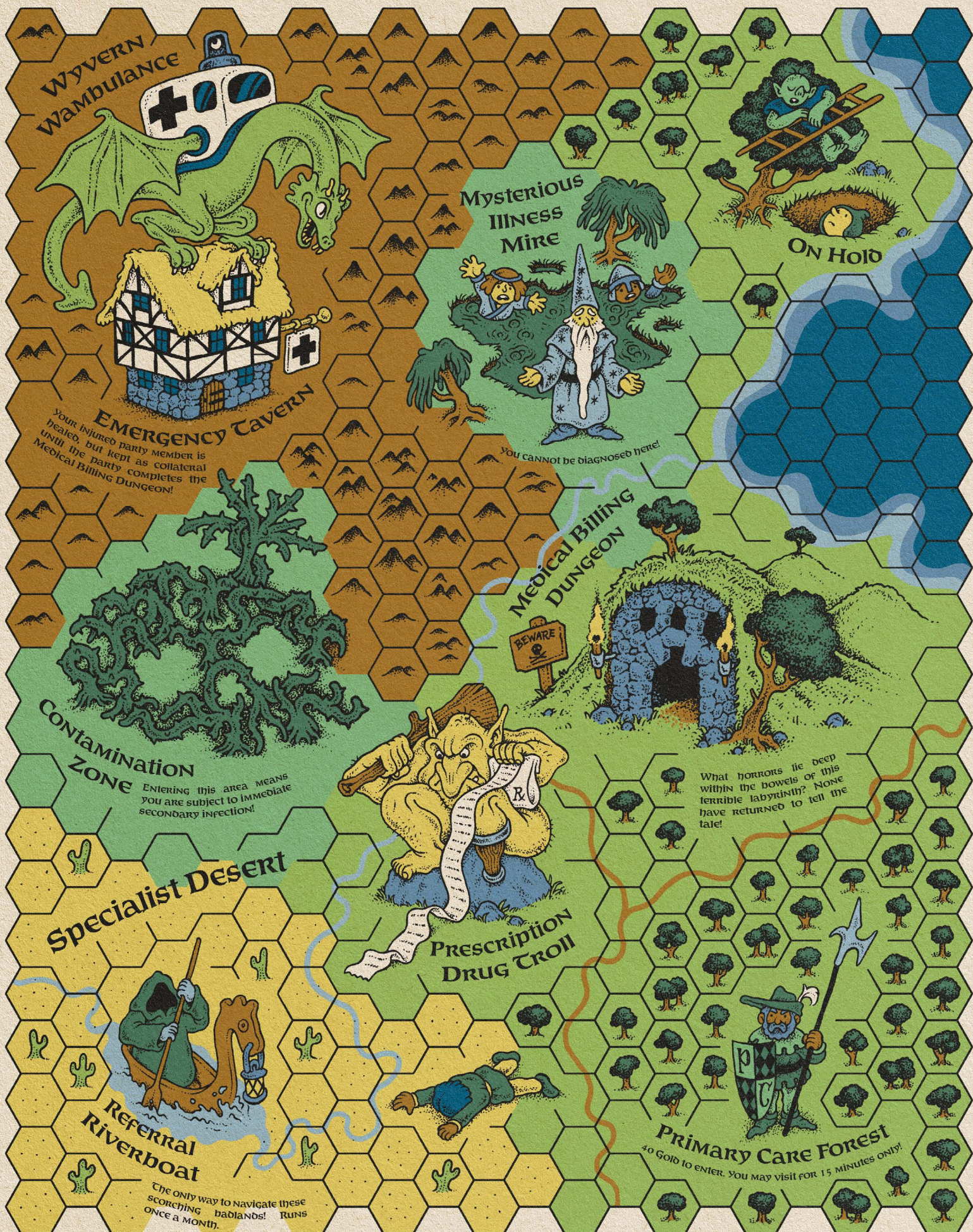


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Current Affairs
Astral Plane
NEW ORLEANS, LA

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

The Kingdom of Wellnessia





I AM NOT USED TO PEOPLE RESPECTING LAWS. Growing up in a wealthy exurb of Houston, I know that shiny muscle cars are meant to be purchased by rich oil families to give to their 16 year-old kids to race down empty streets drunk early in the morning. I know that taxes are a terrible sham that should never be paid. And, as a journalist based in the Middle East, I know the only way to get across the street is to weave in between fast-moving cars, that there are no real sidewalks (and also that taxes are a terrible sham that should never be paid). For much of my life, I've taken this kind of chaos to be a central organizing factor in civic life across the globe: laws are made by discon-

along Norway's beaches, again for weeks at a time. There was a collective sense that orderliness was maintained by investing in the commons and taking plenty of time off work. It was all so damned rational and based on what seems like a scientific method of living well. It thought it was all sickeningly sweet.

Since Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run, talk of the "Nordic model" of governance has swept through American political conversations. Leftists point to Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland as examples where governments have successfully implemented lasting welfare policies, which distribute wealth more effectively than the unfettered "bootstrap" capitalist wasteland America has decayed into. People

we need some
SCANDINAVIAN
SOLIDARITY

BY TY JOPLIN

nected politicians and enforced by bloodless bureaucrats; laws should be broken because they are impediments to your individual success.

So the first time I visited Norway, to meet my partner's family, I was surprised to find a world where no one operated in this way. People in cars not only followed traffic laws, but pedestrians were genuinely expected to wait their turn to cross the road. Rather than be seen as a terrible sham, taxes were a civic duty; a contribution to a system that helps ensure a stable, prosperous life to all. People worked 7.5 hour days, and went jogging and skiing as if it were legally mandated. They ate boring but healthy food, and lived long lives. In the winter, they lit candles, drank dark beer and *aquavit* liquor, and vacationed in the mountains for weeks at a time. In the summer, they switched to light beer and relaxed

in Scandinavian countries have higher life expectancies, higher wages, fewer working hours, more leisure time, better health care, and generally score higher on happiness indices. "There is no question that Finland, as well as other Scandinavian countries have much to be proud of," Sanders said in a 2008 speech. "These are models, it seems to me, that we can learn from."

It's an alluring set of facts, and a whole subcategory of politicians, analysts and scholars are dedicated to trying to transport the Nordic model to other countries around the world. But in the U.S., there's also a contrarian army who argue the Nordic model either only works for Scandinavia or doesn't work at all, so it is obviously doomed to fail in the United States; we shouldn't even try. Socialism collapsed Sweden's economy and almost

threw it into a full-blown dictatorship during a banking crisis in the early 1990s, the *Federalist* decries. Socialism makes people lazier, maintains CATO senior fellow Johan Norberg. Meanwhile, Jim Geraghty of the *National Review* asked why Nordic countries ranked in the top 12 users of antidepressants, if American capitalism is so much worse.

Others yet argue that the only reason Scandinavia can have its great welfare state is because it is racially homogenous, implying the only way to curb the worst instincts of capitalism is to create stratified ethno-states. “Finland is as big as two Missouris, but with just 5.2 million residents, it’s ethnically and religiously homogeneous,” former *Washington Post* journalist Robert Kaiser writes. “A strong Lutheran work ethic, combined with a powerful sense of probity, dominates the society. Homogeneity has led to consensus.”

Before visiting the region and learning its political history, I was susceptible to these types of arguments. They were so easy to point out. Scandinavia is a few tiny resort clubs compared to the big hulking mammoth of the U.S. We were too messy, diverse, and populous to look like them, I thought in passing moments.

But after making Norway my new home-away-from-home, I now know this conversation gets something wrong about the Nordic model. Discussions of the model often frame it as though Scandinavian policies were made in a governance laboratory by experts tasked with calculating What Is Best. According to this myth, Scandinavian politicians figured out that welfare states simply worked for them best, so they made them. If this is true, then all we need to do to improve the U.S. is create a list of appealing policies, have American policymakers champion them, then let a team of experts implement the policies. But this frame ignores the powerful social forces that mobilized to build the Nordic model in the first place.

Norwegian policies stem from decades of civil and political struggle, radical labor militancy and formal integration through a representative government. Norway seems idyllic and orderly today because Norwegians, for the most part, identify themselves with a history of socialist solidarity and a collective past memorializing that struggle. By the same token, one reason why the U.S. doesn’t look like Norway or Sweden now is that organized labor efforts were stifled during the 20th century: labor interests weren’t able to form parties in government and were often violently put down. It is a mistake to assume Norwegians magically relegated the role of the market away from controlling their lives, or that they were able to spontaneously fabricate a social cohesion borne out of their mythically homogenous ethnic makeup. On the contrary, Norwegians fought tooth and nail for their welfare state. So did the Finns, Swedes, and Danes. These policies, and mindsets that inform them, are byproducts of a powerful, multifaceted movement which generated popular demands for more humane policies and a discourse of the good life that shaped their government for decades.

THE NORWEGIAN MINDSET

Norwegians love looking like each other. I am only half-joking. It really does seem they consciously cultivate a sense of a shared identity. One of the first things I noticed about Norwegians is how similar their attire

is: it’s a lot of loose-fitting mom jeans, neutral dark colors, and chunky shoes. Standing out by wearing bright colors and flashy clothes is quietly stigmatized. And if you’re looking for a soda, there is apparently only one that is socially revered by the whole country: Pepsi Max. Signs for Pepsi Max saturate every major Norwegian city, and somewhere in the aisles of Norway’s boutique-sized grocery stores, I could find a sizable mountain of stacked Pepsi Max bottles. I do not know why this is, and Norwegians don’t seem to know either.

Even in their food, Norwegians are trained from an early age to emphasize modesty. “In Norway, you’re not supposed to look forward to your lunch,” Ronald Sagatun, a Norwegian YouTuber focused on culture quipped to the BBC about the tradition. “It’s kind of a strict thing. It’s easy to make, easy to carry around, easy to eat, but it should be a disappointment.” Many Norwegians’ diets are based around putting small amounts of fish, cheese and spreads on crisp bread (*Knekkebrød*), and eating rationally distributed portions of well-balanced, boringly healthy food, usually in packed lunches called *matpakke*.

Scandinavia’s relationship to humility and the collective over the individual was satirized in 1933 by Askel Sandemose, a Danish-Norwegian author, in his book *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*. Sandemose writes of a small, fictional Danish town called Jante, which lives under 10 laws:

- 1: Do not think you are anything special.
- 2: Do not think you are as good as us.
- 3: Do not think you are smarter than us.
- 4: Do not imagine yourself better than us.
- 5: Do not think you know more than us.
- 6: Do not think you are more important than us.
- 7: Do not think you are good at anything.
- 8: Do not laugh at us.
- 9: Do not think anyone cares about you.
- 10: Do not think you can teach us anything.

These “laws,” known as *Janteloven*, are worded as stern commands but reflect a penetrative mindset that still holds sway in Norway and its neighbors. Norwegian friends I’ve spoken to have a mixed relationship to the social codes, but still feel compelled by its emphasis on the collective expressed by them. A few have even taken vows to give away the money they receive from their inheritance out of a personal sense that the money ought to be redistributed more equitably.

Comparatively, I spent the first 18 years of my life in what could be a nemesis of Jante: Cypress, Texas. A sprawling conservative town outside Houston, Cypress is populated by families in constant competition with one another: for the most gargantuan McMansion, for the biggest backyard pool and barbecue pit, for the best school grades and acceptance into the most prestigious, selective universities, for the role of president in the highest number of extracurricular clubs. The governing rules were a practical reversal of *Janteloven*: the point of anything was to beat others, whom we were encouraged to imagine as part of an antagonistic collective. Every home was built inwards, with high fences guarding their yards. A labyrinth of malls anchored social life.

My family was poor though. While we were once steadily middle class, the 2008 financial crisis devastated us. In my junior year of high school,

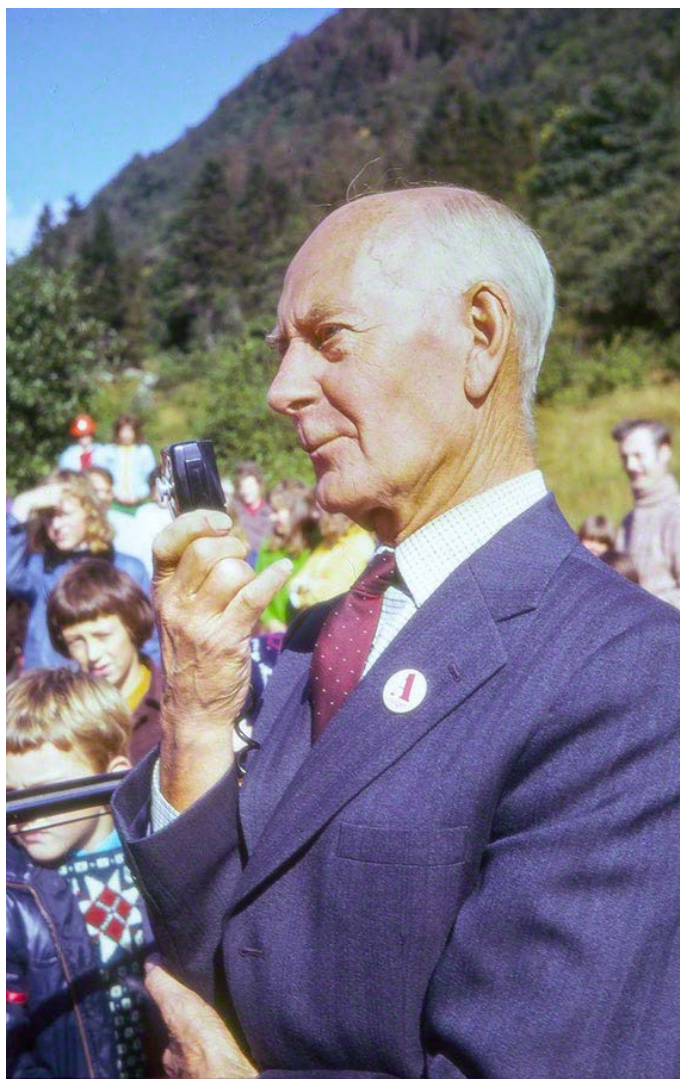
while friends skied in Colorado over Christmas break, I started working to help pay gas, electricity, and water bills after my parents lost their seemingly stable jobs. When classmates spoke of house renovations and fancy food like broccolini, I thought quietly about my microwave meals and the foreclosure letter sitting on the kitchen table staring back at me. Surrounded by Cypress' ostentatious wealth during the Great Recession, I couldn't help but feel that I was on the losing side of a game everyone else was winning. I was the sucker who naively thought a collective sense of responsibility would save my family; that the federal government would bail us out somehow. Even though we qualified for food stamps, we rarely used them. They signified to others that we were falling behind, and my mom was too proud to admit that. So we grew increasingly isolated as the recession deepened, and I began to steal food from local grocery stores until I got caught senior year. My only answer was to try and escape by getting a scholarship to a private school in the Northeast.

EINAR GERHARDSSEN AND NORWAY'S LABOR REVOLT

Around 100 years prior in the early 20th century, Norway was facing similar economic woes to what happened during the Great Recession. Norway experienced rapid boom and bust cycles from the mid 1870s until the eve of World War II. Historically a relatively poor whaling, fishing and agricultural economy, Norway began rapidly industrializing while droves of Norwegians emigrated to America. The political activist and labor politician Einar Gerhardsen was born in Oslo during this time, to a working-class family that could barely afford food and clothes. Gerhardsen began labor organizing efforts after becoming a construction worker as a young man. He worked with communists and members of the Labor party, to which he belonged, to develop a radical platform for workers' rights. In 1921, when Norway's GDP fell by 11 percent, Gerhardsen planned a major strike and encouraged workers to bring dynamite. A few years later, he was thrown in jail for organizing laborers in a paramilitary fashion. Untamed by his jail time, Gerhardsen then organized a campaign to "fill the prisons," urging unemployed people to steal food from shops *en masse* in 1927. Gerhardsen threatened to "raise a guillotine" against Norway's bourgeois society, who controlled a disproportionate amount of the country's wealth at the time. When the Nazis took over Norway in 1940, the activist was the mayor of Oslo and became active in the resistance. The Nazis captured him in September 1941 and eventually sent him to Germany where they sentenced him to death. But this was not the end of his story. Lucky for him, a Nazi officer covertly involved in the resistance helped save his life by transferring him back to Norway. During his time in the resistance and while he was imprisoned by the Nazis, Gerhardsen cultivated a wide range of political contacts including communists, antifascists, members of the Christian-democrats, and conservatives to back the Labour Party's so-called "People's Front Strategy,"

which called for remaking Norway in a democratic socialist vein.

After the war, Gerhardsen was considered a national hero. He resumed his role as mayor of Oslo on April 7, 1945—exactly one day after he was freed by the Allies, before taking over as leader of the Labour Party in May. A few short months later, Gerhardsen was elected as Prime Minister in a landslide. At the time, Norway was a middle-income European country with nowhere near the wealth it enjoys today. Wielding



EINAR GERHARDSSEN

the multifaceted political forces and tactics that he gathered before the war, Gerhardsen rebuilt Norway with socialist welfare policies. Gerhardsen held the post of Prime Minister, with almost no interruption, from 1945 until 1965. "Rather than gold streets, we would have good food," Gerhardsen later said of his political vision. And indeed, in those two decades, the government increased public spending to account for around a third of its GDP, and ensured unemployment "barely existed," as one economic history of Norway puts it. It also introduced sharp progressive taxation to pay for a comprehensive welfare state that now encompassed schooling, health insurance, pensions, housing protec-

tions, and worker rights. Gerhardsen's initial policies generated more demand for a socialist agenda, giving his government a democratic mandate to further expand Norwegian welfare programs. Gerhardsen's stated view was simply that governance should always be moving "in a socialist direction." He was still urging Norwegians to engage in a "slow revolution" to socialism just a few years before his death in 1987. For his radical achievements, Gerhardsen is known as *Landsfaderen*, "the father of the nation." Gerhardsen is celebrated as a champion not only of groundbreaking accomplishments, but also of Norway's ideals: concern for the commons, an uncompromising moral clarity, and a tireless work ethic to realize a humane vision for society.

In this political climate where collectivist discourse dominated, Norway found oil off its shores. A lot of it. An initial small find in 1963 turned into a gigantic economic opportunity by the late 1960s with the discovery of the Ekofisk oil field, deemed to be one of the largest in the world. Thanks to the highly socialistic welfare state the government had created, and a mandate to bolster the commons, Norway nationalized its oil production and channeled the money into a sovereign wealth fund. To this day, management of the fund is guided by the "ten oil commandments," designed to ensure the capital garnered from oil "belong[s] to the people." (Not that this eliminates the inherent contradiction between egalitarian values and the destructive effects of fossil fuel use.)

In the 1970s, Norwegians saw their quality of life improve by oil riches, but were keenly aware of their position relative to the rest of the world. In a hilariously revealing 1975 Gallup survey of Norwegians, 76% of them felt they were *too well off* compared to other people. An overwhelming 90% also thought they were eating too much, showing the extent to which the Law of Jante impacted their thinking. At the time, Norway's per capita gross national product was only \$50 more than the U.S., and \$1,300 less than Sweden. The same Gallup poll showed that the majority Norwegians wanted to see oil capital strengthen social services rather than reduce their taxes.

While these widespread sentiments illustrate how far America—and my Texan hometown—have to go before it develops as noble an ethos for the commons, there is much we can learn from this Norwegian history of struggle. It is true that Norway benefited from a deep well of oil. But its robust welfare state actually predated the oil's discovery. Rather than lead by asking what to do with the enormous wealth they stumbled upon, Norwegians asked how to best guarantee the rights of people given their resources. This mentality, borne from a militant labor struggle and a multifaceted anti-fascist movement crafting a national vision, still informs Norwegian politics today, and can serve as a model for other movements seeking to gain political power.

FRUITS OF A STRUGGLE

Today, Norway is considered a social democracy. It enjoys socialized healthcare and virtually free public university education. Most Norwegians work 37.5 hour weeks, overtime is reliably paid, paid maternity and paternity leave is guaranteed for nearly a year, and most workers get five weeks of paid vacation a year; most often taken during the summer. Nor-

way has one of the lowest rates of income inequality on Earth. Concern for the commons even extends to their prison system, which emphasizes rehabilitating individuals back into society and enjoys one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world. Norway is one of the few countries on Earth with a nearly universal "Right to Roam," meaning everyone is entitled to camp almost anywhere in the country, even without permission from a landowner.

Much of the country's economy is dominated by fully or partially state-owned corporations like Telenor, the national telecommunications company, Norsk Hydro, one of the largest aluminum companies on Earth, and Equinor, its oil and gas company. A large segment of the economy is also made up of worker-owned cooperatives like Tine, the country's largest dairy producer; Coop Norge, one of the world's largest retail cooperatives; OBOS BBL, one of the biggest housing co-ops in the world; and KLP, which is the country's biggest pension company. In practical terms, this means thousands of Norwegian workers are partial owners of their company, ensuring a level of power that cannot be taken away. To call Norway a mixed economy is correct, but it's fairer to say that even the "capitalist" parts are not necessarily owned by capitalists.

Norway is also different in its approach to taxes. There, taxes are automatically processed and publicly viewable, meaning you can look up anybody's tax returns and see how much they make. This unique tool alone speaks volumes about how different the Norwegian conception of taxes is to the U.S. In the *Janteloven*-like social code, it is important for Norwegians to know where they stand in relation to each other economically, and this system reflects this value. With a system like this here, we wouldn't have to depend on the strange norm of depending on politicians' personal openness to see their tax records.

In the collective imagination of Norwegian society, the worker looms large, taking cues from Gerhardsen, who wrote a letter to himself in 1922, when he left his construction job to be a union official, saying that "he must always be faithful to the workers who form the roots of the labor movement." These economic arrangements are not mere concessions by a government or boss. Instead, they are byproducts of a working-class that exercised its power to demand these concessions. The Nordic model understands the market as a limited vehicle to acquiring some goods and services, and not as a mystically ideal panacea around which to organize their hopes and ambitions. It is a proud antithesis to the American 'hustle culture,' where not taking a summer vacation is common. In Norway, companies must secure permission from the government before assigning any individual too much overtime.

Norway is not without its challenges; many of which come from neo-liberal and right-leaning political forces that seek to degrade its socialist underpinning. Successive right-wing governments led by Conservative Party leader Erna Solberg, with help from a consortium of center-right parties, have sought to privatize sections of its mixed economy. Parts of Norway's extensive train routes are being sold off to private international transportation companies, to the chagrin of its train operators who went on strike in October in protest. Under this government led by Solberg, Norway has begun privatizing parts of its military infrastructure. Throughout the Nordic region, education is increasingly being treated more as a commodity with increasing emphasis on evaluating students and their teachers according to standardized test scores, and a subtle

shift in the curriculum towards instrumentalizing knowledge towards specific ends. “There was a shift from the concept of becoming a student for self-cultivation and truth to becoming a market-oriented customer of learning opportunities,” as one 2016 study focusing on Scandinavia’s educational paradigm shifts notes.

This invited yet more privatization efforts, which have led to a steep rise in private schools across the country. More broadly, the percentage of people living in poverty increased from 7.7 percent to 9.3 percent from 2013-2017, the latest year for available data. Income inequality rates have also steadily risen in the country due to a lowered taxes on income, wealth, and inheritance implemented under Solberg. Even Gerhardsen’s Labour Party have adopted an increasingly neoliberal platform since the 1980s, allowing it to be outflanked on the left by vocal socialist parties including the Red Party and the Socialistic Left Party.

One scapegoat for the slow decline of the Nordic model is immigration. The argument goes like this: “Norway took in too many non-white migrants who didn’t share in the social vision developed by the white majority. As such, they are a danger to the social cohesion driving Norway forward.” While official party platforms are careful to word this strain of thought in acceptable terms like calling for “strict and responsible” immigration limits and subtly linking immigration with crime and terrorism. As Cecilia Marcela Bailliet, a professor at the University of Oslo, explains, “There has been a steady rise in xenophobia within Norway—as well as Scandinavia, Europe, and other regions in the world—based in part on xenophobic narratives promoted by the media, social media, populist parties, most prominently by FrP [The Progress Party], not Høyre [The Conservative Party].” In March 2018, Sylvi Listhaug, a notorious far-right Norwegian politician and member of the Progress Party posted on Facebook, “[The] Labor [Party] thinks the rights of terrorists are more important than national security. Like and share.” The post set off a firestorm in the country, and Listhaug eventually resigned, but not before seeking harsher prison sentences for crimes committed in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods.

These ideas are part of a popular racist sentiment that has made substantial gains throughout Europe and galvanized anxious voters to elect right-wing parties seeking to degrade the very welfare state that gave rise to popular conceptions of “the good life” in Europe. This kind of thinking has justified the current Norwegian government’s deportation of Afghan refugees to a warzone, where some have been subsequently killed. One might expect there would be unrest and electoral backlash against migrant-friendly parties in places like Oslo, where a third of the population is either foreign-born or first-generation immigrants. But the opposite has happened. In the September 2019 local election, leftist parties emphasized admitting more refugees and protecting the rights of asylum seekers. Voters rewarded them with huge electoral gains over the centrist and right-leaning parties that sought “strict” in-take policies.

BUT CAN WE, AND SHOULD WE, TAKE ALL THE POLITICAL programs of Norway and apply them in the U.S.? The answer is yes, emphatically, but not in a technocratic, elitist style. Rather, we should rather focus on building a grassroots movement that can generate a collective sense of the commons; one that decommodifies essential goods like education and healthcare,

while harnessing the government to be more humane and responsive to our collective needs. President Obama’s aborted attempt to socialize healthcare in the U.S. is a cautionary tale here. Dismantling the grassroots organizing apparatus that thrust him into the White House on a landslide of support was not only a tactical mistake, but also reflected a belief that technocratic tinkering—not populism—was the way to achieve Nordic-style governance. The result was a brittle-thin program that Republicans easily sabotaged. A democratic chorus threatening to vote out any politician who touched Obamacare would have strengthened the program, and might have even given Obama a mandate to push for more ambitious reforms, just as the leftist activist and politician Einar Gerhardsen led Norway towards its “Nordic model,” and the collective consciousness that remains its sociopolitical glue today. Viewed under this lens, the Bernie campaign and the myriad local efforts by socialist-minded politicians should not be the end-goals of those political struggles, but rather be seen as part of building a broader movement to be wielded by a representative government.

The Great Recession, for many Americans, showed the terrible consequences of being atomized. Millions turned to opioids to numb the physical pain of being overworked and under-covered and the symbolic pain of being powerless to their circumstances. Thousands felt so helpless and abandoned that they committed suicide. In the midst of a new wave of deindustrialization and automation, many lost their jobs only to find out that their entire industry disappeared. Huge swathes of the population, my family included, have yet to recover from the recession.

That these catastrophic effects were felt by millions is both a tragedy and opportunity to seize for a national movement towards a better democracy. While Occupy Wall Street lived a brief life after the financial crisis of 2008, the anti-corporate movement played a critical role in shaping the discourse around equality and fairness, popularizing terms like the contrast of the 1% and the 99%, which so often returns in the rhetoric of popular leftist politicians like Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Occupy helped make sense of the collective trauma Americans faced the same way Einar Gerhardsen did in Norway when he seized on the economic depression of 1920s-Norway to advocate for labor militancy, and encourage unemployed Norwegians to steal food as a political statement. In the process of advocating to break laws he viewed as exploitative, Gerhardsen created a new set of more humane rules that cultivated a cherished sense of the commons. And while *Janteloven* parodies this mindset, Norwegians have every reason to be proud of having integrated its socialist labor movement into law, instead of following the U.S. in violently suppressing it.

But all is not lost. Norwegian happiness can be ours, too. *We can* insist that politicians speak in terms of economic justice and economic democracy. *We can* create new rules around these ideals. *We can* rewrite the expectations for our politicians, ousting the disconnected ones who serve elite interests and ushering in representatives who believe in the power of the commons. The broad support that Sanders has found in young Americans tells us that we have entered a new era. The path to achieve the successful welfare state that Norway was able to build under Gerhardsen will be arduous and upset by obstacles. But we have a long, transnational history to draw from. Norwegians struggled long and hard for a better life. We can do the same. ✱



A PRIVATE CITY

The Rise of Eko Atlantic

BY KATIE JANE FERNELIUS

"PROPERTY VALUES have been restored and multiplied. And more buildings are springing up in anticipation of the opportunities that lie ahead. When all is done, A NEW CITY will emerge from an area that once was devastated by NATURE'S ONSLAUGHT. But that devastation is now history. Our ultimate triumph now beckons. The human spirit will prevail again, because of A FEW GOOD MEN who demonstrated tremendous goodwill."

BABATUNDE FASHOLA, GOVERNOR OF LAGOS, STOOD at the podium in front of a Jumbotron projecting his face. It was 2013, and he was opening a ceremony for a small congregation of "who's who" in Nigeria. Then-president Goodluck Jonathan, former U.S. president Bill Clinton, and billionaires Gilbert and Ronald Chagoury looked on from a small audience, which was a flock of suit jackets and neck ties, kaftans and caps. It was a celebration to mark the reclamation of 5,000,000 square meters of land from the ocean. On that land, a new city was promised to rise and become the future financial capital of Africa. It would be called Eko Atlantic.

The first time I laid eyes on Eko Atlantic was in a YouTube video. A rabbit hole of auto-play videos lead me to one that panned across a computer-generated skyline of high modernist skyscrapers, a cityscape unpopulated and placeless against an empty horizon. The narrator, British-accented and chipper, announced that Eko Atlantic was a privately-built city being constructed on the coast of Lagos, Nigeria. This new city would become a gateway to the continent and a "unique opportunity for investors to capitalize off huge developing growth," according to the bodiless voice. It would have privatized roads and sewage, its own electric grid, and a sea wall designed to stop the threat of an eroding coastline,

effectively reversing a century of natural history. To put it simply, Eko Atlantic would be a city of the future.

It was 2016 and I was living in Lagos. I lived on Victoria Island, a neighborhood known for big business, near the Mike Adenuga Towers which were tinny gold and outfitted with a statue of a bull in the plaza, giving the effect that the building was a double-exposed photograph of Trump Tower and Wall Street. Down the street from me was the Chinese embassy, where every day I'd walk by and see rows of Nigerians on benches outside, waiting to apply for visas. All Eko Atlantic was to me, at that time, was a logo and a long concrete wall at the edge of Victoria Island, separating me from what looked like miles of empty beach and naked steel frames, construction seemingly paused.

At the time, Nigeria was in the middle of a recession. I was advised to bring all my money into the country in crisp \$100 bills, so I could exchange my cash on the black market. The banks followed the government's arbitrary exchange rates and often ran out of cash at certain locations. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, the private investigators for scams and corruption, graffitied properties across Lagos in their signature red all-caps: "EFCC UNDER INVESTIGATION." Online, I'd read reports of the EFCC raiding luxury apartments whose walls were insulated with duffel bags full of American dollars. It seemed to me that Lagos was a city held together by cash, as if every building was literally made of money.

Gated communities jigsawed the whole city, creating a compendium of private borders to constantly negotiate. Phone calls, proof of invitation, and persuasion were often required to get you inside. But even outside of these walls, the city felt enclosed. A lagoon, Lagos is criss-crossed by water, dividing it into distinct

social geographies like chambers of the heart. A cluster of islands in the southeast—Victoria, Lagos, Ikoyi—were accessible to the mainland via long, heavily trafficked bridges which slowly pumped commuters back and forth. To refer to the islands was to refer to business, to wealth, and to the city's elites. It was precisely this group of people who attended that 2013 ceremony at Eko Atlantic.

In the video of that 2013 ceremony, Bill Clinton eventually took the stage and praised the Clinton Global Initiative-sponsored project, saying, "So, for every person who believed in this project, who believed in the future of the city, the state and the nation, I thank you. And I especially thank my friends Gilbert and Ronald Chagoury for making it happen and keeping their commitment. It is a commitment that will eventually not only help brand Nigeria as a country of the 21st century, but also show that it is affordable and profitable to live in harmony with this new natural reality."

Covered by *Business Insider* and CNN's *Inside Africa*, videos of Eko Atlantic told a congratulatory story: the state governors and billionaire Chagoury family had banded together to protect the coastline from erosion with a massive land reclamation effort that had now become "a city-building project on a global scale." The Eko Atlantic channel provided a digital scrapbook of the project's growth over the previous 10 years as it documented dredging, landfilling, and the construction of new buildings. But it always came back to those CGI images of the city, projecting an imaginary future where it was said Lagos would become the Dubai of Africa.

In the years since I first encountered Eko Atlantic on YouTube, it has become my white whale, a synecdoche for all the dynamics I've been trying to make sense of in Lagos. While it was hailed as an innovative solution to the problems facing the city—the lack of skilled jobs, the paucity of formal housing, and coastal erosion caused by climate change—private cities like Eko Atlantic are really a continuation of the status quo, bypassing democratic debate and concretizing urban inequality in the name of attracting investment. Yet these private cities continue to be symbolically powerful: though their urban imaginaries are created primarily

for an audience of investors, the promises can resonate with working Africans too. The powers and processes sedimented beneath the clean facade of projects like Eko Atlantic give insight into cities like Lagos across the African continent, and tell us who claims control of the economic future.

THE CITY AS A FRANCHISE

In 2018, my friend Ishan and I produced a radio documentary on Eko Atlantic and slum evictions for the BBC World Service. After haggling over email, the development director of Eko Atlantic finally agreed to give us a guided tour of the city and let us film for a short video piece we were producing as a companion to the radio story. (Prior to that, the only time that I had visited Eko Atlantic was for a music festival featuring Diplo, where I had to use one of those awful pre-loaded, contactless wristbands to buy drinks and a late night thunderstorm canceled half the performances. All I remembered of it was walking through the sand in the rain, trying to get outside its walls so I could call a *keke*, a moto-taxi, to take me home.)

When Ishan and I showed up at the offices on the perimeter of the city, a black SUV was waiting for us. In the front seat was the development director Pierre and his driver. Pierre had previously been in charge of reconstructing the central district of Beirut after the Lebanese civil war. He also worked on the Monaco urbanization at sea project, which sought to extend the city's domain through new "eco districts" extending offshore.

After we passed through the entrance, Pierre narrated the progress of the construction, nearly word-for-word with the YouTube videos, as we drove down the main avenue. Without the CGI to simulate the district to come, it felt desolate and empty. Occasionally we'd park, so we could film shots of the city. Pierre tried to direct the camera, instructing us on which shots and angles we could use to best portray Eko Atlantic. He complained that the weather would ruin our filming; it was harmattan season and orange dust from the Sahara curtailed the sky. A few times, he interrupted a shot or told us to "cut" if we were filming something that looked bad, like a construction worker taking a nap by an empty canal.

Pierre also brought us to one of the completed residential towers, Eko Pearl. Like a model home, it was vacant, full of furnished apartments with untouched kitchens, pretending at the future life that would be there. The hallways smelled like a just-opened can of tennis balls.

As we concluded our tour, Pierre took us back to the front offices for Eko Atlantic, where the YouTube videos played on loop against the far wall. In the center of the room was a scale model of the future city, nearly the length of a half a basketball court. It almost looked fun to play with, like a dollhouse, except that each plastic building was closed and impenetrable, no human figurines visible beyond its opaque windows.

Eko Atlantic is part of a cohort of private city projects emerging across the continent: Tatu City in Nairobi, Kenya; Hope City in



*"There are no more stars, son.
We destroyed them all."*

Accra, Ghana; and Cité le Fleuve in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. Like Eko Atlantic, the developers have provided assuringly modern visual simulations of cities not dissimilar to Dubai, glass boxes and aquamarine canals sprawled out across geometrically fanciful urban grids.

In a paper about the urban fantasies of these cities, professor of city planning Vanessa Watson analyzes some of these new urban projects. What they share in common are their sheer scale, promising to be entire cities even as they often exist as offshoots of other metropolitan areas. And, in keeping with that scale, these cities tend to share an unspecified plan for governance, neglecting democratic processes in their development, their creators instead rattling off lists of private sector companies responsible for their formation.

Situated in a mythology of globalization, the promotional literature for Eko Atlantic talks of thriving businesses districts, reliable infrastructure, and prime real estate, all promising to make the city internationally competitive. For a while, Eko Atlantic only existed in virtual space, in computer-generated simulations of glistening glass skyscrapers reflecting an undisturbed sky, canals full of clear still blue water, and avenues lined with trees. It was tempting to question whether Eko Atlantic really existed in any material way, or whether it was some elaborate catfish for investors' money. Far from reassuring me of its realness, visiting Eko Atlantic gave the impression of a slide deck spat out by a 3-D printer.

This high modernist simulation—both digital and physical—embodies a techno-financial imaginary. It's consistent not just with the architectural character of cities of the Gulf states, but also with the tech campuses of Silicon Valley. As an aesthetic, it's meant to evoke cleanness, efficiency, and ease; technology smooths out all the rough edges. Such an aesthetic suggests a different vision of city planning: it's the city as a start-up, a project launched with glossy veneer and devoid of social, political and historical context.

This style of design stands in sharp contrast to the history of city planning in Lagos. Previously a protectorate of the British colonial empire, then capital city of a newly assembled Nigerian state, Lagos was planned in fits and starts by colonial authorities. Unlike their ventures in southern or eastern Africa, the British colonial forces didn't pour that many resources into urban planning in Lagos, largely because they didn't expect to use it as a white settlement. (Its tropical environment was seen as deadly to their delicate British constitutions.) Any urban planning they did was in service of "administrative and labour control and the effective articulation of exportable surpluses through modern means of transportation," according to Liora Bigon's history of urban planning in Lagos. The overall effect of this meant that many indigenous Lagosians didn't lose their land rights to enclosure; today, Lagos is rumored to still technically belong to most of the initial ruling families of those indigenous communities, in spite



Photographs by Katie Jane Ferneliuss

of extensive land reform since. Certainly, decisions by the British colonial administration had certain effects, especially in terms of their work to dredge the harbour in order to provide better access to shipping vessels, but early 20th century Lagos developed much more directly in spontaneous response to forces like migration, health and sanitation concerns, and economic trends than it did from a centralized planning force.

More recent urban planning interventions have included infrastructural projects like the Lekki-Ikoyi bridge, the roll-out of low-emissions vehicles to replace the beloved danfo buses, and beautification campaigns run by Kick Against Indiscipline which, at their best, plant flowers in the gores between highway on-ramps and, at their worst, arrest street vendors. These measures seem to be more reactive than proactive, creating expensive fixes to bad traffic, emissions, and urban blight without consideration for the social and economic forces undergirding such phenomena: a city sprawling inland due to displacement of its working class by high-end development. In some ways, the privileging of developers' interests in present-day Lagos expresses the same preferences as its colonial administrators: "the effective articulation of exportable surpluses," or in other words, making money move seamlessly.

So, who are these CGI images for? These sorts of simulations disseminate freely and gleefully in the urban planning circuit, where there is an uncritical acceptance that "smart" cities are good, as are "green," "sustainable," and "world-class" cities. Certain urban planners may get excited about these ideas in the abstract, but, as Watson writes, they also function as justifications to the public for what is ultimately an "exercise of symbolic power[...]" promoting the city and addressed to global elites that "implies a concern with the importance of the city in relation to other cities rather than the extent to which it functions for its citizens."

It's tempting to say that this imaginary of a clean, gleaming city was not really made for Lagosians, because we know that materials about Eko Atlantic are mostly being distributed at urban planning

conferences around the world to architectural firms and real estate investors, and because the location and walls of the city themselves will likely preclude most of the 21 million Lagosians from accessing it. But I think to say that the vision of Eko Atlantic is not for Lagosians discounts how deeply entrenched narratives of first-world development are, and disregards the desires and dreams of many city-dwellers.

Lagos was the most aspirational city I've ever lived in. Almost every Thursday, I'd go to an open mic event at a boutique hotel. The music was good, the yam fries reliably crisp, and the Heinekens cold. It was a regular haunt for the expats who worked at multinational corporations, as well as for the city's community of Instagram influencers. The rumored "talent guy" at a powerful media conglomerate called Pulse Nigeria, a white man in his 50s with a chic bald head and braided hemp bracelets on his wrist, usually attended, sitting in a reserved seat at the front and often accompanied by a young, beautiful Nigerian woman. Every week, one talented singer after another commanded the stage, all making eye contact with this man in the front row, an American Idol rendered in miniature. It felt emblematic of a culture of aspiration that inflected the whole city. Lagos seemed to operate off the premise that each day brought with it the possibility of being discovered; fame and fortune just one chance encounter away.

THE ENTERPRISE AND HUSTLE OF LAGOS IS APPARENT in contemporary novels about the city, like *Blackass* by Igoni A. Barrett, *Welcome to Lagos* by Chibundu Onuzo, and *Every Day is for the Thief* by Teju Cole. But the idea of Nigeria on the rise is also central to today's investment literature. Akin to the "tiger" economies of Asia, Nigeria and other sub-Saharan countries have been hyped as "lion" economies of Africa by the McKinsey Global Institute among others. Urban studies scholars Laurence Côté-Roy and Sarah Moser ask a provocative and compelling question in the title of their article: "Does Africa not deserve shiny new cities?" In it, they write that this investment literature of "Africa rising" "construct[s] a compelling narrative of Africa as the world's next big venture, which fuels a broader 'optimism industry.'" For this reason, it can be difficult to say whether the optimism felt at the level of individual Lagosians generates, or is generated by, such claims. If one were to look at reports from McKinsey, it'd be difficult not to believe that Nigeria is on the up-and-up.

While reporting the BBC radio piece, I interviewed multiple activists and residents of slums, people who had been excluded from a lot of economic narratives about Lagos, treated as disposable by the city's decision-makers, evicted and pushed out of their homes. Though many of them had concerns about Eko Atlantic,



all of them also talked about the importance of Lagos getting nice, new buildings. They wanted the city to be modern.

Anthropologist James Ferguson, a keen writer on Africa and globalization, writes that modernity is "a way of talking about global inequality and about material needs and how they might be met." I think that to the extent that certain Lagosians feel excited about Eko Atlantic, it speaks to the fact that they recognize their own economic exclusion and are questioning the role that geography, politics and the global economy plays in that exclusion.

Ferguson, writing in 2006, points out that certain critiques of globalization can feel weirdly out of place in an African context where franchises like McDonald's are scant. Instead, globalization in an African context "brought an increasingly acute awareness of the material goods of the global rich, even as economic pauperization [...] made the chances of actually attaining such goods seem more remote than ever." It's not unfair to suggest that desire for nice, new buildings could express desire for wealth for working Lagosians and their city. I don't want to suggest that Lagosians are at all gullible about the dynamics underlying Eko Atlantic: I don't think that most working Lagosians believe that Eko Atlantic will directly house them or offer them jobs or, to be frank, even let them in through the gate. But I do think that Eko Atlantic is seen as evidence of economic growth and advancement in Lagos; perhaps less its driver, as the developers would suggest, and more a symptom of it.

It is important to note that there was and is resistance to Eko Atlantic too. Journalists have reported on ocean surges down the coast that residents and scientists blame on the sea wall of Eko Atlantic. The Heinrich Boell Foundation of Germany (a leftist public policy think tank) has, in concordance with Nigerian researchers, published literature critical of the project. And Justice Empowerment Initiative brings together slum dwellers who con-

tinue to organize against demolition of slums in service of new waterfront properties. Their work provides some fine examples of citizen journalism in documenting a record of state abuses against the poor.

A project like Eko Atlantic feels like it ought to be proof that Nigeria is ascendant. It's exactly the kind of project some international media outlets like to show off as "innovative," in an effort not to focus on the kinds of stories often lambasted for perpetuating stereotypes about the continent (namely, that it is impoverished and chaotic). But far from being a rebuke to those narratives, Eko Atlantic implicitly affirms those stereotypes by positioning itself as a modernizing force in Lagos. These new buildings are "designed to avoid and supplant the 'failures and decay' of the existing city," as Watson writes. Like a fairy godmother transforming a pumpkin into a carriage, the erection of nice buildings in a walled enclave is proposed as a catch-all solution to the disorder of Lagos—a makeover meant to attract the prince of foreign investment.

Capital is "globe-hopping, not globe-covering," according to Ferguson. He's rightly challenging the lingua franca of development economics, which conceptualizes globalization as capital flows, as if capital like water disperses evenly across a terrain. It's this sort of thinking which suggests that Africa need only appeal better to foreign investment in order to improve living conditions for its people. This is the same logic that guided the Washington consensus, the set of structural reforms imposed on the Global South by the IMF and World Bank at the end of the twentieth century: reduce state spending, privatize public services, enshrine property rights, and open up to foreign investment.

This logic assumes that Africa had previously been inhospitable to the free market—perhaps a misguided assumption given that capitalism was historically powered by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and given that presently "the basic commodities that lie in abundance in Africa remain the primary ingredients of the global economy," according to *Financial Times* West Africa correspondent Tom Burgis. The Washington Consensus has arguably made it impossible for countries to participate as equal partners in the global economy by imposing massive debt on them. Today, many of the countries that are most rich in resources are also the most exploited by multi-national corporations who bypass local democratic processes, abuse on-site workers, and extract resources with little to no taxation paid to the government. All this is to say that corporations from around the world remain actively involved in African economies, not in spite of political conditions, but because of them. And their activity is largely "concentrated in spatially segregated [...] enclaves," to borrow again from Ferguson—in other words, ensconced in places like Eko Atlantic.

Urban studies scholar Michael Goldman writes about efforts in Bangalore, India to transform local economies into urban real estate through massive development projects. He talks about how the "privatization bravado" of the 1990s set the stage for the idea of "world-city making" in fully-enclosed development projects that allegedly will make cities "world class." As he writes, their enclosures, far from containing their impact, actually require and institute a

real estate regime in the government as they give over economic and political control to developers in shaping the city, over the consent of its residents. Consequently, locals "are being actively dispossessed as part of the effort to build up a world-city based on a speculative imaginary for world-city investors who may just stay away, and for world-city professionals who have yet to come."

The logic of private cities is a continuation of the logic of the Washington consensus, taken to the extreme. Private cities like Eko Atlantic typically advertise themselves as "Free Trade Zones" or "Special Economic Zones," classifications meaning that business can be done with as little regulation and taxes as possible. The state has questionable grounds to interfere in operations, like, for instance in enforcing labor laws. (In 2020, injured workers at the Dangote oil refinery in Lagos expressed concerns that the government lacked power to intervene on their behalf because the refinery was in a free trade zone. Of course, one wonders whether the government would choose to intervene if it could.)

But more than just a flashy project for the wealthy, Eko Atlantic is an off-shore account rendered in concrete. The idea of making Lagos the Dubai of Africa takes on new significance in light of Matthew Page's Dubai report based on data of luxury real estate purchases in UAE which found over 800 properties belonging to "politically-exposed persons" of Nigeria (that is, politicians). As Page writes, "an unknown proportion, perhaps substantial, of the over \$400 million they have used to buy Dubai property could be part of a river of illicit financial flows out of Nigeria, which the think tank Global Financial Integrity conservatively estimated to total \$178 billion from 2004 to 2013." Eko Atlantic may be positioning itself as the Dubai of Africa not just in aesthetic, but in mimicking how Dubai handles vast transfers of cash: with little oversight or impunity. Assuming the best, it makes Eko Atlantic a great place to avoid taxes or financial regulations; assuming the worst, this could make the private city a good place to park ill-begotten money.

By design, private cities like Eko Atlantic exempt themselves from a political context, less belonging to a nation-state than becoming a city-state unto themselves. But the money undergirding these projects doesn't appear from thin air: it's a wealth built by the same history that built the cities and states they occupy.

THE CITY THAT OIL BUILT

It is important to historicize the wealth of the Chagourys and what has made it possible for them to build Eko Atlantic. Most Nigerians know the Chagourys for their association with the country's bloody dictator, Sani Abacha. Abacha, who was head of state from 1993 to 1998, was notorious for extensive corruption, looting money from oil profits and transferring it into overseas accounts. He was also responsible for the execution of environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who protested oil extraction in the Niger Delta.

While reporting for the radio documentary, I talked to Jim Rupert about his work as the West Africa correspondent for the *Washington Post* in the 1990s. Of his investigations into the Abacha

regime, he said: “We didn’t begin by investigating the Chagourys, but rather by investigating what we understood was this corruption within the Abacha regime. And when I went to Nigeria to quietly ask, ‘Well, how does all of this corruption work?’ Nigerian officials and journalists, international diplomats all told me, ‘You have to learn about a family named Chagoury.’”

By Rupert’s account, the Chagourys’ role under the Abacha regime was endemic: not only pilfering kickbacks from oil companies at every step in the supply chain, but also getting contracts to build government office complexes and secret police headquarters in what was then the new capital city of Abuja. The Chagourys also leveraged their access to Abacha to get audiences with multinational corporations and foreign governments.

(When friends ask me how it felt to live in a “corrupt” country like Nigeria, I’d usually answer that at least in Nigeria they called it corruption, because in America we called it lobbying. It is important to emphasize that the corruption of Abacha and the Chagourys is not unique to Nigeria. I want to refuse the narrative that corruption is a problem endemic to African elites, a hold-over from cultures of patronage, as moneyed expatriates often claimed to me. Abacha and the Chagourys’ corruption was a process for bypassing democratic decision-making in order to concentrate decision-making and money among an elite few. And, on a practical level, it was facilitated by and moving through Western institutions and partners, like Halliburton, Swiss bank accounts, and indirect donations to U.S. presidential campaigns.)

After Abacha died—in the arms of two sex workers, from a heart attack, allegedly poisoned—Gilbert Chagoury paid the Nigerian government \$66 million after being found guilty of laundering money for the Abacha regime. In spite of that charge, the Chagourys’ close connection with the Nigerian government and multinational corporations still persists today, as they continue to earn approvals and contracts for large-scale projects. In some ways, the Chagourys represent the ruthless dynamism of capitalism’s exploits on the continent: oil, offshore accounts, contracts for infrastructure development, and now real estate.

Eko Atlantic, like private cities across the continent, signals a profitable opportunity for real estate capitalism. But the ground underneath Eko Atlantic, far from being created out of nothing, has its own history of displacement. In fact, it’s a piece of land that has always toggled between the rich and the poor, less explicit as a class war and more proof of the inextricable and intimate relations between classes.

Before it was called Eko Atlantic, the beach where the private city stood was called Bar Beach. It was a community of petty traders, cleaners, waiters and clerks who mostly worked in service on the wealthy Victoria Island. But it had a storied past. The British protectorate of Lagos was a tough city for colonial officers. Malaria and heat stroke regularly took out their slim ranks. In an effort to control malaria, the British oversaw multiple projects draining swamps, re-shaping the coastline in ways that still have effects today. Furthermore, in their efforts towards promoting “sanitation” (a familiar euphemism in colonial literature), the British apportioned Bar Beach as a “clean air zone” in the late 19th century, advertising an area

separate from the detritus of Lagos. Over time, that designation eroded and far from being a “clean air zone,” Bar Beach became the dumping ground for trams full of effluence (read: shit)—a modern, at the time, attempt to manage sewage in the port city. Lagos eventually traded trams for alternative forms of plumbing, and as its prior reputation as a dumping ground faded from memory, Bar Beach slowly became a place of leisure again.

Beachfront culture was a huge cornerstone of leisure in Lagos. Lagosians today will tell you about holidays spent at the beach as children, eating whole fish and enjoying live music. Some will even recall the Bar Beach show of the 1960s and 70s, a variety show featuring musical acts, not filmed on location, but evoking the spirit of the shore. It was a spirit that the Lagos State Government would later try to capitalize on in the late 1990s in their efforts to build a tourism-friendly economy.

But the popular beachfront culture couldn’t sanitize Bar Beach completely. During the military era of Nigeria’s history, mainly in the 1970s through the 1990s, the verdant landscape of the beach made it a prime location for military training and exercises, too. Eventually, the military would use the beach to perform public executions. “In crime-ridden Lagos, public executions draw crowds,” read a *New York Times* dispatch from Bar Beach in 1979. (Some members of the public grimly called these executions another kind of “Bar Beach show.”) The public executions would stop when Nigeria’s military rule came to an end. But there were still grisly associations with the beach. At the very least, Bar Beach was considered a place where you would get up to no good: the kind of place it wouldn’t be hard to find some drugs if you wanted to.

Despite all this, what is most important to know about the place that preceded Eko Atlantic is that it was a community: home to about 80,000 people, mostly living in stilted homes above the water. The water had always been a threat, not just as it crawled up the coast, swallowing land, but also as it thrashed swimmers around in its notoriously violent tide. Sometimes it would ebb so far as to lick the main road, but Sisyphean sand-filling efforts pushed it back throughout the early 2000s. It has long been evident that coastal erosion is a real problem.

THE LAGOS STATE GOVERNMENT AND THE CHAGOURY family would like you to believe it was coastal erosion that displaced the Bar Beach community—they told me as much in interviews in 2017. But the fact remains that in 2008, state officers arrived, shooting tear gas into the community and burning down homes. In the chaos of the eviction, some fleeing community members drowned off the coast. Countless more lost all their possessions in the mix of fire and water. All of those who survived were rendered homeless in one day. Later that year, Eko Atlantic began construction on the evicted beach. (This wasn’t to be the last eviction, either. Most recently, Tarkwa Bay, which sits directly across from Eko Atlantic, was evicted in early 2020.)

The promise of a private city like Eko Atlantic is that it can start a new city off of a blank slate, unencumbered by the burdensome histories that make cities difficult. But Eko Atlantic is the con-

tinuation of more than a century of changes to the Victoria Island coast. It is not the first adversary of coastal erosion, nor the first moneyed force to reshape the coastline to its liking. Classed access, partitioning, and political violence run constantly from the colonial-era “clean air zones” to the sanitized image of Eko Atlantic today.

I will sheepishly admit that while reporting the radio documentary, I was hungering for some damning detail, something explicitly horrifying to contrast against the narrative of progress that Eko Atlantic’s promotional materials touted. Slum evictions, while horrible, feel almost *passé* in reporting on the developing world. (I once pitched an editor a story about a slum eviction in Lagos and he replied, “Stories of slum evictions are a dime a dozen.”) As urban historian Mike Davis has shown in his work on cities and slums, the spread of urban poverty is perhaps one of the most striking legacies of the austerity of global capitalism in the developing world, a result of reduced public spending, mass migration and the “informalization of labor” (the latter of which he asserts is a euphemism for mass unemployment). The widespreadness of slums can risk inuring us to the fact that urban slums at this scale are a rather novel phenomenon, historically, and one of the most blatant expressions of the inequality inherent to capitalism.

Eko Atlantic is a vision of that inequality thrown into relief. When I flipped my focus from looking at the impacted city-dwellers to the practices of the developers, I was frustrated, like the editor I pitched, by the lack of a smoking gun. Digging into the Chagourys’ association with the Clintons drove me to reading the drivel of right-wing media which, admittedly, sometimes had germs of truth. My friend Ishan and I spoke with journalists and researchers in Lagos who felt threatened by the Chagourys, but those threats were never directly leveraged against them, just ambient warnings from friends and neighbors and coworkers. It was hard to discern what was an actionable threat versus leftover paranoia from a different era in Lagos, when the Chagourys were aligned with Abacha. Such paranoia seemed not unreasonable in our interviewees even if we struggled to fact-check it. For Ishan and I, insulated by our American passports, all we got was a strongly-worded email from Ronald Chagoury Jr. rebuking our interview with him (and with a phalanx of lawyers cc’d).

In looking for the sensational, I think what I had been hoping for was some way to de-sanctify the project, to find a script for how power operated that could expose the aspirational narratives as bogus, so that I didn’t have to graffiti “NEOLIBERALISM UNDER INVESTIGATION” onto Eko Atlantic like EFCC graffiti.



But looking for evidence of spectacular, cinematic violence is a fool’s errand, because it dismisses what is hidden in plain sight: that displacement, exploitation, and violence are endemic to Lagos’ relationship to the global economy and have been so long before the emergence of private cities.

The fact is that Eko Atlantic, and the political and financial mechanics that make a project like it possible, are not atypical of Nigeria or sub-Saharan Africa. Slum clearance and high-end luxury developments are the expression of the mechanics of global capitalism that have been reshaping African megacities like Lagos for decades. The advent of private cities is just the apogee of financial capitalism’s liaison with real estate. Despite what their developers might claim, private cities represent not a fix or departure from the issues facing these cities, but rather a continuation of the very forces that caused them. In their literal concretization, private cities entrench inequality and affirm private rule.

Perhaps the most nefarious element of the story Eko Atlantic tells about itself and Lagos is that it suggests that the future of the city is enclosed by technocratic capitalism: no longer belonging to Lagosians themselves, but instead to the profit motive. I refuse to accept this inevitability. “We must be able to envision alternative configurations of agents, practices and social relations,” Davis writes, “and this requires, in turn, that we suspend the politico-economic assumptions that chain us to the present.”

As much as private cities exemplify the most financially, socially, and environmentally costly aspects to global capitalism, they might also contain the seeds of its demise—by showing the limits and failures of a capitalistic vision of the future. Aspiration doesn’t need to belong only to McKinsey reports about the “lion” economies of the continent. It can be reclaimed by everyday Lagosians as it already is. The future is not entirely foreclosed. At least, not yet. ✚

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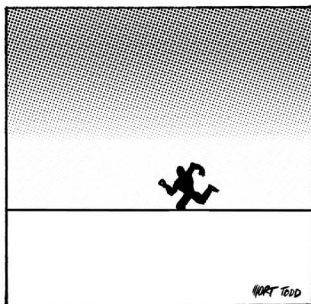
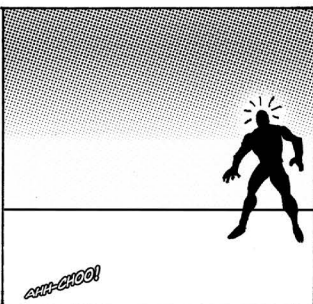
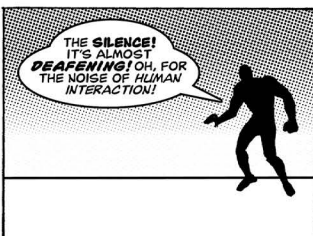


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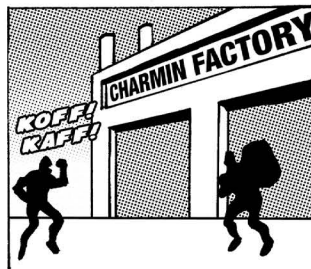
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is socialism



BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

DINESH D'SOUZA'S LATEST BOOK *THE UNITED States of Socialism* is subtitled "What It Is, Why It's Evil, and How To Stop It." As the author of a book called *Why You Should Be A Socialist*, I object rather strenuously to the suggestion that I, along with my friends and editorial colleagues, am "evil." It is hard for me to think of myself as evil. (Flawed, yes. Possibly even "intolerable" occasionally. But "evil" is an epithet I cannot accept. Still, one must remember that very few of the world's evil people thought of themselves as evil. They thought of themselves as good.) So it is entirely possible that I am delusional. I have tried, then, to consider D'Souza's case fairly.

And so: does it articulate a compelling critique of socialism? No. In fact, substantial parts of D'Souza's book are almost completely irrelevant to a discussion of socialism. Long passages attempt to vindicate Trump associate George Papadopoulos and show the Mueller investigation was groundless. Whereas I end my own book with an appendix offering other literature and resources for those interested in the study of socialist ideas, the appendix to D'Souza's book is an excerpt of a court brief from his 2014 criminal case on felony campaign finance violations. It contains various legal precedents and is meant to show that D'Souza's one-year prison sentence was unfair.

Most leftists, reading this part of the book, will think "But I couldn't give a crap about any of that. I want to eliminate class division. How is this a refutation of anything I believe?" We on the left have generally been fairly uninterested in the "Russiagate" stuff, and in fact have been critical of liberals for obsessing over aspects of Trump's presidency that have fewer consequences for working people's lives, instead of talking about his cruelty to immigrants, his elimination of workplace safety rules and labor protections, his assault on abortion rights, and his catastrophic rollback of environmental regulations and worsening of the climate crisis.

But D'Souza, like many conservatives, does not grasp the gulf between liberals and leftists, because he lumps them together as part of the same ideological tendency. He uses the phrase "Democrats," "the left," "progressives," and "socialists" basically interchangeably. To explain away the fact that people like Elizabeth Warren and Nancy Pelosi declare themselves proud capitalists, D'Souza says that this is essentially false. They are socialists whether they know it or not. For D'Souza, there is simply a spectrum, with Bernie Sanders being "very" socialist and Pelosi being "socialism lite," but the differences are very small. I am not sure how to square D'Souza's theory with the fact that the institutional Democratic Party hates Bernie Sanders and did everything it could to keep him from getting the nomination; D'Souza's best explanation is that Democrats are embarrassed by Bernie because he says openly what they all mostly believe privately. ("Their protest against Bernie Sanders seems to be against his candor.")

D'Souza has developed, over the course of several books, a theory of what the left/socialism/the Democratic Party/progressivism is.

He argues that "Progressivism, Communism, and National Socialism" were all "variations on a single theme" pushing us "away from free market capitalism and toward a collectivist society with the state as the instrument of the common good." To socialists, this is silly, because while Nazi nationalism and Sanders socialism can both be said to care about "the collective," one of those dreamed of building an anti-Semitic militarized ethnostate filled with Aryan ubermenschen, the other is trying to institute a universal health insurance program and reduce the reach of militarism and the police state. To say they are similar because both believe in "the collective" is like saying "Hitler and Martin Luther King were part of the same tendency because they were both leaders who spoke to crowds."

D'Souza frequently defends his batty thesis by pointing out that pivotal progressive figures from FDR to Wilson to LBJ were actually racist. Social Security was originally "deliberately crafted to exclude domestic workers and farm workers, the two occupations in which blacks were the most heavily concentrated," and FDR praised Mussolini (that "admirable Italian gentleman") and put ex-Klansman Hugo Black on the Supreme Court. This, in his mind, is evidence progressivism, racism, fascism are all part of the same thing. (And the relevance of D'Souza's own criminal prosecution is that it shows one more example of "the left" behaving tuggishly: to him, it is Barack Obama wielding the state against his political opponents in the same way that an authoritarian communist regime would.)

THE FIRST THING I WOULD POINT OUT TO D'SOUZA, as I did in my review of his *Big Lie*, is that he is totally ignorant of the nature of the conflict between socialists and liberals, or between Sanders supporters and Clinton/Biden supporters. It's no surprise to leftists to find out that Roosevelt praised a fascist; you'll also find these critiques in the works of Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky. His lumping together of neoliberals and socialists leads D'Souza to bizarre comments like "typical of the new type of socialist is Stacey Abrams," even though Abrams is someone who has listed her favorite book as *Atlas Shrugged* and came out to publicly defend Michael Bloomberg's campaign spending. D'Souza even cites Pete Buttigieg "appear[ing] on talk shows bashing Christians for taking seriously the biblical passages disputing homosexuality" as an example of contemporary socialism. He really tangles himself in some knots as he tries to show that contemporary socialism "is no longer rooted in class" and would be "unrecognizable to Marx" because it is a kind of "identity socialism," and "it's all about identity politics now." As an example of this, he cites Hillary Clinton's "jibe at Bernie" that "if we broke up the big banks tomorrow, would that end racism?" Today's socialism, he says "seeks to demonize white male heterosexuals" and so "poor Bernie and Joe Biden" seem "out of place."

I don't encourage you to try to follow this argument. Hillary Clinton's criticism of breaking up banks was an example of socialism? Pete Buttigieg, despised by socialists for being a McKinseyite who bashes

universal healthcare, is a socialist? Bernie Sanders, the foremost figure of the American socialist movement, is “out of place” in it? But you can see why D’Souza gets himself into this mess. He needs there to be a left conspiracy, with all Democrats part of an evil socialist plot. So even though many socialists (see, e.g. Adolph Reed) are strongly critical of politics that prioritize identity and neglect class, D’Souza has to say that today’s socialism is all about identity. This way, identity-emphasizing politicians like Buttigieg and Kamala Harris can be put in the box, and the conspiracy theory can be salvaged.

Of course, when D’Souza turns to attacking Bernie Sanders, once again socialists are supposedly driven by all of the old Marxist economic dogmas. He adopts the working definition that socialism is when “the economic affairs of society belong to the public and not to the private sphere,” saying it has been “embraced by virtually all self-described socialists” and its most “recognizable historical application” is “nationalization of industry.” Now, I do not in fact embrace this definition, because it leaves out a key aspect of socialism, which is against having a hierarchy of economic classes. You could have fully nationalized industries in a monarchy but that wouldn’t make them socialist. (Actually, funnily enough, even though D’Souza places nationalization at the center of socialist ideology, at one point he actually *under*-states what socialists want here. He says he “ha[s] not been able to find a single socialist in America who advocates a government takeover of grocery stores, or retirement homes, or urgent care centers... nor can I find a single voice calling for the nationalization of, say, mail delivery or the phone companies or even space travel.” I for one certainly think that space travel and urgent care should be state-run, and as for nationalization of mail service, nobody tell him about the radical institution known at the United States Postal Service.)

JUST COMPENSATION

But let’s leave aside D’Souza’s esoteric definition of socialism and concentrate on an argument that forms a core part of his book: the defense of free markets as producing just outcomes. D’Souza criticizes some other conservatives here, because he says they seem to admit that capitalism isn’t fair. He cites Friedrich von Hayek, who said:

“In a free system, it is neither desirable nor practicable that material rewards should be made generally to correspond to what men recognize as merit, and... an individual’s position should not necessarily depend on the views that his fellows hold about the merit he has acquired.”

For D’Souza, this is unacceptable. If material rewards don’t correspond to any common standard of “what men recognize as merit,” the system is failing. D’Souza says that whether capitalism is defensible depends on showing that it gives people what they deserve. If he can prove this, he says, he will have shown that it is justified. But if he can’t, he will have to concede the socialists are right:

“The central question for me is whether capitalism truly distributes its rewards in proportion with what people actually deserve. If it does, it’s just. If it doesn’t, it isn’t... If it fails to give people their due, it fails the basic test of justice... it must be reformed or abolished.”

D’Souza’s way of proving that capitalism gives people what they deserve is to attempt to show that it hands out economic rewards in proportion to people’s productivity. To show that it does this, he gives the example of a parking attendant at a Trump hotel. The parking attendant may be miffed that he only earns \$100 a day to park cars, when the hotel makes \$3,000 a day on parking and Donald Trump himself is a billionaire.

“We have to show where the other \$2,900 went. If other words, we have to show that he is being paid commensurate with what he is producing. If we can, we will have shown that the rewards of the free market system are not only efficient but also fair. If we cannot, some social-

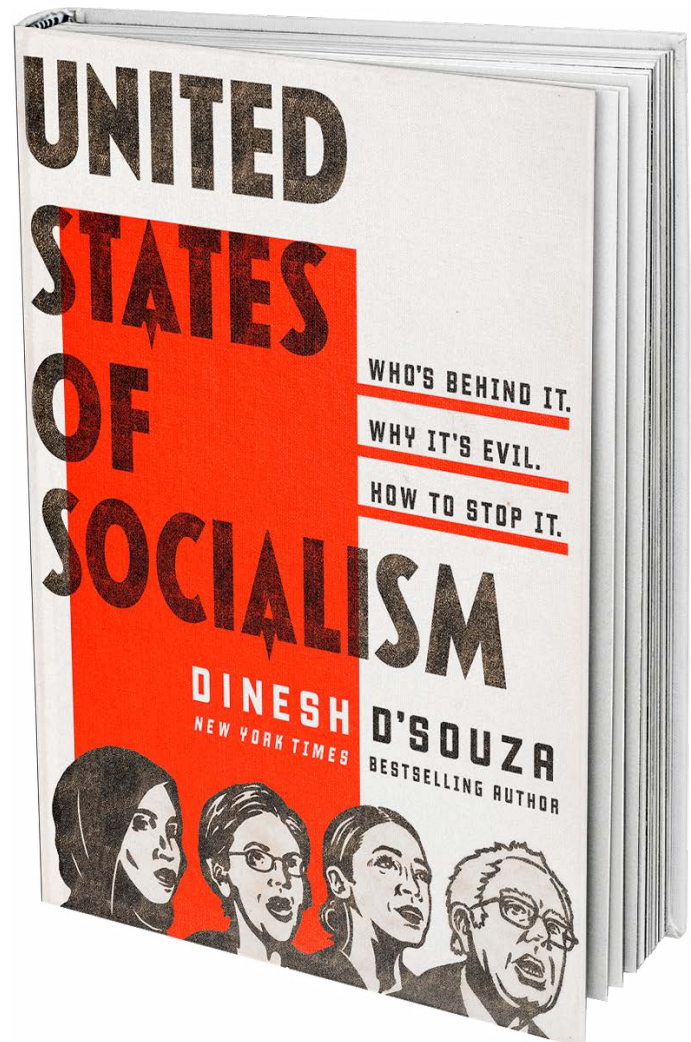
ist-type redistribution becomes not only plausible but also irresistible.”

D’Souza then says that what the parking attendant does not realize is that the capitalist makes vital contributions to a business. Recounting parts of Trump’s career in the hotel industry, D’Souza shows how a hotel impresario selects a location, purchases a building, staffs a business, and builds a brand. A parking attendant does none of this. So, he concludes, because Trump made the greatest contribution to the hotel having its high prices, and the parking attendant did not, Trump deserves his money:

“Someone—in this case Trump—had the idea for that resort. He organized it... His brand attracted the clientele. He took all the risk. The parking guy did none of this. So Trump, not the parking guy, deserves the lion’s share of the profit. Both of them—the boss and the menial laborer—are getting their just deserts.”

Let us zero in on the word “so,” because it’s where the sophistry is happening. D’Souza argues that Trump did a bunch of things to aid the success of the enterprise. He concludes that therefore, Trump “deserves” to be a billionaire and the parking guy deserves \$100. But this is merely assuming the conclusion. Why does being the one who built the brand create this entitlement? A person earning a hundred bucks a day may struggle to pay their rent and raise their children. A billionaire could easily help them by taking less of the profits. The hidden premise here is that you deserve to live in obscene luxury if you can be shown to have contributed the most to the market value of an enterprise. But I don’t accept that premise at all, and D’Souza does not make an argument for it.

Often, the first instinct leftists have when they hear arguments like



“the CEO contributed more to the profits, so the CEO deserves their share,” is to show as an empirical matter that the CEO or capitalist did not in fact make such a contribution, that workers are the true source of value. But I think we need to emphasize that *even if* “productivity” determines what material rewards people get, we will not have shown the system is justified. This is because “distribution based on productivity” is a totally indefensible principle.

Think about what it means to say that “people’s material rewards should be distributed in accordance with their relative contribution to the production of those material things.” It means that the disabled, the sick, children, and the elderly do not deserve any portion of the collective wealth. Anyone who cannot generate market value is, if we apply this principle consistently, left to starve. It is a Social Darwinist mindset that says the weak can suffer and die while the healthy and productive should reap the rewards.

Now, I am sure if you are a defender of the principle, you will say “Oh, no, of course I believe that we have an obligation to take care of the weak and old and sick.” But this means that you do *not* subscribe to the principle that productivity should determine compensation. You subscribe to at least one other principle, one that says that if people *need* things, they should be given them, even if they cannot produce. So some things should be given “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need” rather than “to each according to their marginal contribution to the social product.” (You are, in other words, a little bit socialist.)

D’Souza simply takes his Social Darwinist, let-the-weak-perish distributional principle as a given. But there is no reason that we should, because accepting it would lead to a monstrous situation in which the weak all ended up in poverty. In fact, that is precisely what happens in the United States, where a huge portion of the poor are disabled people, children, old people, full-time carers, and sick people. (According to the Brookings Institution, less than 30 percent of the American poor are working-age adults who could be in the labor force.) Even if American capitalism *does* compensate people in accordance with their productivity, that would mean an impoverished underclass of involuntary non-producers, which is revolting to the basic moral instincts of every compassionate person.

Let me illustrate further with an example from my own experience running a “business,” namely this magazine. (It’s funny, because D’Souza says that one reason leftists have disdain for capitalism is that they do not understand what it takes to run a business or what entrepreneurs do. Well, I actually have done precisely the thing D’Souza says I have not done, so I know exactly why all of this is bollocks.) If I co-founded *Current Affairs* and hatched a good deal of the early creative vision, it might be true as a factual matter that without me, the present-day income of *Current Affairs* would be much lower. Why, though, does that justify me getting rich if the other employees of *Current Affairs* struggle? If making a product requires both somebody to come up with the idea, and somebody to actually make it, why does the one with the idea deserve more? It is not enough to say “because without the idea, there would be no product.” Without my parents there would be no me but they are not entitled to my life savings. We are not in search of an argument that I did things, we need an argument that my doing things justifies a vast wage differential.

Now, the empirical claim about productivity determining compensation also happens to be false. Having had to set salaries, I know that in many enterprises it is almost impossible to actually figure out what each employee produces. Our own employees’ salaries are set according to a murky combination of what we feel we can afford and what seems relatively fair. David Graeber, in *Bullshit Jobs*, writes about how objectively even completely unproductive jobs can persist; for example, one publisher hired a front desk secretary not because they needed one, but because having one made them feel important. The story told by free market

types is that these inefficiencies “will not” continue to exist, because the market will punish those who waste money on nonsense. But the story is speculative fiction; it is at odds with reality.

Even if productivity could always be determined, however, the relative amounts people are paid would still be a *choice*, and that choice needs to be defended. Let us say we can figure out exactly how much an employee contributes. The people at the top are still deciding how much to take for themselves versus how much to pay their employees. They could make a different decision. That is, after all, what Dan Price, CEO of the payment processor company Gravity, did in 2015. He decreed that all of his employees would receive a minimum annual salary of \$70,000 and cut his own pay from \$1 million annually to \$70,000. Price had been moved by a conversation he had with an employee who said that he was being “ripped off” by Price, who was then paying him \$35,000. Price had responded with the classic free market argument: that he was paying the market rate for the employee’s labor, and thereby giving him what he was worth. But the employee pointed out, correctly, that Price was making a *choice* to give himself far more. Nothing was forcing him to pay only the market rate. The conversation haunted Price, who then decided on his “radical” experiment in pay equity.

TELLINGLY, SOME CONSERVATIVES WERE ENRAGED BY what Price did. Rush Limbaugh commented “Pure, unadulterated socialism... I hope this company is a case study in MBA programs on how socialism does not work, because it’s gonna fail.” I am fascinated by this statement, because what Price did occurred purely within the context of a free market.

He was a CEO making a voluntary decision about the contracts to offer employees. But I understand why conservatives would be horrified: Price showed that choosing to take more for yourself because you are the CEO is voluntary, and that there is no reason it has to be that way. (Five years later, according to Price, “revenue is up, attrition is down, and we’ve been able to grow headcount by 75 percent.” He says that the difference it has made to his employees’ lives has been well worth the cut to his own pay.)

D’Souza concludes of the parking attendant: “If he wants to know why his work isn’t being paid more, the answer is that his work isn’t worth more.” But this ducks the entire question, which is whether the choice of CEOs to pay themselves more and employees less is morally justified. *Market* worth, a.k.a. price, is a measure of how little employers can get away with paying. You can produce just as much in April as you did in January but your employer might give you a pay cut because unemployment is higher in the economy at large and you fear losing your job more. When a person will work for a slice of bread and some soup so as not to starve, is it justified for a millionaire to pay them nothing more? Under D’Souza’s framework, the answer is “yes, it’s justified,” because the wage an employee is willing to work for determines what they are worth in the market, which supposedly determines their morally just portion. I do not see any compelling reason to accept this.

Far from seeming to provide “just deserts,” rewards under capitalism run completely contrary to human moral instincts. The people who work the hardest often get the least, and wealthy heirs who produce nothing can live off capital income while dishwashers and fruit pickers work from sunup to sunset and can barely survive. The only way D’Souza can possibly hope to defend any of this is by asking us to suspend our morality and embrace the circular reasoning that if people are paid in accordance with their market value, which in a market they are (by definition), justice has been done.

So D’Souza has failed in his attempt to justify capitalistic distribution. And since he told us that if he couldn’t justify it, capitalism would need to be abolished or reformed, we have no choice but to conclude that capitalism must be abolished or reformed.

YOU ARE



DIFFERENT

THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

One of the interesting things about *The United States of Socialism* is that D'Souza notices how muddled other conservatives are when they talk about the economic system in Nordic countries. Some argue that Norway, Sweden, and Finland are "actually capitalist" and have low taxes, limited regulations, and no minimum wages. Others say these economies are "actually socialist" but are failures, and have very high taxes that Americans would never tolerate. D'Souza is perceptive enough to realize that if conservatives say these societies are "capitalist," they open themselves up to being challenged: "Well, if they're capitalist, why can't we import their model and have universal healthcare and paid family leave and such?" So D'Souza encourages his fellow conservatives to say that the Nordics are socialist.

Interestingly, D'Souza does *not* then do what you might expect him to do, which is to try to show that Nordic socialism "doesn't work." Instead, he says:

"I'm not denying the existence of Nordic socialism. Nor do I deny that this type of socialism works to a point. What I deny is that it can be imported here. We cannot have Scandinavian socialism because we don't have the conditions for it. Our type of society doesn't permit it."

So it exists, and it at least partly works (D'Souza admits that "Finnish healthcare costs less than American healthcare" but says it is "inferior," offering nothing to justify this contention.) But even though it is good, we just can't have it. D'Souza does not make an argument that the benefits Nordic countries offer their citizens do not make them better off (he is smart enough to realize that they do). So he resorts to the peculiar argument that it is simply impossible for Americans to have nice things. The Nordics, he says, are able to have socialism because they are ethnically homogenous. It was "developed for people named Sven." The United States is not ethnically homogenous. Few of our people are not named Sven, and "no American socialist wants America's racial landscape to resemble that of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, or Finland." Thus we cannot have socialism.

This seems awfully convenient; why would ethnicity make the difference over whether a certain kind of healthcare system works? What does "percentage of Svens" have to do with economic policy? D'Souza says that the important thing to understand is that the homogeneity is not just ethnic, but ethical: there is a nationwide "imagined comradeship," a "sense of solidarity among the citizens." "The operating principle of Scandinavian socialism is that we're all in this together." He says that their type of socialism has nothing in common with the identity-based socialism of the United States. Theirs is "unification socialism" whereas ours is "division socialism":

"The motto of unification socialism is that we are one people; we are all in this together... Socialism in America means forcing groups defined as 'oppressors' to submit and pay up to groups defined as 'victims.' Nothing could be more alien to the spirit of Scandinavian socialism... The whole template of leftist politics that we are familiar with in this country, rooted in identity politics, is pretty much inapplicable to Scandinavia."

I am going to be generous and assume that this poor man is simply confused. In fact, if you watch Bernie Sanders' campaign ads, you will see exactly the kind of appeal for an "imagined comradeship" that D'Souza says today's socialists do not have. They are striking calls for solidarity across all identity groups. Sanders tried to cultivate an ethic of unity and condemned those who seek to divide working people against one another. I would encourage Dinesh D'Souza to pick up a copy of *Jacobin* magazine and see where he finds "identity politics" that "demonizes" white people. It isn't there.

Of course, talking about the 99% and the 1% is kind of inherently

"divisive." But the only reason there isn't as much of a class struggle in the Nordic countries is that it was already waged long ago. Interestingly, D'Souza comments at one point that there is no "literature of leftist political pilgrimage to Norway and Sweden" and says it's "striking" that we do not see "reports" from Nordic countries by leftists. I find this funny, because one such report, by Ty Joplin, appears in this very edition of *Current Affairs*. Joplin notes that in Norway, it took labor militancy to achieve the kinds of gains today's socialists seek for the U.S. Yes, it's true, there is a national ethic of solidarity and mutual aid. But that is not because they are white. It is because generations of people tried to build that collective spirit, to bring to their country what American socialists are currently trying to bring to the U.S.

What I like about D'Souza's commentary on the Nordics is that it essentially admits we are right. These countries work, their models are good, and the only difference between us and them is that we do not have the necessary spirit of solidarity... yet. But so long as you do not believe that solidarity is only possible among Svens, this is an argument for pressing forward, not for giving up.

ADDITIONAL IGNORANCE

I have thus far treated D'Souza's arguments quite seriously, but it is worth noting that much of the book is far more ignorant than I have conveyed. He makes idiotic misstatements (Socialism "dates back to 1917, when Lenin founded the world's first socialist state") and his arguments are frequently absurd. (He says that if Walmart workers thought CEOs earned too much they could leave and start their own Walmart, which shows stunning ignorance of the way concentrated corporate power operates to crush potential competitors.) He says that "the central principle of democracy is majority rule," which is false, and then proceeds to show how absurd strict majority rule is (the central principle of democracy is participation in power, which is different). He compares being transgender to thinking you are a toad, repeating the usual conservative mistake of thinking that transgender people are denying biology rather than denying conceptual categories. He is a climate change denier, who delights in posting individual news stories about particular glaciers that are growing rather than shrinking in order to mislead people into thinking that glaciers as a whole are expanding. He flat out lies about the accuracy of climate models. He says that "if the climate change literature was persuasive one would expect the price of coastal properties worldwide to plummet.... But, in fact, nothing like this has happened." In fact, there is research from the not-exactly-socialist McKinsey & Co. on the effect of climate change on coastal asset values.

He says that "the consumer votes with his dollar bills" making the market a pure direct democracy, though the entire critique made by the left is that the market is like a democracy where some people get zero votes and some people get *50 billion*. He says that "we live in a society of black and brown privilege" in which it is "now customary, if not obligatory, to tiptoe around blacks and other people of color, to express deference if not subservience to their demands," ignoring gigantic piles of social science research on racial inequality. He cites Jussie Smollett and Emma Sulkowicz as somehow representing socialism. There are enough bad arguments in this book to write four more books refuting them. You may ask: "Why bother?" to which I'd give my usual answer. People read this stuff, and it's important that we understand what conservatives are going to say and exactly where it goes wrong. I promise you this book will sell more copies than my own, which is sad, but socialists need to know what our counterarguments are, because D'Souza is an intelligent sophist whose works are often fun and loaded with footnotes, and can appear superficially

persuasive to the politically naive.

I'd like to finish with one final D'Souza argument that I think exemplifies what conservatives are oblivious to that the left understands. Here, after talking about why the Founding Fathers were wonderful, he once again turns to lambasting identity politics:

It may seem surprising that, in this account of the American founding, I have given so little emphasis to what the founders thought about race, gender, and sexual orientation. In other words, I seem to have neglected "identity" issues all together. For progressive historiography, this is something of a scandal. Progressive scholars across a range of disciplines talk of little else. They write as if the founders cared about little else. Yet the truth is that the founders gave little attention to the politics of race, even less to the politics of sex, and none whatsoever to the politics of sexual orientation. Why? Not because the founders were racists and sexists. Rather, they were concerned with the norms of society, and in constructing these, they emphasized the typical or normal case. They were not unfamiliar with the anomaly of race. They understood that their wives and daughters were part of the novus ordo seclorum.... So why not build a society keeping minorities and outliers foremost in mind?... For the same reason that a dinner host organizes a party keeping the general tenor of the guests in mind. The basic principles are those of normalcy and inclusion. Now imagine that one of the invitees is a dwarf.

D'Souza says the dwarf will be "annoyed to discover that the chairs are too high for him to climb into" and that he cannot see, but it's

"...very hard for the dwarf to understand that the guests are actually indifferent to height. This is not a party organized by dwarves.... The organizers have made room for him to be part of the festivities like everyone else. But the operating principle is one of universality, not of difference. This is the aspect of the American founding that identity socialists hate."

One could start here by pointing out that the Founding Fathers were, in fact, racists. (Jefferson: "The blacks... are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and mind...") But D'Souza is also illustrating exactly why conservative "color blindness" rhetoric is so wrong. The Founding Fathers didn't let women and people of color vote! This wasn't "universality"! The failure to "see" race means overlooking colossal racial injustices! D'Souza's dwarf example shows this quite well. The party organizers think that by treating everyone "the same" they are creating equality. But one person is having a miserable time, because their differences are not being accommodated. That is because the party is being organized by someone like D'Souza, i.e. a complete dick who cannot even be considerate enough to get a little person a higher chair, and instead comments that "it's very hard for the dwarf to understand that the guests are actually indifferent to height." D'Souza's hypothetical ends with the little person getting enraged and screaming at the other guests that they are being inconsiderate (perhaps this has happened to D'Souza before), and he chooses to see this as impoliteness on the guest's part, rather than an illustration of how ignorant you become if your philosophy is to ignore identity and difference.

Socialist dinner parties are less likely to end with differently abled people becoming upset and offended, because we actually care about everyone's experiences. We pay attention to injustices and we give to each according to their need rather than according to their productivity. D'Souza's arguments are nearly always bad, but his book shows exactly the ways in which conservative philosophy is oblivious to the conditions of people's lives and the changes necessary to improve them. ✿

BUILD YOUR OWN BIDENISM TO SERVE ANY PURPOSE

Sometimes you need to be Joe Biden at the spur of the moment. We've got you covered.

You are Joe Biden. You may not know you are Joe Biden, but that is part of being Joe Biden. You are snoring peacefully in the basement of your Wilmington residence, waiting for someone to activate you. Suddenly, one of your toadies enters. There is a phone call from the Press. A thing has happened. The media needs your comment. What thing? Doesn't matter, there's no time. They just need a classic quotable Bidenism on the spot, so that the People will know you are alive and on top of the thing, whatever it is. When you find yourself in this situation—or any other in which you are required to be and/or impersonate Joe Biden—what you need is this: the *Current Affairs* portable Bidenism generator. We allow you to speak like Joe Biden at a second's notice, merely by following our patented formula. It can't fail!

"The thing—the thing you have to understand about America—what America needs is NOUN 1, not NOUN 2. We gotta...we gotta VERB this ADJECTIVE issue. I've studied history, and you can't forget: GARBLE."

NOUNS

(you will need two. Take the first letter of your first name for NOUN 1, then the first letter of your last name for NOUN 2)

- A. milk
- B. ice cream
- C. the pool
- D. roaches
- E. kids
- F. girls
- G. the Chinese
- H. the crisis
- I. a problem
- J. a yo-yo
- K. fat
- L. socialism
- M. Corn Pop
- N. the President
- O. FDR
- P. World War II
- Q. drones
- R. a kill list
- S. war
- T. a position
- U. Amtrak
- V. Delaware
- W. some babe
- X. my son
- Y. a mistake
- Z. America

VERB

(your astrological sign)

- ARIES: hit
- TAURUS: touch
- GEMINI: smell
- CANCER: sniff
- LEO: bomb
- VIRGO: figure
- LIBRA: beef up
- SCORPIO: fight
- SAGITTARIUS: attack
- CAPRICORN: vote
- AQUARIUS: text
- PISCES: swim

ADJECTIVE

(last digit of your birth year)

- 1. young
- 2. pretty
- 3. clean
- 4. articulate
- 5. stupid
- 6. darn
- 7. bad
- 8. bright
- 9. good-looking
- 0. great

GARBLE

(how depressed you are right now on a scale of 1-20. 20 is high)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1. we gotta | 12. then go vote for Trump |
| 2. see here Jack | 13. or uh. You know |
| 3. it's malarkey | 14. I never heard of it |
| 4. it's not gonna happen | 15. I never met her |
| 5. it can't happen | 16. yes ma'am |
| 6. it won't happen | 17. I don't...I don't remember |
| 7. we have to take care of the cure | 18. give a shot |
| 8. no matter what | 19. if we just |
| 9. ...what was that? | 20. gotta together, we can make America, uh |
| 10. anyway | |
| 11. that's totally different | |

BONUS BIDENISM

But what if the press asks you a second question? Oh no! You're plum out of nouns and verbs! That's ok. Try a full-paragraph garble on for size.

"In America, we get things done. Not because, not only with our words, but actions, and sometimes words too. Because, you know, words are, it's about how we talk, that's what makes us great. And listen, bud, if you want to be America, if you want to be great, let me tell you, it's simple, it's decent, it's how we're gonna do it."

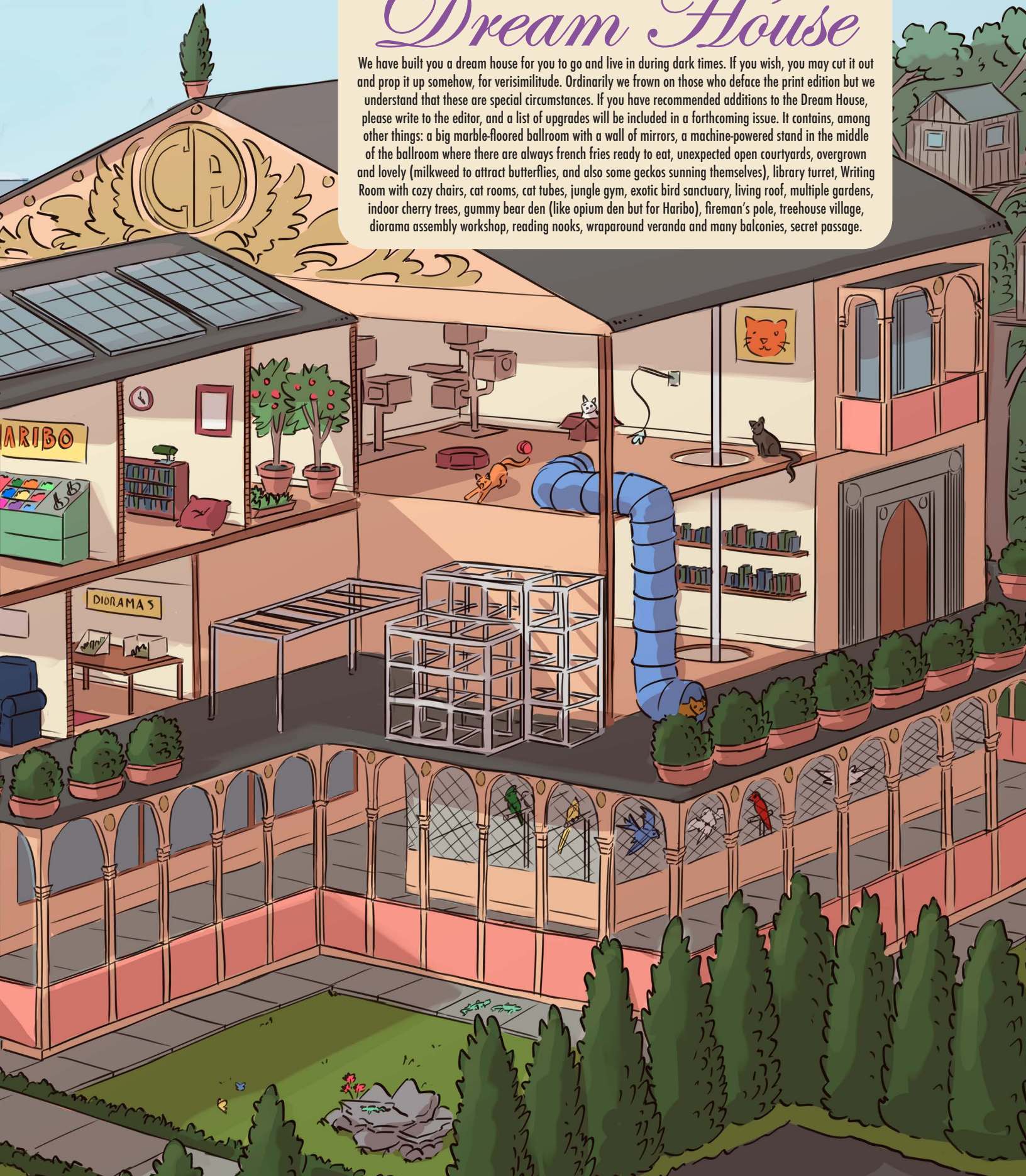




THE CURRENT AFFAIRS

Dream House

We have built you a dream house for you to go and live in during dark times. If you wish, you may cut it out and prop it up somehow, for verisimilitude. Ordinarily we frown on those who deface the print edition but we understand that these are special circumstances. If you have recommended additions to the Dream House, please write to the editor, and a list of upgrades will be included in a forthcoming issue. It contains, among other things: a big marble-floored ballroom with a wall of mirrors, a machine-powered stand in the middle of the ballroom where there are always french fries ready to eat, unexpected open courtyards, overgrown and lovely (milkweed to attract butterflies, and also some geckos sunning themselves), library turret, Writing Room with cozy chairs, cat rooms, cat tubes, jungle gym, exotic bird sanctuary, living roof, multiple gardens, indoor cherry trees, gummy bear den (like opium den but for Haribo), fireman's pole, treehouse village, diorama assembly workshop, reading nooks, wraparound veranda and many balconies, secret passage.





SMELLS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT

by Vanessa A. Bee

I'D BEEN IN AMERICA FOR ALL OF TWO DAYS WHEN I first noticed the pretty little house on Lucky Lane. A mature tree hid half of it, but there the little house lay, behind a backyard fence and redundant wall. Short and capped with an almost flat roof, its siding—a sort of imitation wood—glimmered queerly in the light. From the window of our bedroom window, I watched the chimes on its porch scintillate in the rare Nevada breeze. Lucky Lane was inaccessible from our street, so I'd never examined the little house up close. But I envied it all the same. The cozy size, just wide enough for two. The singing chimes, so bright and colorful. How nice might it be, I thought, to someday call a house like that one home—for my mom and me, as it used to be. Anything for a bed of my own again.

We lived one street over, on the edge of a ring where the houses matched one another like pieces of an assorted doll set. Ours, like the others, was an obligatory two stories, white garage doors, thirsty lawns in the front, and fenced yards in the rear. Windows lined with shutters that weren't supposed to shut. Each house finished with horizontal wood panels painted in respectable pastels. A slice of *Pleasantville* in the high desert. Seven of us were crammed behind this idyllic façade: my aunt and uncle, who'd generously taken us in, their

three children—the middle-schooler Joyce, the fifth-grader Nad, plus the baby—and then my mom and me, freshly arrived from London.

By July 2002, daytime Reno felt a lot like a cloudless oven. My cousins and I stayed indoors more often than not. The house was rarely quiet after dawn, starting with our parents, who conducted all communications at a peak-Cameroonian volume, a perpetual sort of shout whose mood required a trained ear to discern. To pass the time, we alternated between taping music videos on BET, and experimenting with sliding down the carpeted stairs (inside cardboard boxes, then outside of them); we practiced our cornrowing skills on Nad's waist-length hair, and tested each other on American states and their capitals. Dare look bored for a minute, and a floor-length list of chores would materialize. Our parents had no shortage of ideas. We punctuated our play with sterilizing baby bottles and changing diapers, pulling out weeds and cleaning out tilapias for dinner. At any given time, one of us girls either was either hand-washing or dreading her turn hand-washing the bottomless pile of dishes since in this house, a dishwasher was strictly a drying device. A full house meant short showers and sharing beds. But also, an abundance of laughter and tenderness.

I spent much of my free time, that August, studying for high school. Not class subjects, or even my new country's educational sys-

CONTENT WARNING: RACIAL SLURS.

tem. Rather, I wanted to know how American kids talked, what they wore, what their school day looked like. My references were outdated: mostly reruns of *Fresh Prince*, *Boy Meets World*, and *Sister Sister*, none of which I'd watched religiously. The last time we'd moved countries—three years earlier, from France to England—I'd trusted my mom with my first day of school. She'd trusted that the British served a free lunch to all students, as was the norm in French public schools. I realized her mistake when the bell rang at midday, and most of my Year Six classmates pulled sandwiches out of tin boxes. Hunger stirred in my belly while the clock crawled to dismissal time. Never again, I thought, as I typed the words *Wooster High School* into my aunt and uncle's desktop.

LIKE SO MUCH OF THE INTERNET IN THOSE DAYS, Wooster High's web page was scant and unhelpful. An academic calendar was up with holidays, among them: Labor Day in September instead of May 1, Veterans Day around the Armistice, and something called "Thanksgiving." One of the school buildings had a façade painted in scarlet red. Each edge was bracketed by a set of horseshoes and, between them, in shiny white paint: HOME OF THE COLTS. Nevadans had so many words for horses. Steeds. Mounts. Stallions. Mustangs. One section of the website, dedicated to sports, confirmed what I'd gathered from our neighbors' front lawns and from browsing the offerings at the Meadowood Mall. This was a nation of teams. It lived to sort people into categories to which it could sell corresponding gear. Colts versus Huskies. Reno Wolf Pack versus Las Vegas Rebels. West Coast versus East Coast. Black versus white. My uncle, it turns out, had a whole talk about the latter. He'd given it to my cousins before. Sensing it come one day, the girls took a mysterious interest in tidying their rooms and left me alone with my uncle.

"You want to know something," my uncle said in his pronounced accent. "In this America, and you're not going to believe me, but it's my job to tell you, in this country, you have to work twice as hard as white people, do you understand? This is a very racist country. Very racist." I nodded, though unsure what to make of the warnings. It wasn't that I doubted his experience. My uncle had attended college in Texas in the 80s, as dark a Black man then as he was now. But we were far from the South, and even further in time from the American cruelty that I'd seen depicted in the TV show *Roots*. In my 13-¾ years of life, no one had ever called me the n-word. Mentalities had evolved; this was the new millennium! Nevertheless, I promised him that I would do my best.

One other team rivalry, I realized, dwarfed all the others by a long shot: America against the world. How else to explain the obscene display of red, white, and blue flags in places that made no sense? Front lawns, large poles, t-shirts, license plates, eating plates, hats, baby onesies, adult onesies, windows, cupcakes, water bottles, monster truck bumpers. It was as if America feared that people would forget where they were born, or how far they had traveled from their country of origin to get here. I wondered if America had developed this insecurity following that awful day, when I came home from

school and stared at our British newscasts, mouth agape, refusing to believe the tiny bodies jumping off the crumbling towers in real time. But my cousin Joyce said her middle school already made her pledge allegiance to America every day before the September 11th attacks.

I peppered Joyce with questions. One year earlier, she'd survived her first day of seventh grade in America without any help. Before that, she'd lived in England with me, and before that, in Spain with my aunt—restlessness runs in the family. I asked how lunch time worked. What were the kids like? What did they wear? What else should I know? Joyce shared everything she could remember. You could bring your own lunch, but there were carts and vending machines to buy food during breaks. A cafeteria offered free lunch if you were eligible for it, as in poor enough, like we were, but the cost of accepting the free meal, particularly in a full lunchroom, amounted to social suicide. So that was out of the question. She wasn't sure *why* it was supposed to be embarrassing. It simply was.

Vaughn Middle was, according to Joyce, as cliquish as the American schools on television. Guessing that Wooster High might be too, we lay on our bellies and excavated the glossy pages of her yearbook for data to prepare me. I'd never seen a yearbook before. Each student and teacher got an individual photo with their name and grade. An apt tradition for a nation that could Never Forget. Throughout the academic year, a select group of intrepid students scoured the school to document its layers. If they were thorough, every subculture was represented, from the smokers' corner to the jocks to the special classes for students with disabilities. The school sent the final layout to a professional printer, and charged something like \$60 for each hardbound time capsule. I wondered if my mom would have the money to get me one. Joyce said that buying a yearbook wasn't mandatory, but what else would you pass around for signatures the last week of school?

There was a club for everyone and everything: chess, Spanish, model U.N., debate, photography, math, Dungeons and Dragons, drama, band, even the yearbook club itself. It seemed the possibilities were endless. The only time students wore uniforms was to compete in various sports, which were played in seasons. Fall was for soccer (football), volleyball, and (American) football. Winter, for skiing and basketball. And spring, for track-and-field, baseball, and softball (baseball for girls). In Europe, high school and university existed for the exclusive purpose of study but here, they were a conduit for *school spirit*—a sense of pride instilled through fight songs, team colors, and mascot costumes that students wore on game day. Sports were such an integral part of the curriculum that you were allowed, and even expected, to miss class and exams for them. The best athletes went on to do the same at college, in exchange for free or reduced tuition.

Joyce showed me the popular kids in her yearbook. We had them in France and England too, so the category needed no explanation. I knew that popularity was usually a byproduct of exceptional attractiveness or athletic talent. A slim crop of students rose by virtue of their charismatic personalities, though this was not interchangeable with being kind. We combed the yearbook index to get a good look at the crushes Joyce had secretly harbored. She identified the ambitious kids—the ones organized enough to campaign for seats on the

student council—and her girlfriends, both true ones and renowned backstabbers. We flipped the pages slowly. Here, she pointed out the ones who'd welcomed her despite her weird Franco-Hispano-Cameroonian accent. And there, some of the girls who'd be at our bus stop on the first day of school.

Two of them, Allison and Amber, were rising freshmen like me. At Vaughn Middle, they'd been popular and popular-adjacent, respectively. Allison, who lived in the pastel ring, was an alum of the middle school's volleyball and basketball teams. Amber was into cheerleading and lived nearby, too, though Joyce wasn't quite sure where. She didn't know either of them well. These girls were white; her closest friends were Mexican or Black, like her loud and uninhibited classmate Brittany. I'd liked Brittany a lot when I met her. She was American but, like me, had been raised by a single Black mom devoted to church—an experience that transcended borders. Over the summer, Brittany had braved the miserable two-mile walk to the Meadowood Mall with us a few times. We went mostly to have run-ins with cute boys, but usually settled for Dippin' Dots and trying on stuff at Charlotte Russe. As the end of August approached, we made mental notes of the shoes and shirts we'd have to convince our moms to buy at Meadowood instead of Ross, their favorite discount store. Money being tight, always, we knew to be judicious with our demands.

Other categories of yearbook-people were new to me. *Cholos* and *cholas*. English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) kids. But also Loners and Losers, which frequently overlapped. The latter was less self-explanatory. I asked Joyce if accents made people losers. Were we—

No, Joyce said. Lots of people had accents here. (One-fifth of Reno was Hispanic.) The way you spoke didn't matter...unless you had a speech impediment. Then you might be a loser. The list of sins that landed people on the outs were hard to define with any finality. The most obvious losers had trouble making friends, or shared a visible passion for fantasy fiction—dragons, wizards, spells—that preceded and surpassed the mainstream *Lord of the Rings* movies. They were the kids who got called creepers because they stared too long, or wore the wrong trench coats to school, unaware that their vibe was more “Columbine shooter” than *The Matrix*.

I wondered if perhaps some people were just born with faulty wiring that destined them for the edges of society. Innocent heirs to parents who had been losers, perhaps themselves descended from losers. But it was more complicated than that. Loserdom could be reversed, by makeover or a timely growth spurt, just as it could be caught. One vicious breakout of cystic acne, a blowjob to a blabbermouth, or exhibiting sadness past the social expiration date, and you might find yourself in exile. Unless you were exceptionally attractive, in which case, you had immunity. Not all of it made sense. The most important thing was to avoid the stink altogether. Because once it was on you, there was no telling how long it'd linger.

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE REGISTRAR'S DESK AT Wooster High asked if I planned to take honor classes. The point, I was told, was to prepare me for Advance Placement (A.P.) exams my junior and senior years. The exams each cost \$80 but a good score was

convertible to college credits, which were pricier down the line. Alternatively, the registrar said, I could enroll in the International Baccalaureate (I.B.) program, which had extra requirements like philosophy and physics. Other than electives like Spanish or Art, most of my classes would be with I.B. and A.P. kids. The registrar pressed me for an answer. I'd have to commit immediately, in part because of the I.B. program's demanding math sequence: Geometry, Algebra 2, and Trigonometry. Then Calculus senior year. My mom and uncle's heads bobbed in synchronicity as the registrar played a round of bingo with their favorite adjectives. *Rigorous. Challenging. Advanced.*

The registrar glanced at my school records. Six schools in eight years. Perhaps I might appreciate this last advantage, she said. Wooster High was the only school to offer the I.B. program in the county, so enrolling would allow me to stay at the school even if my mom and I moved further away than the pretty little houses someday. Attending Wooster for four consecutive years sounded appealing, but I smelled trouble. Setting aside whatever trigonometry was, besides an assured tanking of my grades, I'd be besmeared as a nerd the moment I stepped foot on campus. Besides, the program presented other impracticalities. The registrar wouldn't know it from my pressed shirt and my mom's pearly smile, but we had little money to our name: just her last paycheck, a meager child support check from my dad, and what she'd managed to get for our well-used Volvo when we left London. Here, she had no working papers. If she couldn't afford to buy me a name-brand backpack, where would she find \$80 for each I.B. exam? I was plotting out how to accept the brochure and talk my mom out of it at home, when I heard my uncle exclaim, “Okay, let's do it!”

ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL, JOYCE AND I walked to the bus stop around the corner. I recognized Allison, the popular girl from the pastel ring, right away. She was around 5'9" but didn't slouch the way some tall girls did. Her skin was bronzed and freckled, and her hair a natural dark-gold. Teeth perfectly aligned. She wore sweatshirts that said *Billabong* and *Roxy*. We made small talk. She said her brother was an upperclassman with a car but who, for whatever reason, wouldn't drive her to school. American families were strange like that. Amber arrived from Lucky Lane minutes later, with her older sister Cristel and Cristel's best friend Mickie. By then, Allison had returned to her phone at a respectable distance. I wondered if she was shy. She'd greeted Joyce and me but only because we'd said hi first, I think. This was more than she'd given the Lucky Lane girls. With them, Allison hadn't even bothered with a nod. I thought at first that she'd been too engrossed in her phone, but she went on to ignore their presence the rest of the week, and every week after that. Stranger yet, the Lucky Lane girls didn't seem offended.

I wasn't blind to how shiny Allison looked next to the other three high-schoolers. Mickie had thin eyebrows that she penciled over in thick brown, and wore a dark lipstick that made her face even paler. Her teeth were crowded though that didn't stop her from smiling big and loud. Most days, Mickie sported a pair of black jeans fad-

ed with wear. Her sweatshirts were loose, as if inherited from larger boyfriends who smelled of stale cigarette. She was short but took up space. I gathered that how others felt about it was not her problem. Cristel, on the other hand, looked a little lost when Mickie skipped school, like a shadow in want of a human to trail. I remember that she smiled at jokes on a slight delay. By her own reports, Cristel dated boys who treated her like garbage. Her round cheeks and surprised eyes made her seem fragile. That first day of school, I'd mistakenly thought her younger than her sister Amber.

Cristel and Mickie were juniors at Wooster High, so I could see why they might not care about Allison's coldness. They were preoccupied with older boyfriends whose every motion—calls/no calls, texts/no texts, visits/no visits—generated an immense supply of material for them to analyze on the school bus. But I remained baffled that Allison and Amber were not friendly. Not just baffled. Bothered. It wasn't simply that they were pretty-faced blondes who looked like they might get along. They were also the same age and had lived around each other forever, Allison in the pastel ring, and Amber in the pretty little houses. Every morning, for years, they'd awaited the school bus 10 feet apart. The two of them shared a ton of friends. And while Amber's clothes were fewer and more worn-out than Allison's—you could tell three weeks into the school year—these girls obviously liked the same surfing and snowboarding brands.

I struggled to put my finger on why the bus stop division troubled me so much, even though their friendship wasn't remotely my business. Some mornings I chatted with Allison or Amber, but we three freshmen girls always gravitated to our actual friends when the yellow bus pulled up. I had no particular investment in their relationship, or lack of it. The I.B. program had isolated me with fellow nerds, which meant no classes with either Amber or Allison. Yet, every morning, I watched them ignore each other, and wondered how my study of the yearbook had failed to predict this outcome. It was as if an invisible barrier separated Allison from the Lucky Lane girls, and none of them were curious about what lay on the other side.

AS THE FALL SEMESTER UNFOLDED, MY NEW classmates taught me a slew of Americanisms. Bins were called *trash*. The loo or toilet was a *bathroom*, and sometimes a *half-bath*, despite having no bathtub in it. Rubbers were always *erasers* unless you meant to say condoms. As for the little houses on Lucky Lane, the ones I found so charming, they were *trailers*. And the people who lived in them: *trailer trash*.

In my mind, the word trailer conjured images of caravans attached to trucks, or the aluminum container in the middle of the basketball courts where Wooster High made its ESL students take classes. But trailers could look like the pretty little houses behind the pastel ring, too. Single-wides that were 10 feet across, and double-wides that spanned 20 feet, although older models could be as small as eight feet. Much later in life I'd learn that, starting in 1976, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development imposed construction standards that vastly improved the fire safety, insulation, and overall shelf-life of these "mobile homes." The mandated changes had

brought the structures closer to permanent housing than their predecessors, rendering them harder to pick up and move in lean times. Only the federally-compliant models counted as manufactured homes, though. Older houses, like most of the 187 double-wides on Lucky Lane, built in 1971, would never get to be anything other than trailers and mobile homes.

Trailer trash, I learned, was a derivative of *white trash*. If you asked people what white trash was, the definition tended to soften. White trash became a person with no *cultural* class, the kind who misbehaved and broke social norms. Odd thing was, we all knew kids with money who technically had no cultural class and yet didn't quite fit the white trash mold. They had parents with criminal records, parents who smoked cigarettes indoors, parents who forgot to pay the electricity bill, who had disabilities, who got laid off, who lost custody. Rich kids weren't immune to other kinds of markers for low cultural class either, like catching lice or chipping front teeth. Every year, at least one of them temporarily lost their driver's license to a DUI. My senior year, the wealthy dad of a boy in town—and close friend of several of my I.B. friends—murdered the boy's stepmom after being ordered to pay spousal support. He'd then tried to take out the family court judge using a sniper rifle, before escaping to Mexico where he was promptly caught. But of course, no one would describe *that* family as white trash.

It was doing the above while poor that transformed these acts into failures of character. You could be as kind and polite as Amber, you could join cheerleading, wear the right clothes, and date upper-middle-class jocks, but if you lived at the Lucky Lane Mobile Home Park, there was no getting out of it. You were white trash. Which is to say, it wasn't about cultural class at all. People just didn't like to admit the required components of so-called trash: whiteness, poverty, and sometimes trailers.

The closest equivalent to *trailer trash* in my French hometown were the *gitanes*, a nomadic population of Roma that had emigrated from eastern and southern Europe. I remember seeing them in the grocery store parking lot when I was little. The children, tan-skinned and smudged, ran up to my parents and asked to clean our windshield in exchange for a few coins. I don't think those children went to school. They lived in camps near the pond and behind the municipal gym, near where my dad still lives. Clothes hung on ropes between their caravans. Every few months, local police appeared unannounced and the Roma camps vanished for a season or two. But in the end, they always returned. There were no banners against them, no hostile signage or ads in the windows. But I understood from a young age that they were not welcome in polite society. People held their children and wallets closer when the Roma approached. They scowled when the Roma asked for money. Storekeepers didn't bother to invent a reason before asking them to leave.

But the concept of trailer trash operated differently in America. It wasn't directed at so-called ethnic whites, like the Roma who were brown year-round, or the recent comers whose first language wasn't English. Blacks and Mexicans could be a lot of things—at my school: *beaners*, *wetbacks*, *ghetto*—but white trash belonged to white Americans born and raised in this country. It was for them and by them. A

means to denote the wrong kind of whites, short of stripping them of their whiteness.

There is something about temporary housing, about caravans and mobile homes, that causes the people who move in them to lose value faster than a car driving off the sales lot. When Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast in the summer of 2005, my junior year of high school, the Federal Emergency Management Agency would house thousands of storm refugees in trailers across Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. As early as October 2005, the Department of Labor would find that the trailers were essentially toxic cans, oozing high levels of formaldehyde—a gas that would, in time, cause the trailer occupants to contract respiratory complications and in some cases, cancer. A scathing report by the Inspector General for the Department of Homeland Security later revealed that “[w]hen [the federal agency] did learn of the formaldehyde problems, nearly a year passed before any testing program was started and nearly two years passed before occupied trailers were tested and the occupants were informed of the extent of formaldehyde problems and potential threats.” Sometimes, I wonder if these evacuated folks—now, trailer people—ever stood a chance.

There can’t be any honor innate to the concrete and bolts that connected the pastel ring houses to the ground. Nor is there any particular grace in property titles, which are so often a mere formality. Most of the pastel ring residents, my aunt and uncle included, didn’t own these homes outright. The buildings were mortgaged for hundreds of thousands of dollars, pursuant to contracts that allowed the banks to change the locks on the doors if any of them fell too far behind on payments. But even so-called outright ownership is ephemeral. Houses are not buried with the people who claim them. Their walls and floors are no more an extension of us than our cars. What housing isn’t *temporary*?

The trailer’s fundamental sin is, I think, its failure to pass. Apartment buildings and mortgaged houses leave open the possibility that their inhabitants are squarely within the middle class or higher, that they’re able to weather hardship in place, or afford a similar apartment or house elsewhere should they have to. You might never have reason to think otherwise, not until you’re inside anyway. But trailers foreclose that possibility. 10-foot-wide evidence of coveting a piece of the American dream—a lot in one’s name, a stake in the land—and coming up short. The trailer is an admission of the best its owner can do: a \$50,000 aluminum box removable during hard times, voluntarily or by force. In many instances, a landlord owns the land on which their trailer is parked. In Nevada, this imbues trailer park residents with legal protections, but in 18 other states, they assume the burdens of both ownership and tenancy. This makes them responsible for the upkeep of their trailer, yet at the mercy of a landlord’s rules and whims.

The trailers’ very existence is a threat to *real* property values. Developers wall parks of them away from freshly painted rings of subdivisions. Realtors downplay their proximity. With financial equity at stake, the market isn’t going to pretend that trailer residents possess the right kind of class. And with social equity at stake, Allison wasn’t going to pretend that Amber did either. My cousin

Joyce and I were safe to acknowledge, though. Living in the pastel ring masked our poverty and excused our Blackness. It had allowed me to pass.

Americans liked to say that everything sounded more intelligent in a British voice. It was facetious. Yet, I understood that my strange European accent legitimized my presence to my classmates; it made me seem deserving of sitting in these advanced classes. Perhaps it’d had the same effect on the registrar. My best friend Caitlin and I were the only Black students in the I.B. program’s class of 2006. She was half-white and middle class; and people liked to joke that she, too,

*“Living in the
pastel ring masked
our poverty
and excused our
Blackness.”*

“sounded” white. If the registrar had invited other Black students around town, or even in the rest of my freshman class, to join the I.B. program with the enthusiasm she’d extended to me, it was not reflected in our class numbers.

The I.B. program was full of kids zoned for the Galena High and Bishop Minogue High zip code, where the median income was \$91,000, double Reno’s overall median income. My classmates were good kids: smart, thoughtful, curious, and surprisingly well-rounded for teenagers. As I acclimated to this country, they were patient and generous with me. I feel fortunate to have been stuck with them for four years. But underlying their openness to me, I think, was the incorrect assumption that I was a Black and foreign version of them. An upper-middle-class transplant of sorts. Most of them were unaware that, our freshman year, I shared a house with six relatives and a bed with my cousin. Or that my mom and I couldn’t have come up with the money to even rent a trailer of our own.

We were well into the fall of my freshman year when I discovered what team American life had sorted the Lucky Lane girls into. For the year or so that I lived in the pastel ring, we continued to say hello in the mornings. But I wish I could say, with confidence, that I would’ve been as friendly on day one, had my careful study of the yearbook revealed that these were the *wrong kind* of white girls. Only, teenage cruelty knows no bounds. It was better not to have known in those first weeks, so drawn out and dull, yet precious in their innocence. The last summer that trailers were simply pretty little houses. ✦



INTRODUCTION

In this heated political climate, it's important to make sure, above all else, that we don't go too far. There are right and wrong ways to do things, a fact which radicals and certain left-leaning Twitter feeds would do well to remember. Look: everyone wants to make the world a better place. We just need to be sure we're making it a better place correctly. Welcome to **CIVILITY**, the game about enacting change while following the rules.

CIVILITY is a two-player game. **PLAYER ONE** takes on the role of those who happen to hold power. **PLAYER TWO** is trying to enact change within **PLAYER ONE**'s system. In order to enact change, **PLAYER TWO** must complete three stages—Taking Action, Jockeying for Influence, and Moving the Levers of Power—while **PLAYER ONE** encourages them from the sidelines and ensures that the rules are properly enforced. Though **PLAYER ONE** has no direct involvement in Stage 1 (Taking Action), their support for the movement begins to manifest in Stage 2 (Jockeying for Influence) and Stage 3 (Moving the Levers of Power), when they start taking turns and contributing according to the rules.

NOTE: The goal of **PLAYER ONE** is not to stop change from happening. **PLAYER ONE** should approach the game as if they are completely fine with change—at least in theory. But **PLAYER ONE** is also here to enforce the rules. Any dampening of **PLAYER TWO**'s efforts which just so happens to materially benefit **PLAYER ONE** is purely coincidental.

Here's how it works: in each stage, **PLAYER TWO** must take "steps" toward change. To start, **PLAYER TWO** rolls a die and follows the corresponding directions. If the directions—and **PLAYER ONE**—allow it, they can progress to the next stage. If **PLAYER TWO** fails to advance, they must take another turn, rolling the die again and repeating the stage until they beat it (or unless otherwise specified by the directions). If **PLAYER TWO** can successfully complete the final stage (Moving the Levers of Power), then the political change they desire will take place.

Starting in Stage 2 (Jockeying for Influence), **PLAYER ONE** will fully enter the game. At this point, **PLAYER ONE** will go first—of course—rolling a die and following the corresponding directions. If the directions allow, they can advance to the next stage. If they are unable to advance, they must generously allow **PLAYER TWO** to have a turn. If **PLAYER ONE** can successfully complete the final stage (Moving the Levers of Power) then **PLAYER TWO**'s desired change is just not what the American people want right now.

STAGE 1 Taking Action

1

NOTE: Player 1 merely offers words of support and friendly advice during this stage. Only Player 2 has to actually Take Action. To begin this stage, Player 2 rolls a single die, and then proceeds based on the number rolled.

1. **PLAN AN ACTION:** **Player TWO** has exactly one minute after rolling to write down a comprehensive plan for a protest that will generate headlines, achieve tactical goals, and, above all, not inconvenience anyone in the area. Whether they have succeeded or failed is up to **Player TWO**'s discretion. If **Player ONE** says they have failed, **Player TWO** must roll again.
2. **DRAW A RANDOM LUCK CARD**
3. **ENDURE SETBACK:** Oops! **Player TWO** has blocked someone's commute on their way to their vacation. If they were ever going to take **Player TWO**'s cause seriously, they won't now. **Player TWO** must roll again.
4. **ORGANIZE A RALLY:** Something terrible has happened! **Player TWO** has one minute to get together enough people to command public attention—at least 100 people—and rally with them in a central space. Oh, and also **Player TWO** needs to get police approval for the rally, otherwise everyone will be arrested for disturbing public order. Again, success or failure is up to **Player ONE**'s discretion.
5. **DRAW A RANDOM LUCK CARD**
6. **KIND OF A BAD TIME:** **Player ONE** says the following: "[**Player TWO**], your cause is great, it really is, and everyone should absolutely care about this issue. But it's right before the election, and we need to demonstrate unity right now. Let's just all work together and wait to have the revolution. **Player TWO** does not advance, and cannot roll again; they must simply wait for a more opportune moment, as determined by **Player ONE**."

STAGE 2 Jockeying for Influence

2

NOTE: At the beginning of this stage, Player 1 writes down three words on slips of paper and keeps them hidden. If Player 2 inadvertently uses any of the words, they have, unfortunately, evoked a harmful trope and must go back to the Taking Action stage. Player 1 also now enters the game in a more active role. Player 1 may use whatever words they want. If, however, Player 1 is called out by Player 2 for using harmful tropes, Player 1 must shout "AM I BEING CANCELLED?" until Player 2 quits the game in disgust.

To begin this stage, **Player ONE** rolls a die. Then **Player TWO** will be allowed to take a turn, as long as **Player ONE** believes they're not being too loud or impatient.

1. **WRITE AN OP-ED:**
 - (A) **Player TWO:** You have five minutes to write an op-ed that articulates the goals of the movement, makes a passionate case for the necessity of change (anecdotes about human suffering that simultaneously titillate and tearjerk are a must), and criticizes powerful interests while avoiding "casting blame." If **Player ONE** determines that the op-ed is adequately inoffensive, and the plea for change expressed with sufficient humility, it will be published in the *New York Times*, and a few people will be convinced to give donations and change their avatars on social media. **Player TWO** may then advance to the next stage.
 - (B) **Player ONE:** You have one week to write your op-ed. No content or tonal restrictions apply. **Player TWO** has no ability to edit or respond to the op-ed. It is published in the *New York Times*. No matter the public response, **Player ONE** advances to the next stage and waits for **Player TWO** to join them.
2. **DRAW A RANDOM LUCK CARD** (Applies to **Player TWO** only. **Player ONE**'s world is insulated from the winds of random luck. If **Player ONE** rolls a 2, they may roll again.)
3. **ENDURE SETBACK** (applies to both players): Whether intentionally or not, The Troops have been disrespected. All rules regarding **Player ONE**'s freedom to say anything they want will be suspended for twenty minutes.
 - (A) **Player TWO:** Go on Jake Tapper's show and apologize profusely. Read the entirety of John McCain's Wikipedia page out loud and tell **Player ONE** your five favorite heroic facts about his life. If you are unable to be sufficiently laudatory about the life and legacy of John McCain—as per **Player ONE**'s discretion—go back to the Taking Action stage.
 - (B) **Player ONE:** Go on Jake Tapper to "clarify" your position. Skip your next turn.
4. **GO VIRAL:**
 - (A) **Player TWO:** Someone supporting your cause has become an internet celebrity! That's great. **Player ONE** may now go through every single post they've ever made on any social media platform. If there's nothing that can be construed as problematic, you may advance to the next stage. If there is anything problematic, your supporter is #cancelled and you lose a turn.
 - (B) **Player ONE:** Someone supporting your status quo position has gone viral! They are immediately booked on *The View*, and you advance to the next stage.
5. **DRAW A RANDOM LUCK CARD** (Applies to **Player TWO** only. **Player ONE**'s world is insulated from the winds of random luck. If **Player ONE** rolls a 5, they may roll again.)
6. **WHAT ARE YOUR DEMANDS?**
 - (A) **Player TWO:** You have one minute to write a comprehensive list of policy goals related to your cause. If you are unable to do this, you are fundamentally unserious about politics and lose your turn. If you succeed—according to **Player ONE**'s discretion—you must debate **Player ONE** until **Player ONE** concedes (in which case, **Player TWO** advances to the next stage) or **Player TWO** gives up (in which case **Player TWO** goes back to Taking Action).
 - (B) **Player ONE:** You do not have any demands. You may advance to the next stage.

CIVILITY!

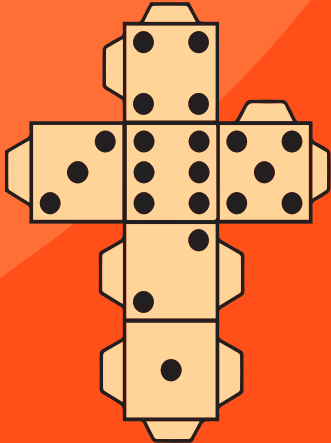
A GAME OF REASONABLE CHANGE WITHIN CAREFULLY DELINEATED BOUNDARIES

3

STAGE 3:

Moving the Levers of Power

NOTE: Player 1 can end the game at this point by paying \$1000 to a centrist candidate's re-election fund.



IF YOU NEED A DIE,
HERE IS A DIE



1. **COMPROMISE:** Both **Player ONE** and **Player TWO** have the opportunity to do a half-measure. Their choices are to accept a stalemate and walk away from the game satisfied in the knowledge that they haven't lost, or both go back to the previous stage for being too indignant.
2. **DRAW A RANDOM LUCK CARD** (Applies to **Player TWO** only. Again, **Player ONE** remains unaffected by luck because they've "earned everything they have." If **Player ONE** rolls a 2, they may roll again.)

ENDURE SETBACK:

(A) **Player TWO:** You've been rude to someone who voted to strip healthcare from millions of people, and your new institutional allies are pissed. Roll again: if you get a 6, you've managed to build a large, successful, popular coalition and win the game despite your rudeness. Roll any other number and you've squandered all that hard-earned goodwill and must return to the beginning of the game.

(B) **Player ONE:** You have a call coming from that same someone who voted to strip healthcare from millions of people: your tee time has been moved back a half hour. I know: rude! Anyway, unless by some miracle **Player TWO** manages to successfully roll a 6, **Player ONE** wins the game.

3. **JUST WAIT YOUR TURN:**

(A) **Player TWO:** You've been promised change, so long as you're willing to play along until it happens. Keep this copy of the *Civility!* rules until **Player ONE** decides it's time to implement change, which can be any time as long as it's more than a year away.

(B) **Player ONE:** Same as above, only you get to keep the rules, and determine when the game begins again.

4. **DRAW A RANDOM LUCK CARD** (Applies to **Player TWO** only. Again, **Player ONE** remains unaffected by luck because they've "worked really, really hard." If **Player ONE** rolls a 2, they may roll again.

5. **CONFRONTATION:** **Player TWO** is close to making change happen, and they just might have the votes. (A) **Player TWO:** Demand, debate, or beg **Player ONE** to help you. If you succeed, you win the game. If you fail, **Player ONE** wins.

(B) **Player ONE:** You get to decide if you want to let the change through. If it's irritating to you, or if **Player TWO** refuses to make the concessions you demand, or if you're just feeling kind of hangry, you can reject it entirely.

??? Random Luck Cards ???

Chaos



Player 1 writes down a number in secret and then Player 2 rolls a die. If the die lands on the secret number, Player 2 has done a successful vigil in a quiet corner of the park. If not, a window has been smashed and the protest has "erupted" into violence. Player 2 must return to the beginning of the Taking Action stage.

Balance



If the results of Player 2's last turn were positive, they are undone.

Dialogue



Player 1 writes down a secret word. If Player 2 then says this word, they have gotten mean and "too personal," and must miss their next turn. This can be the same word as one of the words from the beginning of Stage 2 (Jockeying for Influence), or it can be entirely arbitrary. Particles and conjunctions are welcome!

Fundraiser



Player 2 can donate \$10 to a pot that will go to the eventual winner of the game, or can boycott. If they boycott, they will have to roll to see if they've engaged in hate speech. If Player 2 rolls a 1-5, they have done hate speech with their peaceful boycott and must return to the beginning of the Taking Action stage. If they roll a 6, they have probably done hate speech, but escape consequences for now.

Legal Challenge



The next dispute or argument between players must be resolved by determining the original intention of the rules. Player 2 has no ability to make contact with the makers of *Civility!* Player 1 has the burden of determining the meaning of the rules.

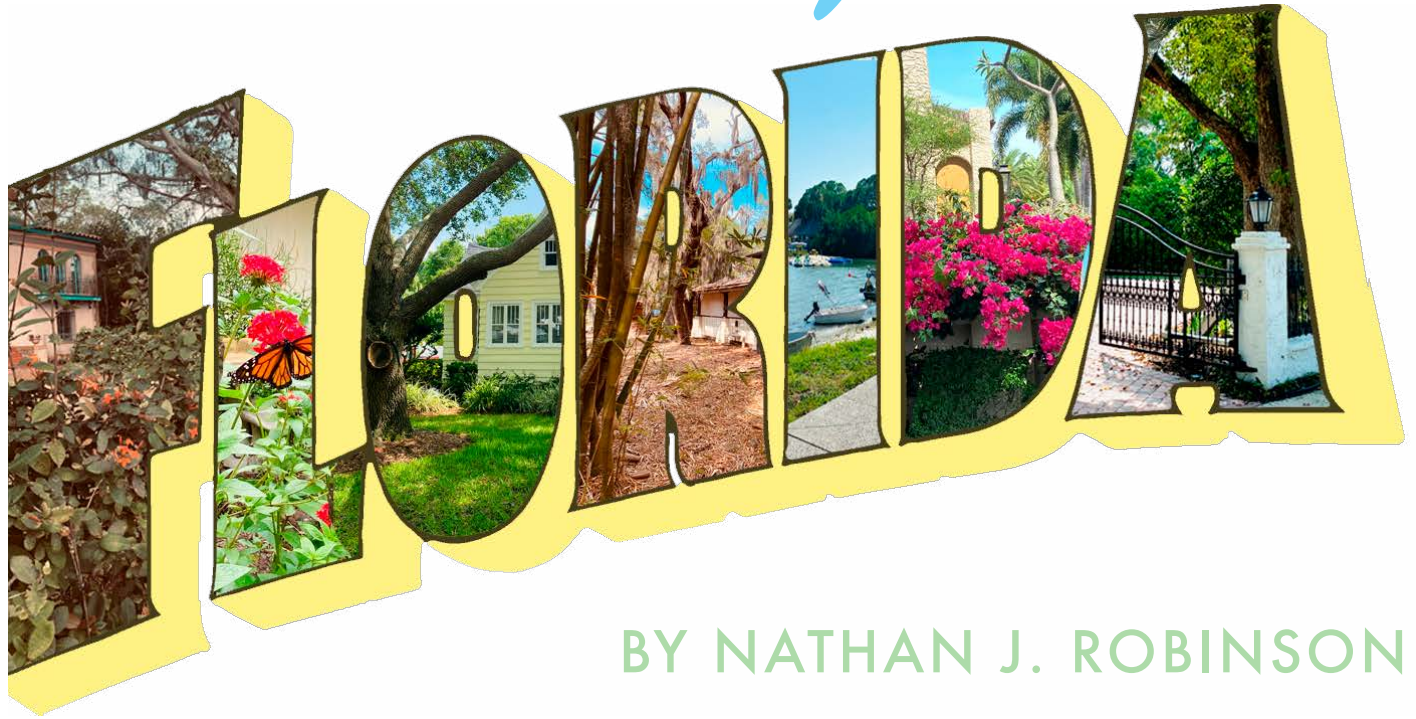
Friendly Advice



For the next turn, Player 1 gets to make choices for Player 2.



The Patterns Of



BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

I USUALLY TELL PEOPLE THAT MY FAVORITE NONFICTION book is Noam Chomsky's *Understanding Power*, but this is a lie. My actual favorite nonfiction book is far odder, but it is more difficult to explain, so I usually don't mention it in conversation. It is called *A Pattern Language*, and it provides a blueprint for how to build perfect places.

A Pattern Language is over 1,110 pages long and was published in 1977. It is credited to six authors, Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, and Shlomo Angel. But Alexander is the real driving force behind the thing, and has written a number of other volumes expanding on his unique architectural philosophy, including the four-volume *Nature of Order* series and a fun shorter book called *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*, which describes his attempt to apply his philosophy to the real world by building a school in Japan in the 1980s. (The school he built is gorgeous and strange.)

Alexander is a staunch critic of contemporary architecture, which he thinks has lost sight of human values. In *The Timeless Way of Building*, the prequel to *A Pattern Language*, he says that there is an eternal art of placemaking, and that places can either succeed or fail. They succeed when they feel alive, when they possess what he calls "the quality without a name." The quality, he says, is difficult to describe precisely, but it can be felt, and people know what you're talking about when you point it out. A Target parking lot lacks the quality. A hammock in a garden

has it. Some places are simply better than others to be in. They live. Alexander talks of "order" more than "beauty," but the thrust of it is that aesthetic bliss is "objective" in a certain way, in that we either experience it or we do not. It is intrinsically pleasurable to be in some places and less so to be in others, and the proof is that people travel thousands of miles to visit Sorrento or Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood, but they do not travel to visit random strip malls in the suburbs just for the pleasure of looking at them.

Alexander does not think we should be content to have so many places that do not delight us. Why shouldn't an ordinary place be beautiful? Why, even though we know we have the ability to create structures of breathtaking beauty, do we have so many EconoLodges and CVSes?

The answer has a lot to do with the processes by which things are built these days. Alexander says it is now "virtually impossible for anybody in our time, to make a building live." This is in part because people do not build their own buildings; they do not shape their spaces:

"Towns and buildings will not be able to become alive, unless they are made by all the people in society, and unless these people share a common pattern language."

Patterns describe repeating properties in the places we build. Alexander says that there are patterns that work, and those that don't, and what we can do is take all of the patterns that we know work, and these should form the language of built space.

The patterns in *A Pattern Language* are often pretty simple, and they are not all strictly architectural, but more like "things that make people feel good." At the micro level, they are things like: having bedrooms in

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



the east so sunlight enters in the morning, hidden gardens, street cafes, common land, adventure playgrounds, animals everywhere, pools and streams, balconies, gateways, bike paths, carnival celebrations, outdoor rooms, fruit trees, trellised walks, alcoves, green streets, arcades, window seats. Some are eccentric but appealing, like “child caves” for kids to explore and separate cottages designed for old people and teenagers. Some are quietly radical, like “worker self-management,” which is somewhat funny to see on a list of ingredients for building well-functioning places, but is also correct. At the more macro level are things like “country towns,” “mosaic of subcultures,” “identifiable neighborhoods,” and “webs of public transportation.” I agree that all of these, taken together, would create idyllic communities indeed, but Alexander stresses that he’s only offering one possible pattern language and each society must develop uniquely. The important insight, though, is that we should be conscientious in looking around us and seeing what “works,” what creates life and what does not, what induces feelings of bliss and what is boring and forgettable. Alexander suggests that the more “living patterns” in a place, the more it “glows” to the point where it becomes “part of nature,” and says that regular people, not developers and build-

ing companies, are capable of “repairing the world” and giving it these transcendent characteristics. It is a bit mystical, really, and I am not sure I buy the whole thing, but it has certainly caused me to look around me and mentally note when I feel I have found “timeless” patterns that I wish were more common.

I AM BACK IN MY FLORIDA HOMETOWN AT THE MOMENT, because of the pandemic, and I recently went wandering around, reacquainting myself with some of the lovelier bits, taking photos, and thinking about patterns and the “quality without a name.” I took hundreds of photos of places I thought possessed the “quality” and some of places I thought did not.

When I was growing up here, I do not think I would have said I lived in a beautiful place. I knew that our beach was highly-regarded among enthusiasts (professional beach blogger “Dr. Beach” had given it a top ranking), but I did not go to the beach, for I was pale and turned pink within minutes, plus I did not like to get sand in my toes. Plus the Sarasota I knew was mostly suburban. You had to drive to get anywhere, and most of the places I went were built in the 1990s, by people for whom



aesthetic considerations were secondary. I associated the place with sprawl, with highways, with malls. Now I live in the French Quarter of New Orleans, which I think of as far more beautiful.

But since I left Sarasota for college, my parents have moved. They are now closer to downtown. The Sarasota I have come back to does not feel quite like the one I grew up in. It is more lush. It is older. Less artificial. (The streets around the neighborhood where I grew up were named after Robin Hood characters in what was clearly an effort by a residential developer to cultivate some elevated associations with Englishness.) Wandering around downtown, I saw gorgeous things all over the place. And I wondered why the whole world couldn't be like that.

The main thing I've noticed is that the natural world is so much more beautiful than anything human beings are capable of producing ourselves, and our own spaces are enriched to the extent that we integrate them with wild plant life. Every leafy place I photographed was gorgeous, and every non-leafy place was less so. Residential streets that were beneath a canopy of oak trees were beautiful, and ones that were treeless were not. The design of the houses mattered little compared to whether the places felt like part of nature or felt separate from it. This

is such a simple and obvious observation that one would think it didn't need to be said, but the crazy thing is just how many places we build that involve demolishing or extracting all visible wildlife. 90 percent of the places I went were not beautiful at all, and did not "feel alive," because they quite literally weren't alive. (See the two photographs on the right hand side of the next spread, which show what most of Sarasota looks like.) I took pictures of all the sights that were pleasing, and I ended up with so many that you might think I lived in a stunningly beautiful paradise. But photographs are misleading, because you don't see anything outside the photograph, and most things will always be outside of the photograph. These are highly selective slivers; I took great care to get these shots and excluded everything dull and dead.

I am mystified, though, by why we can't make everywhere feel "alive" like this. And certainly, we seem to be doing it less and less. The places I photographed that most possessed "the quality" were all parts of Old Florida, the bit that has been here for a century and has changed the least. Nothing built in the last 20 years was worth taking pictures of. It is just gigantic condo blocks, mall parking lots, acre after acre of treeless housing culs-de-sac, the "little boxes that look all the same."



In trying to understand what makes a place work, I do think we have to “get political,” and that Alexander’s “worker self-management” principle is an important piece of it. Places often seem to have life to the degree that their occupants have been involved in making them. Or rather, the best places seem to have been made by people who cared about them, rather than prefabricated by people who were just doing their jobs. Weird sculpture aside (I actually want you to focus on the boring stores rather than the sculpture, though it was too interesting not to get in the picture), the places to the right do not seem to have been designed with the intention that anyone spend time looking at them and enjoying them. Certainly they were not made to be loved. By contrast, the lighthouse on the left—which is not an actual lighthouse, by the way, just a house somebody has built to look like one—was built by a person who had, at the very least, a bit of whimsy and originality..

Or look at the gate. (Left page, bottom right.) That’s an abandoned elementary school that I attended 25 years ago. I went back to poke around and reminisce, but I can’t remember anything about my time there except that they taught me to sing the song “On Top Of Spaghetti.” It was a tiny school, in a building the size of a house, located in a 1920s-era neighborhood. My parents tell me the education I got there was pretty terrible, which makes sense given how much I can recall of the curriculum, but as a place it is ideal. I don’t know if the trellis was that overgrown when the school was in operation (it probably did not have nearly so many spiders) but what a perfect entrance to a school that is. *A Pattern Language* talks of the importance of entrances. You shouldn’t see a place all at once; it should be revealed to you, and you should pass through something that makes it feel like you are entering a different zone. When Alexander was building his school in Japan, he built a big archway at the entrance and set it at an angle so that you did not see the school until you passed through the archway.

One of the critical points emphasized in the book is the importance of subjective feelings. Architects today often look at their renderings in a “view from nowhere” or “God view,” rather than through the eyes of the people who walk through and inhabit spaces. (They even fill their physical building models with little fake people known as “scalies”; it should seem insane to view people from the outside rather than taking a “scalie-eyed” view of the world, but such is the profession.) What is it like to be a child coming to school? What should a school feel like? What does a place called “home” feel like? Personally, I think the lawn flamingos in the house on the left are just as important as anything else about the house. They make people feel good. They turn a mere building into a place clearly lived in by humans, humans who have tastes. (Perhaps questionable tastes,



but tastes nonetheless.) The shame of it is that so much built space doesn’t seem to have been produced with questions like these in mind. How will it make people feel? Will they come from all over to look at it? Will they never want to leave? Alexander talks a lot about the “quality without a name” being “objective,” which will surely make people upset, but it’s actually misleading, because this way of thinking truly prioritizes the *subjective*. It’s about building places that are for people to be in, and making sure that the lives they live in these places are good.

You might not have constructed a personal pattern language of all the good things, or know yet how to build utopian cities and towns. That’s okay. We’re still working it out. But there are bits and pieces left of Old Florida that offer some hints. The basics are simple: keep things human scale. Make it walkable. Lots of color. And plenty of trees. ✚

the POLITICS of PUBLISHING

by Yasmin Nair

IT WAS THE PUBLISHING SCANDAL OF THE TWENTY-FIRST century—or at least of the first month of the first year of its second decade.

The novel *American Dirt* garnered its author Jeanine Cummins a “seven-figure advance.” (Such a phrase always leaves us wondering: what *was* the particular number attached to those zeroes?) But this—in an era when Lena Dunham, a never-before-published author, makes six million for a slim “memoir” that she wrote at the un-memoir-producing age of 28—was not the real scandal.

In mid-January 2020, *American Dirt* landed with great fanfare and advance praise from notable critics, including Stephen King, whose blurb was featured prominently on the back cover. Also featured were words from bestselling authors like John Grisham, Ann Patchett, Kristin Hannah, Julia Alvarez, Don Winslow, and Sandra Cisneros, the Matriarch of Books about Mexican-American Identity whose *The House on Mango Street* (1984), has become something of a

lodestar in fiction about Mexican-American life. Winslow went so far as to call *American Dirt* “a *Grapes of Wrath* for our times,” words which were featured prominently on the front cover, a rather beautiful image of blue and white Mexican tiles divided by black barbed wire.

Rumaan Alam blurbed that the novel was “exhilarating and beautiful.” On the inside back cover was a blurb from Erika Sanchez, author of the best-selling *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Sanchez is part of a millennial group of Mexican-American writers and poets garnering attention for their writing (and, full disclosure, a former student of mine: I take no credit for her work), and her words, along with Alam’s, signalled to a young and hip audience that *American Dirt* was relevant to a time when the issues facing Mexican-Americans have taken center stage. To cap the book’s success, it was chosen by the Oprah Book Club. This is, for some, a dubious honour but, still, one that instantly catapults a book onto the best-seller list (Jonathan Franzen rejected it in 2001, and the resulting controversy made both him and Winfrey immeasurably richer). As of April 2020, the book still tops the bestseller list.

With so many accolades from such a range of authors, *American Dirt* bore testimonials both from established writers and those whose work was representative of the Mexican-American experience. It was all a perfect public relations package.

And yet almost at the moment of its publication, *American Dirt* was reviled, torn apart, stomped into the ground and practically thrown into bonfires as writers and critics like Myriam Gurba and Roxane Gay insisted that no one should even buy the book. They claimed that *American Dirt*, a story about a Mexican woman and her young son escaping a cartel that wipes out their entire Acapulco family, trafficked, as it were, in stereotypes and perpetuated the idea that the United States is a safe haven for the persecuted.

The *American Dirt* controversy appeared to pose questions of



identity and publishing. Gurba's scathing (if somewhat skewed and, in my opinion, quite inaccurate) response to the book went viral in large part because it was dripping with snark (starting with the title "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature"), but also because it seemed to expose the racism at the heart of the publishing industry. She and other critics insisted that not only was the book a terrible set of caricatures, but that its very publication, and the high seven-figure advance given to its *white* author revealed the racial imbalance between white authors and those of colour, especially women. In fact, Cummings has a Puerto Rican grandmother, which she had both publicly discussed and mentioned in the afterword to a book that few of her critics appear to have actually read, a fact that would negate her "whiteness" and which was blithely ignored by all.

Cummings's own racial identification has been a sore point with her critics because, according to them, she claimed to be white in a 2016 *New York Times* op-ed and then became Latinx when it was convenient, in an interview with *Shelf Awareness* to publicise *American Dirt*. In the *Times* op-ed, Cummings was making a point about a horrific incident in 1991 in Ferguson, Mississippi, involving her brother and two cousins. Four men, three of them African American and one white, came upon the family members, brutally attacked them, raped her cousins, and threw them all off a bridge into the Mississippi River. Her brother was the only survivor. The op-ed is a repudiation of the racist undercurrents that inevitably greeted the perpetrators but is also an attempt to think through complicated matters of race. It's in this context that she writes:

For almost 25 years, I asserted that race had no place in the discussion of what happened to my family. I still don't want to write about race. What I mean is, I really don't want to write about race. I'm terrified of striking the wrong chord, of being vulnerable, of uncovering shameful ignorance in my psyche. I'm afraid of being misinterpreted.

I am white. The grandmother I shared with Julie and Robin was Puerto Rican, and their father is half Lebanese. But in every practical way, my family is mostly white. I'll never know the impotent rage of being profiled, or encounter institutionalized hurdles to success because of my skin or hair or name. But I care about race and equality. And it's imperative for white people to join the conversation about racism. Discomfort is the least of our obligations.

Race in America is weird and complicated. Neil Ignatiev's classic *How the Irish Became White* demonstrates that skin colour alone has not guaranteed acceptance into the hierarchy of whiteness. Even now, in the 2020 census, "White" includes "Lebanese, Egyptian, etc." despite many years of people of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent lobbying to be counted as such. Cummings' critics insist that she identified as white, without pointing to the specifics of the op-ed, where she clearly highlights the fact that race is a cultural and economic construct as much as it is about skin colour: it's mostly African Americans who cannot escape the classification of Black, and that is because, historically, they have been tied to a narrative of slavery, not migration. Her declaration of whiteness is less a claiming of privilege and more an acknowledgment that her ethnic history grants her the privilege of whiteness ("Puerto Rican" in the United

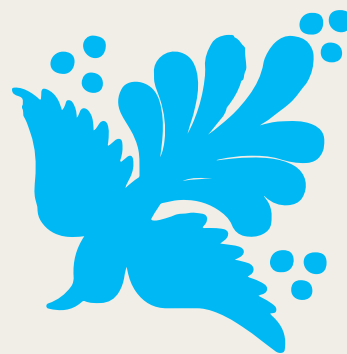
States is more complicated in its ethnic configuration than, say, "Mexican" and that has everything to do with the history of Puerto Rico in relation to the United States.)

Was Cummings conveniently claiming Latinx identity as the publicity for her new book rolled out four years later, when the category was also becoming, dare we say, a fashionable topic? It's possible, but it should be noted that she also said, to *Shelf Awareness*, "I was resistant, initially, to writing from the point of view of a Mexican migrant because, no matter how much research I did, regardless of the fact that I'm Latinx, I didn't feel qualified to write in that voice." She may also have, over the course of those four years, and in writing the book, felt more like identifying as Latinx and therefore not as white. The criticism of Cummings on grounds of race and ethnicity depends a lot on interpretations of her behavior which are subjective and don't take into account that she made her original declaration of whiteness while relaying a fraught version of American racial history. Identity is, in short, complicated.

The critics of *American Dirt* were themselves invested in a very particular kind of "Mexican" identity: they were angry, for instance, that the protagonist Lydia Quixano Pérez was a middle-class woman and therefore unsuitable as an "authentic" character. What does it mean to insist that only poor and struggling Mexicans can be depicted in fiction for it to be deemed "authentic?" In fact, Lydia's class identity is part of what moves the story forward: her husband was murdered because he was a journalist whose exposé prompted the cartel leader to respond. Some critics have also hinted that she plagiarized parts of the book, but as it turns out, some of the details echo those found in *non-fiction* by writers like Luis Urrea, which seems like Cummings likely used it for source material.

As the internet frenzy continued, the book continued to sell well despite the author cancelling all her book events (I really cannot emphasize this enough because I love recounting tales of the extreme futility of social media-led campaigns). Still, Latinx authors seemed galvanized to create what they saw as major changes in the highly unequal and screwed-up publishing industry.

HOW BAD IS PUBLISHING? THE GENERAL PUBLIC tends to assume that all writers receive massive advances, and then spend their lives simply writing in pleasant surroundings at leisure. But the truth is that great or even good advances are hard to come by and most writers have to scramble to get anything done while working at least one daytime job (in today's economy, everyone's a gig worker at two or three jobs). Even gigantic book advances don't actually benefit anyone very much except the top executives at the top publishing houses which are mostly sustained by small cohorts of bestselling authors. In fact,



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advances often work to the detriment of writers themselves. In a 2016 piece in *Marie Claire* titled “I Published My Debut Novel to Critical Acclaim—and Then I Promptly Went Broke,” Merritt Tierce recounted how a seemingly glorious career in waiting vanished in the face of the reality of publishing: that you might get all the attention you want (and the advances) but in the end, actually selling the number of books that warrant fat advances is enormously difficult, except for a relatively few proven hitmakers.

Factors like the industry’s focus on churning out hits and the massive consolidation of publishing houses as a whole have resulted in a classed homogeneity in publishing which, especially in the United States, is also a racialized homogeneity. As this *Vice* report points out, “79 percent of the industry overall is white, and 78 percent is female.” So, in that sense, critics of *American Dirt* were right to point to the racial and ethnic inequality in the publishing world, and how it leads to bad books; it’s just that they chose the wrong target.

Seemingly in response to such disparities, and galvanized by their anger over *American Dirt*, Gurba and others formed what the *LA Times* called a group and which so far appears to be not much more than a Twitter hashtag: #DignidadLiteraria. They did meet with Macmillan, the publisher of *American Dirt* (through the Flatiron imprint), and afterwards the *LA Times* said that “Macmillan committed to increasing its number of Latinx staff, authors and titles and to changing the “overall ecosystem.” It also vowed to develop an action plan to address those goals within 90 days and to regroup with the cohort in 30 days to evaluate progress.”

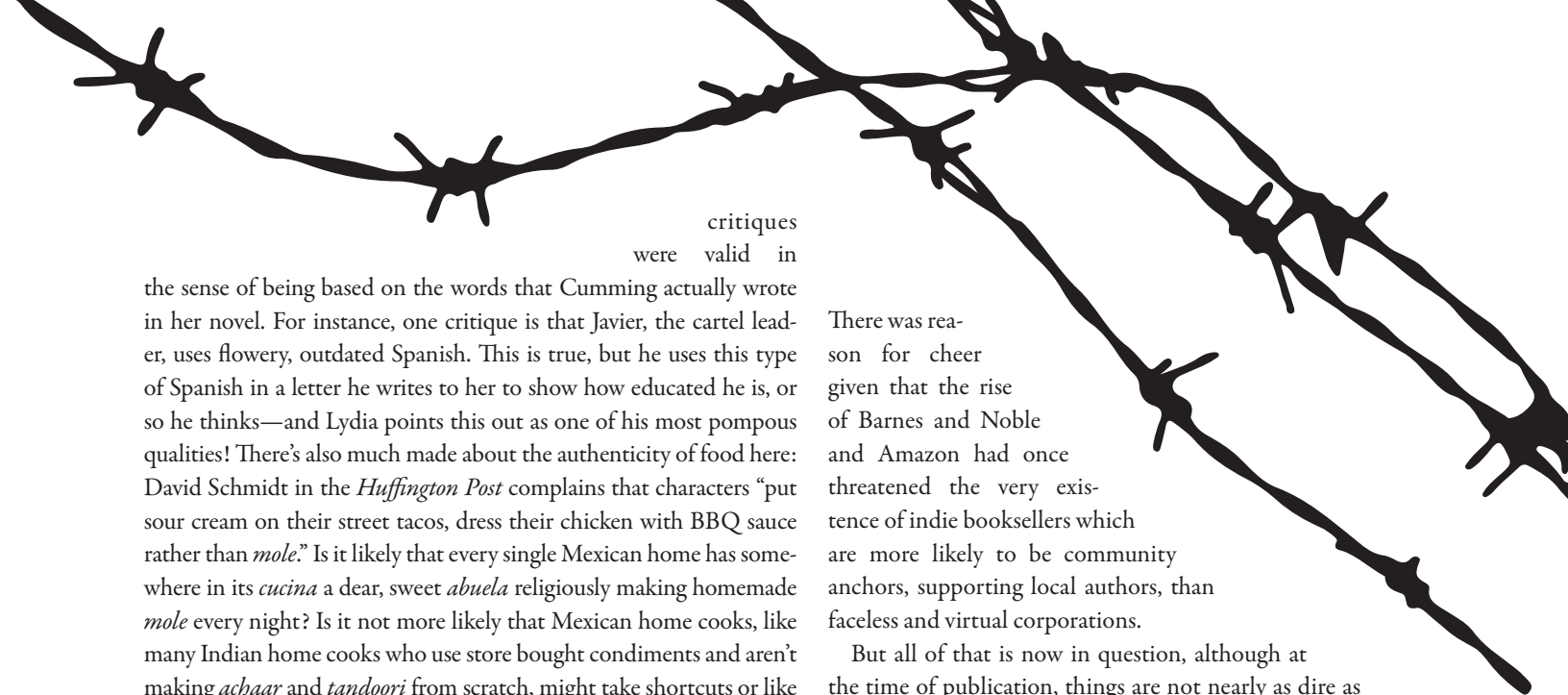
That was on February 7, and the pandemic is likely to have delayed the proposed plans. Incidentally, around the same time, in pre-plague February, protests arose over Barnes and Noble’s admittedly deeply troubling and, well, just plain *weird* project of issuing classics written by white authors with black and brown figures on the covers. This meant, for instance, that Dorothy on the cover of the newly issued *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was now a young Black girl with a modern hairstyle and a pair of red sneakers draped over her shoulders, and that Alice

on the cover of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was, for reasons unknown, a young woman dressed in seemingly traditional Native American garb. That project was quickly dispensed with after rightful protests that called them out for “literary blackface.” (One has to wonder: given that English departments everywhere are surely filled with extremely woke students who graduate and move into the publishing world, where Barnes and Noble acquires the members of its marketing team). The whole disastrous affair highlighted the publishing industry’s deep racism and diversity problem, as pointed out by its many critics: it only knows how to be troublingly superficial without getting at the bigger issues.

To really engage in a thorough overhaul of publishing, though, would also mean going beyond simply ensuring that there are more people of color in publishing firms and at magazines. After all, a diverse banking world filled with women and people of color would still be a horrible, exploitative, predatory world. Until publishing simultaneously fixes its class *and* diversity problem, until it stops becoming a place where only the wealthy or well-off are afforded the ability to write for a living, its problems will continue.

As necessary as some of the points about representation might be, it’s unclear from the objections of the #DignidadLiteraria writers if they actually want a more diverse group of authors to be represented, or if they simply want more money to be given to Latinx authors on par with the advances given to white ones. As for the question of authenticity and authorship: many of the criticisms of *American Dirt* were directed at the middle-class protagonist’s class background. Which is to say: it seems that the objectors are less interested in the representation of identity than in identity, in this case of Mexicans/Mexican-Americans, being represented as a very particular sort. There’s no real, actual diversity asked for here, or else a story about a middle-class Mexican woman would be considered as valid as a story about a poor and suffering one.

In fact, as I will demonstrate in an upcoming piece, “Where Have All the *Abuelas* Gone?: Critiquing the Critiques of *American Dirt*,” published on my own site, none of the



critiques
were valid in
the sense of being based on the words that Cumming actually wrote in her novel. For instance, one critique is that Javier, the cartel leader, uses flowery, outdated Spanish. This is true, but he uses this type of Spanish in a letter he writes to her to show how educated he is, or so he thinks—and Lydia points this out as one of his most pompous qualities! There's also much made about the authenticity of food here: David Schmidt in the *Huffington Post* complains that characters “put sour cream on their street tacos, dress their chicken with BBQ sauce rather than *mole*.” Is it likely that every single Mexican home has somewhere in its *cucina* a dear, sweet *abuela* religiously making homemade *mole* every night? Is it not more likely that Mexican home cooks, like many Indian home cooks who use store bought condiments and aren't making *achaar* and *tandoori* from scratch, might take shortcuts or like the taste of BBQ sauce on their chicken? Does *Huffington Post* critic David Schmidt have access to every single Mexican household and its culinary tastes?

Disagreements on the quality of the work will continue (and readers are paying no heed, clearly), and it might be argued that literary criticism of any sort is often, to some degree, subjective. (As a book critic of several years, I would like to make a forceful argument for the idea that there's always room for, dare we say in the age of influencers and when anyone can be a self-proclaimed critic, *expert* opinions on matters like style and plot).

THE REAL ISSUE, I THINK, THAT'S BEEN LEFT OUT of all the fervour around the *politics of American Dirt*, I think, is that we need to have a wider and more sustained conversation about the politics of *publishing*.

On top of the issues with advances and diversity, there is the nuts-and-bolts matter of who publishes books and where we buy our books from. The publishing industry has seen massive consolidations among its top entities (as when Random House merged with Penguin), which means several different things, but for authors it means more demands for sameness with an eye to big sales. As the dust settles and we enter The Age of the Pandemic (let us call it AP), we have to wonder what, if anything, will be left of the publishing world itself.

A great deal will depend on the survival of physical books. In a time when every surface is potentially a site for infection, we might wonder what will remain, if anything, of the very idea of reading an actual book. Of course, there are e-books and e-readers galore, but books as physical entities have long been more than relics (as is evident in the fact that publishers still pay great attention to the look and feel and design of books, as does this magazine). To everyone's shock, people still love holding (and, some of us will admit, smelling) books in their booky forms. Before AP, we saw much cheery news about the resurgence of independent booksellers; the American Booksellers Association proudly published this extensive list of articles about the phenomenon.

There was reason for cheer given that the rise of Barnes and Noble and Amazon had once threatened the very existence of indie booksellers which are more likely to be community anchors, supporting local authors, than faceless and virtual corporations.

But all of that is now in question, although at the time of publication, things are not nearly as dire as we might expect mostly because indie bookstores also learned, in the wave of the last near-collapse, to be savvier about their online sales strategy. The importance of brick-and-mortar bookstores in the selling and distribution of books cannot be overrated. Although we run the risk of overly fetishizing the idea of local community, bookstores do generate interest in authors through book events, including ones where writers show up in the flesh and blood. To be honest (and I say this as a sometimes book publicist), organizing author events can be a thankless task if the writer in question is not already hugely successful or well known to their audience. A Stephen King or an Annie Leibovitz can attract crowds so large that the Chicago public library has to open up overflow rooms and people stand around listening to the writers through speakers. For the average writer, though, book tours can be especially excruciating, expensive, and often just deeply humiliating as one sits at a desk strategically placed at the front of a bookstore, with one's books neatly piled on each side, awaiting signatures and buyers. Despite what one sees on television and the movies, only the big authors get anything like hotel accommodations these days, and very few publishers will even fork out the money for cheap wine and cheese.

But bookstores are, when done well, portals to reading experiences and a customer who wanders into a sufficiently inviting one is likely to not only buy keychains and bookmarks but perhaps a volume or two of a favorite or undiscovered author. Books can't survive on the abstract vectors of marketing alone: they are in a sense like viruses, jumping from one host body to the next, propelled by word of mouth, whether through real time or virtual book clubs, enthusiastic texts between friends, or the interest sparked by an author interview. No one has really mastered the art of selling books: the upper echelon of authors like Grisham, King, and Danielle Steele could generate massive interest and money if they simply went around talking about their grocery lists. For the rest, bookstores and people power are necessary to generate sales, which often means a gruelling schedule of cross country travel, podcasts, book events, and any other slice of the attention economy. And while much is made of the effects of

social media chatter, we might want to pause and consider the simple salient fact that *American Dirt*, whose protagonist happens to be an independent bookstore owner and lover of books, has been on the top of the bestseller list despite all the kerfuffle and the admonitions of big-name writers like Roxane Gay to *not* buy the book.

THE FOCUS ON MONEY AND PRESTIGE PUBLISHING does nothing to destabilize the immense inequalities perpetuated by a massive mainstream publishing industry. As it exists, the industry only traffics in identity and inequalities when these issues can be deployed by it to make...money. The state of publishing remains precarious as writers reconcile themselves to not making money *as* writers alone, and the industry throws massive amounts of money at books like those by Kristen Roupenian, whose collection of short stories featuring “Cat Person” (a story about pain, identity, and helplessness that went viral in 2017) failed in sales, despite her massive two-book “seven-figure deal.” How do we on the left, many of whose lives and careers are inextricably interwoven with the publishing world, think honestly and with integrity and with an attention to severe inequalities, about the *American Dirt* controversy? What can change in publishing that’s more meaningful than “Give writers of color massive amounts of money as well”?

What if we shifted the paradigms entirely and gave neither millions nor a pittance but enough for a writer to live for a year and write? This will no doubt upset several writers, who dream of those “seven figure advances” (and I will admit nothing would please me more than getting one). But much of publishing is distorted in terms of payscales, whether for books or articles, primarily because everyone to the left of Rush Limbaugh thinks that writing is not a profession but a calling. So much of (what passes for) left publishing is underpaid and/or sustained by the unpaid labour of mostly academics or writers who are either independently wealthy or have families or spouses who will support them. At a panel on publishing *Guernica’s* then-editor Lisa Lucas was reported “saying many of her contributors don’t mind working for free, that many of them are well-paid elsewhere and consider it ‘a donation’ to gift their work to *Guernica*.” Lucas, who is Black, is the daughter of music producer Reggie Lucas (Madonna produced her first album at his studio), graduated from the University of Chicago, and has worked at prestigious non-profits like Steppenwolf Theatre and *Guernica*. All of these jobs and the cul-

tural cachet she accumulated over the years resulted in her landing her most prestigious and current job, as executive editor at the National Book Foundation. In her current job, she talks earnestly and frequently about the need for inclusivity and diversity and that she cannot avoid the fact that she is both the first woman and the first Af-

rican American to head the NBF. But left out of all this celebration of diversity is the fact that Lucas’ current position has a lot to do with the upward mobility conferred upon the small cadre of people who can afford to continually swan around a wealthy elite, who can afford to work for very little or nothing for years as they gain more and more social capital.

It doesn’t help that it’s not just editors and Very Important Book People who hold the idea of writing as paid labor in such contempt. Even enormously successful writers, like Elizabeth Gilbert, about whom I wrote for this magazine, insist that all their success simply happened because of some form of magical thinking. But that isn’t really how the process works.

The writer Nick Mamatas has pointed to the elitism that governs who gets published, over and over, and who only gets to “fail” (not make enough money) once:

Are you special? Depends. Where did you go to school? Who did you meet there? Where do you live now? How close is it to the L? Who are your best friends; who do you date? Do they all have the same “publishing haircut” (asymmetrical bobs for women, Princetons for men)? Is exposed brick good or bad? Are you suspicious of anyone who can write a book in a year? Are you from a “good” family (which is different than a “good family”)? Do these questions make perfect sense to you? No? You’re not special.

All of this still leaves the question of identity and the inequality of representation in publishing. These questions matter: who are the protagonists in contemporary fiction, and how are their stories being told, beyond caricature and virtual color-face? Who gets to write the lives of Others, and who is constantly being monitored to ensure that theirs are “accurate” representations? If I attempted now to enter the constantly exploding minefield that is Young Adult literature to talk about its controversies, it would be another whole full-length article, because in that world ferocious accusations of inauthenticity happen every other week.

The politics governing publishing are complex, and infrequently written about, in large part because it’s dominated by various cabal-like entities with the aura of progressive politics and because, let’s face it, no one takes writers seriously as workers in a drama of class struggle for the simple reason that *even writers* (such as Elizabeth Gilbert) don’t want to see themselves as workers. Identity matters, but as long as we are cathected to the idea that it’s somehow isolated from the bigger, structural and economic questions that govern publishing—a world that is, outwardly unlike, say, the world of Goldman Sachs but which operates with the same cutthroat instincts—publishing will continue to become both much bigger through consolidation and much, much smaller in terms of how it allows us to imagine ourselves and the multifarious lives we lead. ✦



NATIONALIZE THE NICE PLACES

by Nick Slater

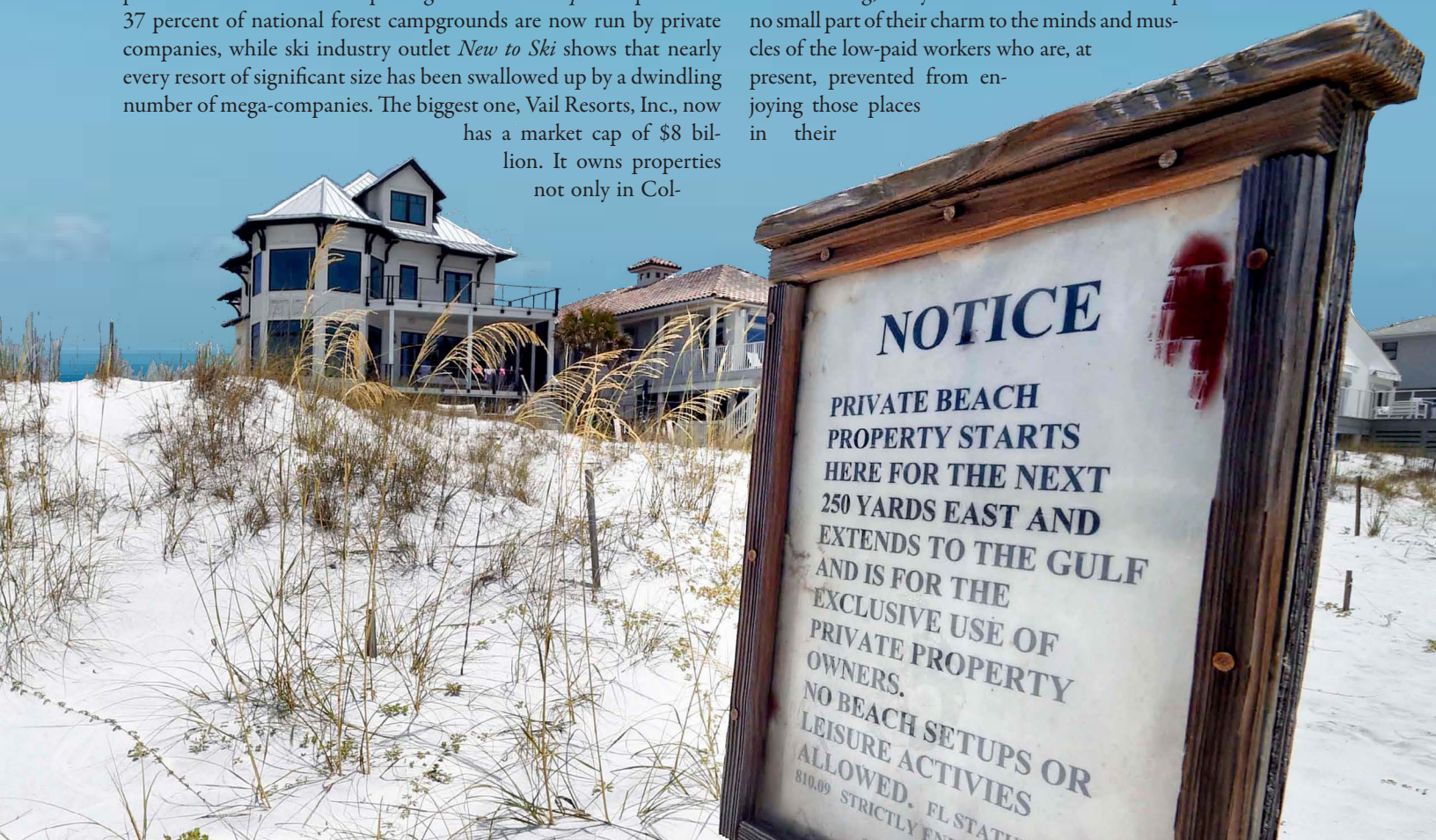
THE UNITED STATES IS HOME TO SOME OF THE MOST beautiful places in the world. Even after centuries of degradation, this country is still chock-full of snowy mountains, mystic deserts, gorgeous coastlines, and every other screensaver-worthy setting you can envision. It's easy to forget this, however, if like most Americans you spend the majority of your waking hours in a semi-somnolent shuffle through an environment that seems designed to suck the joy out of life. Drab workplaces, retailers laid out in an endless series of soulless rectangles, copy-and-paste homes built for quick profits rather than comfort—these are the places where we spend almost the entirety of our far-too-short lives on this planet. Unless, of course, we've had the good fortune to be born loaded or, by some rare stroke of luck, to have clawed our way into the ranks of the frequent flyer class.

Should you have enough money and leisure time, the United States offers a staggering array of locales to delight the mind and invigorate the senses. These could be right down the street, or many hundreds of miles away, depending on where you call home. Regardless of their geographic location, more of these American oases are falling under private dominion with each passing month. *Marketplace* reports that 37 percent of national forest campgrounds are now run by private companies, while ski industry outlet *New to Ski* shows that nearly every resort of significant size has been swallowed up by a dwindling number of mega-companies. The biggest one, Vail Resorts, Inc., now has a market cap of \$8 billion. It owns properties not only in Col-

orado but also in Vermont, Michigan, and California, among many other states (it owns resorts in Canada and Australia as well). The same pattern of private acquisition and consolidation is repeated elsewhere, as more of our nice places become assets in the portfolios of the wealthy, who then demand hefty entrance fees or exclusive memberships in exchange for the privilege of spending time in settings that aren't dull and depressing as hell.

That's why we need to nationalize all the nice places. All the beaches, all the ski resorts, all the country clubs, all the private hunting reserves. We need to stop the steady segregation of the country into Zones for Elites and Zones for Plebes. We need to not only preserve our many mini-Edens, but to make them accessible to everyone. Mollie Beattie, the first woman to lead the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, once said, "What a country chooses to save is what a country chooses to say about itself." What would nationalizing our nice places say about the United States? For starters, it'd show the country was finally getting serious about living up to one of its founding myths: that the bounties of the land belong to all those who live and work upon it.^[1]

With all due respect to Mother Nature and her indisputable knack for decorating, many of the United States' nicest places owe no small part of their charm to the minds and muscles of the low-paid workers who are, at present, prevented from enjoying those places in their



leisure time. To illustrate: in my younger days, I earned \$7.25 an hour working on the “turf management crew” of a Minnesota country club. Six days a week I would gather at 5:00 a.m. with my colleagues—the majority of whom were Mexican immigrants of hazy legal status—to begin the task of prepping the club’s sprawling golf course for the flood of wealthy patrons that would soon arrive. There were acres and acres of trees to trim, weeds to whack, and sand traps to rake until they were smooth and velvety as a tub of butter.

I hated every fucking second of it.

Well, *almost* every second. Every morning there was a quiet dew-kissed moment—before the golfers began to show up with their \$10,000 sets of clubs and their passive-aggressive (or just aggressive-aggressive) complaints about the placement of the pin on the 13th green—when the course seemed to be the loveliest place on earth. Willow trees hung with lazy grace over ponds whose reflections held both sun and moon. Great blue herons kept a silent vigil as they picked through the thickets of cattails. The rich reds and purples of geranium patches and lilac bushes gleamed like jewels amid the rolling verdant seas of grass.

It always struck me as bizarre that although my colleagues and I were the ones who’d made this little patch of heaven, we were forbidden from setting foot on it unless we were carrying rakes or pushing lawnmowers. We were unable to pay thousands of dollars in initiation fees, never mind the monthly dues, and therefore we were permitted only to toil at the club, not to enjoy its beauty.

All over the country, this de facto segregation on the basis of class (and race, which is a major factor on its own *and* as an element of class) is becoming impossible to ignore. It’s also unsustainable. Country clubs—which have historically been hostile to those of non-WASPy persuasions—are dying. According to market research firm IBISWorld, in 2010 there were nearly 11,000 such clubs; today there are 9,985. The reason is unsurprising to most of us who entered adulthood around the Great Recession: the young (mostly white) people who were supposed to be the “next generation” of country club members don’t have any money. As detailed by economist Gray Kimbrough, while Boomers owned 21 percent of the nation’s wealth by the time they hit 35, Millennials have less than half that, clocking in at a measly 9 percent. There are zero credible signs that Zoomers will reverse this trend. And so we’re staring at a future full of zombie country clubs being passed around by investors and real estate developers, scorned by an ever-dwindling number of rich people and still off-limits to everyone else.

The shift may of course be cultural as well: many younger people wouldn’t want to spend their free time in this kind of environment (whether for golf or birdwatching or any other activity). The much larger problem is that almost *any* beautiful recreational place is being priced out of the reach of average Americans, particularly young Americans. Take ski resorts, for example. A recent survey by industry outlet *Snow-Online* found that the average price of a single-day lift pass in the United States is nearly \$100, nearly double the price it was in 2000. This is also about 88 percent more expensive than a similar ticket in Switzerland. Are the Rocky Mountains a very nice place to go skiing? Sure. Are they *that* much nicer than the Swiss Alps? I find this hard to believe.

Even beaches—which have provided free pleasure for generations of the young and/or broke—are getting harder and harder to enjoy if you don’t have a fistful of dollars to exchange for the privilege. While the United States has over 95,000 miles of shoreline, ultra-rich landowners are blocking off ever-greater chunks of beachfront property for their private enjoyment. As if that weren’t enough, they’re also hiring security guards and building fences to prevent ordinary people from accessing public beaches on “their property,” a trend that the *Guardian* highlighted back in 2015. Mark Zuckerberg might have gotten the most

media attention for his attempt to claim Hawaii’s prettiest beaches for himself alone, but he’s far from the only wealthy prick doing his best to keep the teeming masses far away from his personal pleasure gardens.

Zuckerberg and co.’s attempts at segregation draw on a rich American tradition of keeping “undesirables” away from nice places. Everyone knows that Black Americans were forbidden from using whites-only swimming pools in the Jim Crow South, but it’s less widely known that public beaches were also off limits well into the 1960s, even in “liberal” northern states like New York and Connecticut (and some recreational spaces like public pools are de facto segregated to this day). When Black residents in cities like Washington D.C. and New Orleans demanded a place to do some sunbathing of their own, they were given a few scraps of heavily polluted shoreline. Similar stipulations applied to other nice places like ski resorts—in the 1930s, the Black community in Colorado was forced to build its own resort, as the state’s powerful Ku Klux Klan chapter helped enforce a de facto policy of segregation on public slopes. The ramifications are felt to this day; as former *SKI Magazine* journalist Hal Clifford noted, skiing is still the “whitest and least integrated popular sport in America.”

While leveling the economic playing field could, in theory, help shrink the gap of (forgive me for using this hideous phrase) access to nice places, it’s not a silver bullet. After all, the Black middle classes in D.C. or Denver weren’t banned from nice places on account of their net worth, but because of their skin color. As long as private actors can control who gets to catch rays, rip powder, or take advantage of any other natural delights the U.S. has to offer, they’ll find a justification for keeping many people out. That’s why if this land is truly our land, it has to be nationalized.

BUT NOW LET’S ANSWER THE QUESTION EVERY FISCAL conservative worth their roomy-seated Dockers has been dying to ask: *how would we actually nationalize all the nice places?* While it certainly seems like a reasonable question (if you’re asking it in good faith, it is!) in many cases this is a form of sealioning, which linguistic anthropologist Amy Johnson describes as a rhetorical trick used by those who feign ignorance about easily-findable information in order to exhaust and enrage their opponents.

Opponents of nationalizing nice places would like you to believe that, from a legal standpoint, such an endeavor is just too big and messy to even contemplate. And to be fair, there’s no “one weird trick” to confiscating the ill-gotten gains of private entities and returning them to public use. But let’s not give the sea lions too much credit. Governments already have a number of tools that could be used to nationalize nice places—the only thing lacking is the political will.

The most obvious tool for nationalizing nice places is eminent domain, which the Legal Information Institute at Cornell Law School defines as “the power of the government to take private property and convert it into public use.” While eminent domain is most often used to rob the poor to feed the rich, as detailed in a 2008 report in the journal *Urban Studies*, there’s no reason a government with different priorities couldn’t use this same mechanism to redistribute resources in the opposite direction.

Asset seizures provide another method for nationalizing nice places that happen to be owned by less-than-scrupulous entities (which is quite common, as we’ll see). Data from the Department of Justice show that the U.S. Marshals Service held over \$2.8 billion in assets as of September 2019, “including real estate [and] commercial businesses.” Currently, those assets are sold using “best practices from private industry” to finance essential purchases like killer police robots and military-style surveillance technology. There’s no reason a

non-psychopathic government couldn't seize a private golf course or beach resort and turn it over to public use instead.

Even a cursory examination shows that the main obstacle to nationalizing the United States' nice places isn't a lack of laws or policies that would enable such moves. Instead, it's a lack of willingness from those in power to exercise those laws and policies for the common good. If we had a federal government that gave the slightest shit about ordinary people, we'd be amazed at how simple it would be to make nice places accessible to everyone.

WE NEED TO NATIONALIZE ALL THESE NICE places for the health of society. But we also need to nationalize them for the health of individuals. Relaxation and fun aren't luxuries—they're essential parts of human life. We can get doses of these vital soul-nutrients through activities that aren't dependent on being in a specific place (for example, via books and games and movies) but—as those of us who have endured quarantine can attest to—they're no replacement for *actually going somewhere*.

Research backs this up. A 2012 study in the journal *Health & Place* found that spending time near the water not only boosts one's physical and mental well-being, but that these effects are even more pronounced for low income people who can't afford the material luxuries others take for granted. In other words, the less able you are to pay for access to a private beach (or a public one that is being held for ransom by a team of hired goons), the *more* you would benefit from being able to access it.

Beaches aren't the only nice places to have demonstrable benefits for humans. You'll probably be unsurprised to learn that scientists have found spending time in quiet environments with lots of plants can significantly reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and bestow other physiological and psychological blessings. The Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, or "taking in the forest atmosphere," has proven so effective at improving people's health that a 2010 study suggested it be used as "a strategy for preventative medicine." In 2018, researchers writing in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that a few days in the mountains can do wonders for both your peace of mind and your cardiovascular health.

Nationalizing the nation's privatized forests, mountains, ski slopes, beachfronts, golf courses, and other nice places would clearly be in the best interests of ordinary Americans, but it would also draw predictable cries of outrage from the people who are presently trying to monopolize all the nice places. Perhaps the loudest one would be: *well, if you let everyone into the nice places, then those places won't be nice anymore!*

This argument is drawn from the "tragedy of the commons," an idea that has long been used by elites to justify privatization of pretty much everything. The phrase itself was made famous by a 1968 essay from ecologist Garrett Hardin in the journal *Science*, in which he argued that people's selfish impulses will inevitably lead them to destroy any communal property or resource. Citing examples of ranchers who seek to increase the size of their own herds far past what the land can support, and fishermen who would empty the oceans of fish for the sake of personal gain, Hardin took a dim view of his fellow humans' ability to control their base impulses (a view that has since been embraced by everyone from neoliberals to anarcho-primitivists). According to Hardin, "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."

However, as the late political scientist Elinor Ostrom—the first and only woman to win the Nobel Prize in economics—showed through extensive field research, this is simply not the case. It doesn't matter wheth-

er you're talking about Spanish farmers, Indonesian fishermen, Swiss villagers, or American beachgoers: when people have a shared interest in safeguarding a common good, they tend to do a damn good job of it, even without a coercive authority forcing them to be on their best behavior. People, it turns out, devise unwritten codes of conduct to ensure their mutual benefit through a process of informal negotiation. This isn't some utopian socialist pipe dream, it's the same thing you do with your friends every time you take a long road trip together. There are always some points of contention to sort out (whether it's the driver's insistence on cranking late-period Bob Dylan or a nearby group of picnickers' reluctance to pick up their beer cans), but even the gloomiest misanthrope would find it hard to suggest these are unsolvable problems.

Another common objection to nationalizing nice places (or anything, for that matter) is that it would somehow infringe upon the liberties of their "rightful owners." If we were to make Augusta National Golf Club open to the public, for example, this would be an intolerable act of oppression against the fine stakeholders of Augusta National Inc., the company that club founder and Wall Street stock broker Clifford Roberts set up in 1932 to handle Augusta's financial affairs.

However, it's mighty hard to make an argument that Augusta National Inc. is deserving of any sympathy. The club is notoriously bigoted^[2]. In 2013, legendary TV announcer Bob Costas said he'd never be able to call the club's signature Masters tournament because, "I'd have to say something [about Augusta's history of racism and sexism] and then I'd be ejected." While Augusta may be a dramatic example of "a beautiful place owned by terrible people," it's far from the only spot that fits that criterion. Most private nice places are owned either by powerful corporations with questionable principles—*Mother Jones'* scathing 1999 exposé of Vail Resorts, Inc. shows how such companies prioritize catering to a select group of wealthy patrons over environmental conservation and the interests of local communities—or by individuals with a well-documented history of unethical behavior. Zuckerberg is an obvious one, but there are plenty of less-famous villains such as Ariel Quiros, a ski resort mogul who was recently implicated in massive fraud by the Securities and Exchange Commission. It seems safe to say that most, if not all, of the places owned by such goons could be requisitioned without relinquishing the moral high ground.

UNLESS YOU'RE OPPOSED TO THE IDEA OF ORDINARY people enjoying their lives (which, to be sure, is a popular stance among many of America's finest thought leaders and petty tyrants), it's hard to find a reason *not* to nationalize the country's nice places. Such a move would make our world healthier, more equitable, and more interesting for everyone. It's not the only thing necessary to lift us from our current collective doldrums—for people to be able to enjoy these nice nationalized places, they'd also need living wages, paid time off, quality child care, and affordable transportation, among other things—but it would be a big step in the right direction. And if it means that many of America's golf courses would get turned into dog parks or laser tag complexes, that's a price most of us would be delighted to pay. ♣

[1] *As with many of the United States' favorite myths, this one elides the fact that millions of indigenous people were persecuted and slaughtered so that waves of European colonists could reap said bounties.*

[2] *To be fair, the club has begrudgingly cleaned up its image a bit in recent years, having allowed a handful of women and Black people to join as members (small progress, to be sure). Still, it's an improvement over the policies enforced under Roberts, who once said, "As long as I'm alive, all the golfers will be white [men] and all the caddies will be black."*

RAT FUCK

So you're running in the Democratic primary on a social democratic platform? Well, good luck with that. I mean, try your best, for sure. But don't get **RATFUCKED!**





WOULD YOU LIKE TO OWN A WORKING lightsaber? For a few hundred bucks, you can buy a realistic customizable imitation, made from plastic and LEDs. What about a DeLorean, a.k.a. the time travel machine from *Back to the Future*? Starting in 2021, you might finally be able to buy a brand-new version of the classic 1980s car (flux capacitor not included). Would you like to hear a Silicon Valley luminary complain about the lack of *real* laser swords, time travel, flying cars, teleporters, or spaceships that can travel faster than light? Congratulations: that's free, and it's everywhere. Peter Thiel, the infamous libertarian-authoritarian investor, may have invented this trend a decade ago when he complained that the future—his present, now our past—didn't measure up to expectations. "We wanted flying cars, instead we got 140 characters," is a statement often attributed to him. In a 2011 *New Yorker* profile, Thiel expanded on his frustrations:

"One way you can describe the collapse of the idea of the future is the collapse of science fiction...Now it's either about technology that doesn't work or about technology that's used in bad ways. The anthology of the top twenty-five sci-fi stories in 1970 was, like, 'Me and my friend the robot went for a walk on the moon,' and in 2008 it was, like, 'The galaxy is run by a fundamentalist Islamic confederacy, and there are people who are hunting planets and killing them for fun.'"

In 2020, probably everyone not named Steven Pinker would agree that the "future" has been disappointing. Whether or not you were raised on a steady diet of whiz-bang heroic science fiction, the current dystopian hellworld of plague, economic depression, and looming climate disaster is nobody's fantasy. The current run of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) tends toward stressful dystopias, mostly via the placid acceptance of capitalist realism (though to be perfectly honest, I would probably read that planet-killing story). There *does* seem to be a particular imaginative lack both in our popular fiction and in our reality, as we parse through the uncertainty of the next few months and the treacherous years to come.

Before the coronavirus crisis, Thiel and other Silicon Valley luminaries already had a solution: escape. Thiel personally favored seasteading, the art of building your own country on the high seas (a venture, as Aisling Mc-

THE FAKE NERD BOYS OF SILICON VALLEY BY LYTA GOLD

Crea has chronicled for this magazine, that often ends in complete disaster). Jeff Bezos has set his sights on the moon, or pods in space, depending on the year. His space-faring company, Blue Origin, has been declared exempt from mandatory stay-at-home orders during the coronavirus crisis—not because the quest to colonize the solar system is considered “essential” to human flourishing, but because Blue Origin, like most other aerospace companies, has ongoing contracts with the U.S. government (Elon Musk’s SpaceX is also operational and intends to conduct tests in the near future). In fact, Blue Origin attempted to move forward with its scheduled April 10th launch of the New Shepard rocket, despite its Washington-based workers’ stated concerns about traveling to the Texas launch site and potentially carrying the virus with them to an under-resourced rural area. The New Shepard rocket, incidentally, is *not* intended for the salvation of humankind through multiplanetary homesteading, or even for some disturbing U.S. military project. Its purpose is “to eventually carry wealthy thrill-seekers to space where they’ll experience a few minutes of weightlessness” before returning back to earth. The tech outlet *Verge* quotes an anonymous employee, furious and frightened that they might be forced to travel to Texas and launch New Shepard during a pandemic: “What is essential about a vehicle that flies...billionaires to space?”

E LON MUSK, FAMOUSLY INTERESTED IN SETTLING Mars, has also used the coronavirus crisis to engage in petty billionaire showboating. Having initially downplayed COVID-19 (he called early concerns “dumb”), Musk pressured his Tesla workers to report to their California factories despite the stay-at-home order. Since then he’s pivoted wildly to promoting hydroxychloroquine as a cure based on a faked scientific paper, and boasts of having delivered “ventilators” to stricken New York and California hospitals. These devices, as it turns out, were really sleep apnea machines capable of being cobbled together into makeshift second-rate ventilators, which to be fair is slightly better than nothing. Musk also claims that Tesla factories are hard at work making real ventilators, or ventilator parts, but as of the time of this writing they have yet to be finished or tested.

While the whole ventilator stunt is clearly another brand-building event for Musk, even in the most charitable interpretation it’s merely

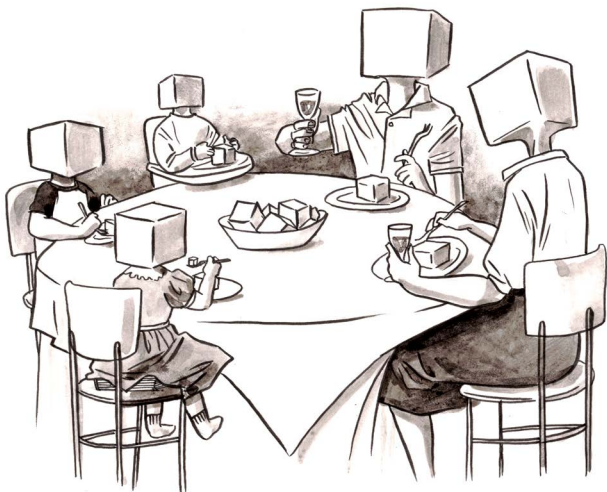
scrappy. He’s not building a *better* ventilator, some thrilling innovation that will save hundreds of lives, just giving away already-existent medical devices and (maybe) churning out some parts. His recent announcement of further SpaceX rocket tests—for the SN4, which had to be built after the SN3’s fuel tank dramatically failed in a previous test—feels similarly stunt-like and insufficient. “Elon Musk is determined neither the coronavirus nor anything else will stop him from making humankind a space-faring species,” an opinion columnist scribbles desperately in the *Hill*. “...It is by such determination that we shall defeat the virus and then go forth to the stars.” It is? How? We’ve built rockets before, including ones that didn’t explode. It doesn’t sound like any of our tech overlords’ efforts, from Tesla/SpaceX to Blue Origin, are remotely revolutionary, or futuristic, or even that exciting. None of it seems likely to get us much closer to building a civilization in outer space, or curing the microscopic virus that has crippled this one.

What went wrong? Why has the future been such a disappointment? It’s not the coronavirus itself; after all, the sense of future-failure has been present for the last decade or more. Peter Thiel, having seemingly given up on seasteading some years ago, is rumored to have moved to his bunker in New Zealand to wait out the virus, once again slightly ahead of the curve. In 2018, NASA released a report about the unlikelihood of settling on Mars, gently warning that Elon Musk’s plans to terraform the red planet are science fiction at best. We don’t have anything approaching the necessary technology, NASA reminded everyone, and we’re unlikely to develop it any time soon. Musk, while revising his Mars plan into domed cities for wealthy tourists, said rather plaintively, “You want to be inspired by things. You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great. And that’s what being a spacefaring civilization is all about. It’s about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past.”

Honestly, I *do* want to wake up and be inspired by things. Right now, living in Queens in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, I would really, *really* like to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great. In fact, right now I would settle for “not a complete fucking nightmare.” But Elon Musk’s vision was clearly never going to get us there. His dreams have always been dystopian. In *Salon*, Keith A. Spencer gamed out what Musk’s rich-people resort on Mars would actually look like:

“Imagine signing away years of your life to be a housekeeper in the Mars-a-Lago hotel, with your communications, water, food, energy usage, even oxygen tightly managed by your employer, and no government to file a grievance to if your employer cuts your wages, harasses you, cuts off your oxygen. Where would Mars-a-Lago’s employees turn if their rights were impinged upon? Oh wait, this planet is run privately? You have no rights. Musk’s vision for Mars colonization is inherently authoritarian.”

In a previous article for this magazine, Nathan J. Robinson pointed out similar truths about Jeff Bezos. Should the Amazon overlord succeed in his desire to build Moon colonies or space pods or orbital stations—rather than just send billionaires up and down in thrill rockets—he’ll have made another corporate dictatorship, Amazon in space. It’s already rather obvious if you look at Blue Origin. When workers expressed concerns about testing the New Shepard rocket during coronavirus, executives threatened to fire them. Jeff Ashby, the “senior mission assurance director,” reportedly told employees,





A Blue Origin "New Shepard" rocket, destined to take rich assholes into space, or perhaps just blow up on the launchpad.

"I would say that you should ask yourself, as an individual, are you acting as a toxin in the organization, fanning discontent, or are you really trying to help our senior leaders make better decisions?" It does not appear to have occurred to Ashby that the senior leadership *itself* is the toxin in the organization, the virus, the heartless robot issuing orders that could get human beings needlessly killed. Utopia never arrives, despite all their dreaming, and management still doesn't understand why.

Ironically, if Silicon Valley CEOs and the tech writers who adore them took a closer look at the science fiction and fantasy they profess to enjoy so much, they might find the answers right on the page. In a 2017 article for the *New York Post*, journalist Stephen Carter enthuses about Musk's plans for Mars. He says they remind him of Philip K. Dick's 1966 story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" (which may be better known as the source material for the Schwarzenegger movie *Total Recall*). The first line of the story is, famously: "He awoke—and wanted Mars." Carter says he first read this in an anthology in high school, which is reminiscent of Thiel's nostalgia for that 1970 anthology with its robot pals on the moon. However, if you go back and reread Dick's story, the out-of-context first line takes on very different qualities.

"We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" is the tale of a "miserable little salaried employee" who desperately wants to travel to Mars but can't afford the trip. Consumed by his desire, he goes to a memory implantation center, hoping to be instilled with the memory of being a cool secret agent who's been to Mars. In a classic Dickian twist, it appears that the protagonist *is* in fact a secret agent who *already* went to Mars (for the purposes of assassinating someone)

and his deep-state former employer has succeeded in erasing his memory of the event except for his vestigial yearning to recover his past. Behind the scenes, the government is working with the memory-implant corporation to try to suppress the agent even further. Of course, if you haven't read the story in years, you might only remember that first sentence and the protagonist's desire for Mars, not the revelation of *why* he wants to go there, or the dystopian, paranoid, and psychologically distorted nature of Dick's writing. That is, you might have forgotten what the story is really about.

Dystopian narratives like Dick's were common in the 1960s and 1970s. A lot of utopian science fiction dates from this era as well, and it wasn't all, or even mostly, "cool robot friends on the moon." To start with, there are a number of excellent 1970s feminist utopias. But the best-known utopia of the time is, of course, *Star Trek*. The many iterations of *Trek's* spacefaring future are popular in Silicon Valley, but Thiel himself happens to not be a fan. When Maureen Dowd interviewed Thiel for the *New York Times*, he revealed why he prefers *Star Wars* to *Trek*:

"I like Star Wars way better. I'm a capitalist. Star Wars is the capitalist show. Star Trek is the communist one. There is no money in Star Trek because you just have the transporter machine that can make anything you need. The whole plot of Star Wars starts with Han Solo having this debt that he owes and so the plot in Star Wars is driven by money."

Thiel is likely being somewhat cute here (the *Star Trek* machine he's referring to is a replicator, not a transporter, which could have been a mental error on his part but is probably a dig at pedantic nerds). But, at the risk of being a pedantic nerd, it's worth unpacking the rest of what Thiel said, because "the whole plot" of *Star Wars* is

not, in fact, remotely driven by money. The original *Star Wars* movie begins with a long shot of the terrifying Star Destroyer, a gigantic piece of Imperial technology shaped like an enormous spearhead, which is chasing down a tiny ship of desperate rebels carrying the secret which can destroy the Empire's greatest weapon. Capitalism is certainly present in the story—the smuggler Han Solo does owe a debt—but it's a minor element in the narrative at best. *Star Wars* is generally not much interested in political economy; its conflicts tend toward the political-philosophical-familial. And even when capitalism does appear, it doesn't come off too well. At the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*, Han Solo is frozen into a slab of carbonite and shipped off to Jabba, his creditor, to be displayed like a trophy in Jabba's palace. In the opening of the next movie, the heroes stage a brave rescue, and Jabba is strangled to death by one of his employees/slaves. The prequel and sequel *Star Wars* movies rarely reference capitalism at all, but in one of the more intelligent moments from *The Last Jedi*, a character points out that no matter who's winning the war, the rich profiteers will always get their cut. It's hard to imagine watching any of the *Star Wars* films and concluding, "You know what's great? Capitalism!"

IN GENERAL, CAPITALISM DOES NOT MAKE FOR PLAUSIBLE utopian, the-future-is-great fiction.* When capitalist societies appear in SFF, they're usually a backdrop for dystopia or epic conflict. The obvious counterexample you might offer would be Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*—another favorite of both Thiel and Musk. But Galt's Gulch is not a closed society, like most utopias; it's dependent on capital derived from the labor of many other people who are still living outside, in a dystopian civilization. This, for Rand, is perfectly fine; the poor, as far as she's concerned, are undeserving grotesques. *Atlas Shrugged* is essentially the flip side of a capitalist dystopia like *The Hunger Games* or *Altered Carbon*—there are the rulers, and the ruled; a utopia for a few, and a dystopia for most.

This accords perfectly well for someone like Thiel, who is not a fan of equality. An open supporter of Donald Trump, Thiel has stood by through the worst of Trump's immigration restrictions, voter disenfranchisement, and environmental degradations. In the *New Yorker*, George Packer explains Thiel's mindset: "In Thiel's techno-utopia, a few thousand Americans might own robot-driven cars and live to a hundred and fifty, while millions of others lose their jobs to computers that are far smarter than they are, then perish at sixty."

Beyond science fiction and the disturbing dreams of billionaires, capitalist utopian schemes are not particularly functional in real life. An attempt to build Galt's Gulch in Chile—a "completely transaction-based community"—ended up being an immediate grift and a

fraud. People "bought" pockets of land that were not actually available for purchase, and lost thousands of dollars in the process. But, given the nature of capitalism, this is hardly a surprise. If, as capitalists insist, greed and selfishness are the human condition, then there can be no cooperation, no democracy, no utopia—only a permanent, rugged battle for survival. In a "completely transaction-based community," you're either the cheater or the cheated. The great RJ Eskow points out that "*Atlas Shrugged* actually celebrates fraud—at least against those whom Rand despises. These [fraud] charges [in Galt's Gulch Chile] aren't an aberration. They're the inevitable outcome of Rand's own philosophy."

Rand's philosophy is marked by an unresolvable tension between its own vaunted utopianism and its actual, predictable outcomes. For all that *socialism* is the ideology derided as dreamy utopianism—and authoritarian communist states the inevitable outcome of such radical schemes as universal healthcare—it's *capitalism* that positions itself as the true promised land that can never be reached, the ever-distant American dream. Neoliberalism, capitalism's current flavor and direct descendant of Rand's philosophy, is particularly guilty of this. Neoliberals, as George Monbiot writes, believe in a "utopian, millenarian faith describ[ing] a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin's theory of evolution." Witness Steven Pinker, the high priest of neoliberalism, telling us over and over that the world is constantly getting better thanks to capitalism and development. "Steven Pinker Thinks The Future Is Looking Bright," ran a headline in the *New York Times* in 2018, the same year *Vox* praised Pinker in a syrupy interview titled "The Case for Optimism." This was all infuriating at the time, but now, mid-COVID, it's bitterly hilarious. The neoliberal utopia of the past three or four decades was one in which many people were permitted to suffer, as long as the suffering was slowly being reduced according to cherry-picked data points such as access to cell phones, clean water, and nominal democracy. It seems that neoliberalism is a system that cannot weather crises, either a pandemic or the weather itself, which is still slowly and inexorably turning on us, and taking those cell phones and clean water and nominal democracy with it.

The days are growing darker. I would guess that after nostalgic space dreams, the next imaginative phase for Silicon Valley will be neo-feudalism. This is an easy prophecy to make, because it's already begun. The best-known proponent of neo-feudalism in Silicon Valley is Curtis Yavin, a "mouthbreathing Machiavelli," as Corey Pein described him in the *Baffler*. Voluntarily writing under the pen name "Mencius Moldbug," Yavin advocates an anti-democratic ethos known as the "Dark Enlightenment," which "oppose[s] popular suffrage, egalitarianism and pluralism." You might expect Moldbug to be just some internet crank, but he's relatively wealthy and influential—largely thanks to Peter Thiel, who has invested in several of Moldbug's ventures. As Pein points out, "there is definitely a whiff of something Moldbuggy in Thiel's own writing. For instance, Thiel echoed Moldbug in an infamous 2009 essay for the Cato Institute in which he explained that he had moved beyond libertarianism. [Thiel wrote] 'I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible.'" Thiel also said that the extension of voting rights to women plus the existence of too many "welfare beneficiaries" makes "capitalist democracy" impossible (after public outcry, he walked back his comments about women's suffrage at least).

* *The only real exception to the rule of capitalist utopias that I know of is Nancy Kress' underrated—and deeply disturbing—Beggars in Spain (1993). Operating under a slightly less cold-blooded version of Rand's ideology, Kress posits a utopian society of genetically sleepless, hyper-efficient elites ruling over a mass of stupid citizenry made passive by drugs and entertainment (yes, this is portrayed as a good thing). It's a well-written and functional story, but only if you accept its basic meritocratic-feudalistic premise that some people are simply born smarter and more deserving than others.*

Thiel does not often write directly about his ideology; Moldbug, on the other hand, once churned out lengthy purple-prose screeds about the glories of authoritarianism. (He took a long hiatus, but recently returned to publishing on the right-wing site the *American Mind*, a project of a conservative think tank known as the Claremont Institute.) Moldbug's interminable posts—which somehow, even through a computer screen, carry an odor of mildew—involve a lot of tired references to *The Matrix* and are also “heavily informed by the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and George Lucas.” It's not hard to imagine Thiel reading this tripe with an approving nod. Thiel, as we already know, loves *Star Wars*. Beyond his affection for its latent capitalism, that 2011 *New Yorker* profile noted that a building housing several of Thiel's venture capital firms is “decorated with statuary of Darth Vader and Yoda,” and the London offices of his company Palantir features at least one stormtrooper in a bullet-proof vest. Capitalism can't buy utopia, or happiness, or rockets that don't explode, or even kingship (yet), but it can absolutely buy fiberglass statues of pop culture characters.

But it's Tolkien that Thiel is really fascinated with, and you could make the argument that the *Lord of the Rings* is the ur-text of Silicon Valley, even more so than *Atlas Shrugged*. While basically everyone who loves the polemical *Atlas Shrugged* cites its politics as the chief attraction, the politics of *Lord of the Rings* are somewhat more ambiguous. Tolkien variously described himself as an anarchist and an “unconstitutional monarchist,” and his books are simultaneously a critique of power and a celebration of monarchy. Rather than tease out these interesting and often contradictory themes, the Tolkien superfans of Silicon Valley seem to have a somewhat shallower appreciation of the books. Alex Farr, the CEO of a startup called Zammo, told CNBC, “It just is a great story...It's just a beautiful story of which direction in your life you can go.” The CNBC article—titled “Why Silicon Valley Is Obsessed With ‘Lord of the Rings’”—mentions that Farr has named his cars after Legolas, his horses after Gandalf, and his own home after the Shire. “[Farr] also frequently attends and hosts LOTR [*Lord of the Rings*]-themed dinner parties and events with others in the tech industry.” He's hardly the only one in Silicon Valley to express his fandom through property names or themed parties. Sean Parker—the founder of Napster and a friend of Thiel's—had a Tolkien-themed wedding on Big Sur, spending \$4.5 million to turn sections of the California park into “a wooded fantasyland.” And Thiel himself has named at least five companies after people, places, and artifacts in Tolkien's works.

The best known of these companies is probably the aforementioned Palantir, the all-purpose surveillance and “data processing” corporation. In Tolkien's legendarium, a palantir is a “seeing-stone,” a sort of crystal ball that can reveal things far away in both space and time. There are seven in total, and they can communicate with each other. Since the chief villain Sauron possesses a palantir of his own, and anyone who attempts to use one of the other palantiri is almost certain to fall under his control, this ends up being a fairly serious problem. “Maybe Palantir didn't really think through the connotations that come with that,” said Andy Ellis, yet another Silicon Valley Tolkien fan interviewed by CNBC. “But maybe when you look at the company and its clients, it might be an appropriate name.”

YOU MAY BE FAMILIAR WITH PALANTIR FROM SUCH scandals as: Operation Laser, a *Minority Report*-esque project of the LAPD “to identify and deter people likely to commit crimes;” a similar predictive-policing tool used in New Orleans; and, most infamously, Palantir's contract with ICE. Palantir helped U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) “build profiles of immigrant children and their family members for the prosecution and arrest of any undocumented person they encountered in their investigation” and provided data support for other acts of cold-blooded cruelty that were deemed “mission critical” by ICE. Palantir CEO Alex Karp (another massive Tolkien fan who refers to the Palantir office as “the Shire”) refused to stop working with ICE even as employees reportedly begged him to end the contract. As detailed by the *Wall Street Journal*, Karp reassured his employees that “Palantir helps stem the cross-border flow of drugs, not separate families.” This, according to internal documents obtained by the *Intercept* and the immigrants rights organization *Mijente*, is a bald-faced lie. Thanks to Palantir's data work, “unaccompanied children were taken by border agents, sent to privately-run facilities, and held indefinitely. Any undocumented parent or family member who came forward to claim children was arrested by ICE for deportation. More children were kept in detention longer, as relatives stopped coming forward.”

You can see why Thiel, who at least once identified as a libertarian, and Karp, who has variously described himself as a socialist and a neo-Marxist (whatever the fuck that is), might be uncomfortable with admitting to having aided and abetted ICE in separating families, if only for—as the *Wall Street Journal* puts it—Palantir's “public-perception problem.” But working with organizations like ICE is part of Palantir's original mission. In 2011, Thiel told *Bloomberg* “civil libertarians ought to embrace Palantir, because data mining is less repressive than the ‘crazy abuses and draconian policies’ proposed after Sept. 11.” He argued that “the best way to prevent another catastrophic attack without becoming a police state...was to give the government the best surveillance tools possible, while building in safeguards against their abuse.”

Incidentally, this sounds like something straight out of *Lord of the Rings*. In fact, it sounds like a very specific scene from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where the wizard Saruman—fresh from using his palantir and being ensnared by the evil Sauron on the other end of it—tries to convince Gandalf to join them, claiming that Sauron's victory is inevitable:

“As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order...”

A number of Tolkien scholars have pointed out that this particular speech of Saruman's may be a riff on Neville Chamberlain's arguments for appeasing Hitler. Whether or not art initially imitated life, life has once again imitated art: Tolkien superfans Thiel and Karp have ended up parroting their favorite book's second-rate villain, aiding ICE in work that would make an evil wizard blush.

“Whatever else you might think about Peter Thiel,” writes Maria Bustillos in *New York*, “he is a terrible literary critic. *The Lord of the Rings* is his favorite book, but he has apparently got no earthly idea

what it is about.” Tolkien’s work is thematically complex, and there’s plenty of racism, feudal nostalgia, and reactionary sentiment mixed in, but it’s pretty clear that however much these Silicon Valley nerds like to attend *Lord of the Rings*-themed parties or name their prized possessions after its characters, they don’t really understand the larger meaning of the books at all—especially the clear warnings against allying with evil, the corrupting influence of power, and the negative effect of greed on the natural world. Sean Parker, the Napster founder with the Tolkien-themed wedding, had to pay the California Coastal Commission a legal settlement of \$2.5 million because of “potential destruction to old-growth redwood forest from all the digging, bulldozing and building of fake ruins.” Destroying ancient trees for some tacky *Lord of the Rings* wedding! It’s hard to imagine anything *less* in keeping with the story’s themes, or more hateful to Tolkien himself.

We’ve all known the sort of geeks who will quote at length from their favorite pop culture movies, and make constant, out-of-context references to the stories they love. You may have once been this geek yourself. But you probably left it all behind in high school, retaining your fondness for these stories but developing a more critical, nuanced understanding of these narratives and why you love them so much. Not so our tech overlords. As George Packer notes for the *New Yorker*, “[Thiel] seems uneasy with the world of grownup feelings, as if he were still a precocious youth.” Packer goes further:

“Thiel and his circle in Silicon Valley may be able to imagine a future that would never occur to other people precisely because they’ve refused to leave that stage of youthful wonder which life forces most human beings to outgrow. Everyone finds justification for his or her views in logic and analysis, but a personal philosophy often emerges from some archaic part of the mind, an early idea of how the world should be. Thiel is no different. He wants to live forever, have the option to escape to outer space or an oceanic city-state, and play chess against a robot that can discuss Tolkien, because these were the fantasies that filled his childhood imagination.”

Contra to Packer, I think there’s actually a lot of value in retaining childish wonder, and never losing your ability to imagine a different world. This specific Silicon Valley obsession with pop culture objects is certainly a function of immaturity, but it’s not really about *imagination*. In fact, it’s something of the opposite.

A FEW YEARS AGO, DAVID ROSE, AN INVENTOR AND proponent of “the Internet of Things” made headlines for what he termed “enchanted objects.” The reason, he said, that people were reluctant to adopt Google Glass and smart fridges and wifi-enabled toilets is that these devices lack a sense of drama and enchantment. Rose argued that these objects needed to feel *magical*. Inspired by—you guessed it—*Lord of the Rings*, Rose created such useful inventions as an umbrella handle that glows when it’s about to rain, and an orb that displays the weather. (The specific reference point from Tolkien’s legendarium is the sword Sting and other blades from Gondolin, which turn blue when people of a hated race get too close.) Rose’s light-up umbrellas and glowing orbs sound quite pretty, but so is the view out your window. The “Internet of Things” still remains less popular than projected, not because the objects that comprise it lack enchantment, but because no matter how nice the design, none of this shit is really that imaginative, or useful. The

Juicero ended up being a \$400 substitute for ordinary, unenchanted human hands that can squeeze a smoothie packet. Nobody has ever needed the “Internet of Things”: it’s always been a catalog of ain’t-it-cool garbage for unhappy nerds with more money than sense.

As long as we live under capitalism, new hardware and software will only have two real purposes: to collect data, and to sell it. Inventors and investors can claim whatever specific inspiration from Tolkien they like, but every single one of the enchanted objects in our midst is a palantir. Suburban neighbors use Google Nest or the aptly named Amazon Ring to spy on each other (and to let the police spy on them); employers use a variety of techniques to monitor their employees’ every move. As Nicole Aschoff writes in *Jacobin*, “Microchips, mobile spyware, and perpetual, individualized monitoring are all part of capital’s fantasy of twenty-first-century scientific management—a future in which our movements, impulses, and rhythms are perfectly adapted to the needs of profit-making.” ‘The future’—our present—is capital’s fantasy, and that’s why it’s a nightmare. We live in a hell of black magic, and it’s not even composed of original or imaginative spells: just random objects dragged out of previous works and remembered for us, half-sale.

“I think it is important that we become a spacefaring civilization,” said Elon Musk in 2019, “and be out there among the stars... We want the things that are in science fiction novels and movies not be science fiction forever. We want them to be real one day.” Notice what he wants to be real: *the things*. The objects. I am sure that Musk and his fellow Silicon Valley nerds’ love of science fiction and fantasy is genuine, but they appear to love it for all the wrong reasons: for its trappings, its gadgets, its settings, its *stuff*. Lightsabers and spaceships, time travel and epic battles, magic swords and magic stones.

Science fiction and fantasy, of course, are not simply stories about being in space, or possessing enchanted objects (which, in most stories, invariably comes at a cost). And they aren’t really stories about what is going to happen, or should happen, in the future. Ursula K. Le Guin claims in the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* that novels set in the future aren’t actually *about* the future at all. She writes:

All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and the historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor.

A metaphor for what?

If I could have said it non-metaphorically, I would not have written all these words, this novel...

To be fair, it would probably be easier for Silicon Valley luminaries to understand the metaphoric qualities of fiction if they didn’t have such contempt for the humanities. Thiel is openly opposed to higher education for most people: he offers a paid fellowship for kids who will skip college in favor of launching startups. In 2018 he said on Dave Rubin’s podcast, “One of the downsides of too much education is that you get the most brainwashed.” Musk too has recently scoffed at higher learning, saying, “You don’t need college to learn stuff.” I agree this may be perfectly true for some people, but Thiel and Musk themselves could stand to take a middle-school literature course.

The problem, ultimately, is not *what* these men have read or how

they read it, but that they possess the capital to try to launch their misunderstanding of SFF into reality. And when that reality fails to materialize—as it always will, because capitalism forbids real utopia, and, as Vanessa A. Bee has explained, also inevitably stifles innovation—they become frustrated and either retreat with all their billions, or simply set about conquering humanity.

Jeff Bezos is one of these would-be conquerors. He also happens to love science fiction, and *Star Trek* in particular. According to a recent, slavish *Atlantic* profile, Bezos identifies particularly with Captain Jean-Luc Picard, although he's enamored with the entire property and all its spinoffs. "[Bezos] has a holding company called Zefram, which honors the character who invented warp drive. He persuaded the makers of the film *Star Trek Beyond* to give him a cameo as a Starfleet official. He named his dog Kamala, after a woman who appears in an episode as Picard's 'perfect' but unattainable mate." Again, names, references, objects, even deep cuts from bad episodes: but not anything resembling *meaning, theme, purpose*. *Star Trek*, as Thiel said, is the *communist one*—and Bezos is the living antithesis of communist ideals. He's currently worth \$139 billion. He has fired workers who organized to protest the unsafe conditions in his warehouse, both during the pandemic and before it. He has been trying, through Amazon, to achieve complete market dominance in every sector. "The man who styles himself as the heroic Jean-Luc Picard," Franklin Foer writes nervously in the *Atlantic*, "has thus built a business that better resembles Picard's archenemy, the Borg, a society-swallowing entity that informs victims, *You will be assimilated and Resistance is futile*."

At the end, the collector's mania for the objects of science fiction deepens into a desire to literally become an object, to absorb all life into itself; to become, like the Borg, an extended living *thing*. The quest for eternal life, or brain-uploading, or to have a perfectly optimized body—all popular Silicon Valley obsessions—are really about controlling the messy unpredictability of fate, the future that can't be predicted or directed. When it comes to Amazon and the "Internet of Things," we're told by the tech press that "resistance is futile" precisely because it isn't. If it were, why insist on it? If there's nothing to be done, why bother to tell us that all hope is lost?

In the third volume of *Lord of the Rings*, Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, looks into his palantir and tries to see the future. Thanks to Sauron's subtle manipulation of his perceptions, Denethor sees his city burning. This is a true event that will happen, but one that has been decontextualized; it's not the end of Gondor's history, just one event that will happen. However, convinced that the city will be destroyed and the future is lost, Denethor commits suicide, nearly taking his son with him in the process. Power always tries to convince us that the future it sees is inevitable, but it rarely ever is, unless we allow it.

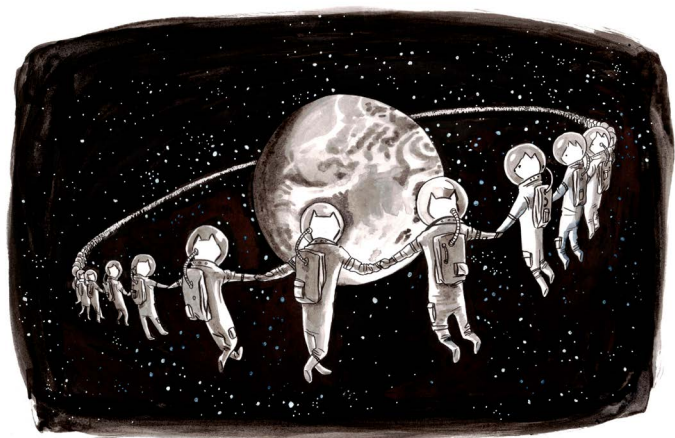
I'M OBVIOUSLY VERY FOND OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY, even if these fake nerd boys keep trying to ruin it for everyone. These are, again, complex works open to varying interpretations, including disturbing and reactionary ones. But at the end of the day, stories are *about* things, not merely receptacles *for* things. Looking at Thiel's best beloved *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, we see a shared plot element in both narratives. The heroes are trying to destroy the most dangerous object in their respective universes: the Ring of Power and the Death Star. What these objects

represent metaphorically is complicated (as Le Guin says, if it could be summed up easily there would be no need for the stories.) But, in oversimplified form, the Ring stands in for the seduction of absolute power and authoritarian control; the Death Star is a similar ultimate weapon of empire. You can, of course, buy a replica One Ring off the internet, or a Lego Death Star (the first Death Star or the second, and even Starkiller Base from the rehashed new films) but there is no getting around the fact that within these narratives, these powerful objects *end*, and they are supposed to end, and their ending causes or dovetails with the destruction of a cruel authoritarian regime. This is not a minor plot point like Han Solo's debt to Jabba. It's not the cool ornamentation of less important objects like shiny blue swords. This is the entire thrust of these stories. But the fake nerd boys of Silicon Valley don't want the objects to end. They want it all to continue forever. And so the future will always be, for them, terribly disappointing.

In his 2009 Cato Institute essay—the same one in which he said democracy was incompatible with freedom—Thiel wrote:

"...we are in a deadly race between politics and technology. The future will be much better or much worse, but the question of the future remains very open indeed. We do not know exactly how close this race is, but I suspect that it may be very close, even down to the wire...The fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom that makes the world safe for capitalism."

In 2020, the question of the future still remains open. The race is now closer than ever; we stand, maybe, on the edge of a knife. "Making the world safe for capitalism" is even more laughably impossible now than it was in 2009; thanks to the coronavirus it's clearer than ever that capitalism is a system that can only devolve into destruction and death. This either hasn't occurred to Thiel, or he doesn't mind so long as its costs are borne by people who are not himself. He doesn't also seem to notice or care that there is no such thing as "the machinery of freedom" and that utopia is only meaningful if founded for everyone and not just for some. In *The Two Towers*, Gandalf explains to the other heroes that they have an advantage; Sauron would never assume they would try to destroy the Ring of Power. He would expect them to use it as a weapon, destroying Sauron and replacing him at the top of the social order. Gandalf says, "That we should wish to cast him down and have *no* one in his place is not a thought that occurs to his mind. That we should try to destroy the Ring itself has not yet entered into his darkest dream." ▲



"Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow."



the peculiarity of GENDER

by Brianna Rennix

THERE'S A PASSAGE THAT I READ WHEN I WAS about 16 that I've never been able to locate again, although it evidently made quite an impression on me, if I still recall it (however vaguely) after all this time. I'm fairly sure that it was from an essay, not a work of fiction, but I have no idea who wrote it. (If anyone can identify it based on the following description, I'd be incredibly grateful to be put out of my misery). The passage vividly described the feeling of a man who is struggling to debate a clever opponent. He's very convinced in his heart that the thing he believes is true and correct, but is struggling to put the enormity of it into words, while his interlocutor makes objections that sound very reasonable and logical. In the end, all the man can do is cry out that he *knows* he's right, even if he can't say *why*.

I think the reason this bit of writing struck me was because it ran counter to what I believed about the world at the time. As a teenager, I was pretty sure that if you had a belief you couldn't defend with clear words, you were probably an idiot, or at least didn't really believe the thing you thought you believed. But later in life, and especially when I went to law school, I thought a lot about this half-remembered passage and began to appreciate it in a new way. I realized that most of what passes for "logical" argument amongst would-be intellectual thought leaders is simply a matter of entrapment: whoever has the power to set the foundational premises of a debate, however stupid or immoral they might be, is the person who will score the points and win the arguments. You can try to challenge the bad premises, of course, if you can figure out what they are in the first place. But discerning the submerged, deeply-held assumptions that underlie an argument can be difficult, and even if you do manage it, it may, as a practical matter, prove impossible to uproot them in a way your opponent or your audience will acknowledge.

This is starkly true in the world of the law, of course. I feel the full force of that passage whenever I watch an asylum-seeker in court trying to defend themselves against the chilly accusations of some judge or trial attorney. Often the asylum-seeker is unable to understand what their interrogator is even getting at, because the arbitrary legal categories under which they're being evaluated are so far removed from the reality of their lived experience. So much of immigration law, and the law generally, is about putting people and their experiences into categories. When does violence pass the threshold of "mere

harm" and enter the realm of "persecution"? When is a collection of people sufficiently "socially distinct" to qualify as a "particular social group"? Do we evaluate these questions from the perspective of the asylum-seeker? The persecutor? Society At Large? The mythical Reasonable Person that every adjudicator complacently believes themselves to be? As an advocate, it feels futile and intellectually shabby to make arguments about these kinds of categorizations, which are so clearly stupid, especially when you know that whatever finicky distinction you're defending today is something you're fully prepared to jettison tomorrow if it could help your next client.

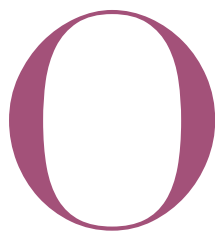
I have similar feelings when it comes to trying to have conversations about Gender. (Whether Gender qualifies as a particular social group under asylum law, incidentally, is a whole thorny legal question that I won't waste time on here.) I'll come out and say it: gender is stupid. The thematically appropriate creation myth of traditional Gender would be that some idiot lawmaker got up one day and announced: "We've decided to split the entirety of humanity into two separate groups. You can only belong to one or the other, and you don't get to choose which one you're in, but a variety of random characteristics, from your color preferences to your personality to your available opportunities, will be imputed to you in perpetuity based on which team you've been assigned. You will find your team assignment in your trousers. Enjoy!"

If you don't feel quite right in your gender—because you want to be identified by a different gender than the one you were assigned at birth, or maybe because you'd rather not have any gender, or maybe you haven't figured out what you really want at all, but the problem keeps gnawing at you urgently—it can be very hard to explain *why*, to people who've never (or only fleetingly) felt this way before. Certainly, there have been reams of theory written on gender, and it's good to have many minds at work on the issue, but not everyone is temperamentally suited to theory, and not everyone finds that putting a tangled concept into intricate language—building a map of the territory that's the same size as the original, as it were—provides much psychological relief. Or even if it does provide some clarity for you personally, you may be anxious that talking in overly academic language will embarrass you in front of other people, who will think that you're trying to be pretentious.

The academic field of gender theory is very much not my wheel-

house: I'm not qualified to write about it in any kind of detail, and I won't try. What I want to do instead is talk very generally about some of the popular ways that gender is thought about and written about, and propose some (not groundbreaking) ways to engage with these topics. The right certainly has its abundant share of assholes who are constantly trying to advance creepy views on gender—but the left has assholes too, such as the kind of charming internet “leftist” who mocks people for including their gender pronouns in their Twitter bio (usually while subtly hinting that the left needs to drop “trans issues” and “gender issues” from its platform in order to succeed with The People). And then there's the fact that academic and online communities which spend a lot of time thinking and writing about gender often seem to be at each other's throats, for reasons that are extremely hard for outsiders to follow—for example, popular leftist YouTuber Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints), who has made a lot of videos on gender and trans issues, seems to incite the internet into a rage on a semi-monthly basis for reasons that it's taken me a long time to piece together. It's sort of understandable that there would be a lot of turmoil and constantly-evolving terminology in the debate over What Gender Even Is, but this also makes it daunting to try to talk about—you never know who you're going to piss off, or what you could be mocked for, or what kind of “gotcha” moment you're going to unwittingly wander into.

Additionally, if you want to write about gender, there's a certain pressure to put forward your own identity as a kind of calling-card—which makes some sense. Certainly there are a lot of men who try to write about feminism, and cis people who try to write about trans and nonbinary people, in ways that are either malicious or misguided. Identity can (sometimes) be a valuable gauge for how many grains of salt you may need to pre-game before trying to choke down someone's warmed-over drivel. I use “they” pronouns and identify as “??? nonbinary ??? leaning transmasculine ??? figuring some stuff out still.” I arrived at the decision to start using gender-neutral pronouns after a mere 15 years of mysterious brooding and enigmatic refusal to explain my wishes to anyone, which was very cool of me and not at all annoying for everyone I interacted with. All of this is to say that questions about gender matter to me—as indeed they matter to most people—but my experiences are only my own, and my identity isn't a marker of reliability or authority, and I am not speaking for anyone but myself.

 ONE WAY OF TALKING ABOUT GENDER THAT'S common on the right—and which right-wing commentators love to present as common-sense, hard-nosed realism against the delusions of weirdos—is that gender is something that arises from Nature. The thing is very simple and “biological” to them: there are men, who have penises, and women, who have vaginas. (Intersex people presumably do not exist, or are deemed irrelevant outliers.) More than that, they believe that there are deep-seated differences between men and women, intellectually and temperamentally, and they will happily cite any number of Brain Studies purporting to show that this is so. As they see it, men are more similar to other men than they are to women, and women are more similar to other women than they are to men. To organize human society along the lines of these fundamental differences, which are nicely complemented by

reproductive functions, seems obvious to them. This view of humanity is dearly beloved by a certain kind of religious traditionalist, along with a certain kind of evo-psych “rationalist”; but it also has a loose corollary in the specific kind of feminist who insists that the world would be better if women ran it, because women are innately kinder, more socially adept, better problem-solvers, etc., etc. People who fall into this gender-essentialist bucket may vary somewhat in the extent to which they think the differences between the sexes/genders are hardwired into our genes (and/or ordained by God!), versus the extent to which they are shaped and reified by other social factors, but they nevertheless remain pretty firm in their belief that a gender binary definitely exists, and that this binary runs deeper, even, than mere physical or reproductive difference. This view on gender, which I am currently writing about as if it were some kind of bizarre fringe position, is obviously very common and doesn't feel remotely controversial to huge numbers of people.

Then there's the entirely different way of thinking about gender that's been present in certain strains of feminist and gender theory for quite some time, which says that actually, gender is pretty much entirely a social construct. That is to say, it's a set of socially-created expectations and assumptions that are placed on people based upon the bodies they happen to have been born into. The differences between “men” and “women”—to the extent they exist—are largely products of the way people are socialized, the way our gendered expectations cause us to perceive and evaluate the behavior of those we consider men and those we consider women through different lenses, and the divergent set of challenges and risks that people of different genders experience as a consequence of these factors. There's nothing fixed or “natural” about gender, since what's considered “masculine” and “feminine” varies across cultures and time periods (and since a number of societies throughout history have acknowledged the existence of more than two genders). The natural conclusion of this line of thought is that gender is essentially a social mirage, and often a pretty harmful one at that, since being continually evaluated according to a gendered standard tends to inhibit people's ability to develop and be appreciated as individuals.

Under this framework, we might think it would be better to live in a world where gender simply doesn't exist as a concept, where the differences between people's bodies aren't believed to encode any deeper meaning about their inner selves, and human beings treat one another accordingly. At any rate, it's certainly uncontroversial, among people who believe that gender is a construct, to state that there's no “right” or “wrong” way to inhabit your body: you should be able to like whatever you like, wear whatever you want to wear, have whatever job you want to have, irrespective of whatever gender you are or are perceived to be. If a little girl wants to play with monster trucks, that's not evidence that she's bad at being a girl, or that she is “really” a boy, because there's no earthly reason why a person's chromosomes should have any power to dictate whether they ought or ought not to enjoy smashing toy vehicles violently together.

I should mention that I'm not outlining these two views on gender as if to suggest that there are two distinct camps of people (genders, if you will) touting one theory over the other, and that they're constantly pitted against each other. I'm just sketching in broad strokes what I think are the furthest extremes of how most people view gender, from “fundamental and natural; is and should be the foundational ordering principle of society” to “totally contingent; ideally shouldn't be pro-

scriptive in any way, if we can help it.” If you are a leftist, and you favor egalitarianism and individual autonomy, you probably skew closer to the second vision, since it’s the one that offers more scope for individual people to choose what kind of lives they want to lead, and to have their choices respected by others.

But there’s also a certain tension in the gender-as-social-construct viewpoint that has given rise to endless waves of debate and controversy—usually around issues related to trans people. If you are a Gender Traditionalist, who thinks that gender is wholly dictated by the type of body you were born with, a trans person is merely someone with a delusion. You might be the kind of traditionalist who thinks that that person should be locked up, or the kind of traditionalist who merely thinks that their whims don’t deserve social tolerance. As right-wing commentator Ben Shapiro told a student questioner during a debate over trans issues: “I’m not going to modify basic biology because it threatens your subjective sense of what you are.” Now, if I am in the opposite camp, I’m going to respond that gender isn’t “biology” (whatever the hell that means), it’s a social construct, and that there’s no reason why someone can’t identify as whatever gender they please. But if gender is just a construct, and there’s no wrong way to be a man and no wrong way to be a woman—so my opponent might reply—why should anyone feel the need to transition from one gender to another? Why is identity so important? Isn’t it all the same thing?

NOW, ONE COUNTERARGUMENT I COULD make is that some trans people experience deep psychological anguish because they are inhabiting a body and an identity that doesn’t feel like their own, and that this anguish, whatever its source, is the impetus for transition, and it’s the reason why continuing to publicly identify as the gender they were assigned at birth is not an option. This is the whole idea behind “gender dysphoria,” the official DSM classification for the state of extreme distress that a trans person experiences when their personal sense of gender identity doesn’t match their assigned gender identity; the fact that it’s recognized as a medical condition is the reason why some trans people are able to have counseling, hormone therapy, and/or surgery covered by their insurance. That all trans people experience gender dysphoria from a young age has been, I think, the common public narrative (to the extent there is one) around transition for a number of years. It’s similar to the dominant narrative around gay people when I was growing up, that if you were gay it’s because you were “born that way.” The idea that sexuality was fluid and that people might choose, or sort of vaguely wander into, different kinds of sexual and romantic preferences at different points in life certainly wasn’t emphasized, probably because it was easier to placate conservatives with an idea of homosexuality as a tragic destiny that couldn’t be avoided. And certainly, some people’s identities remain very stable from a young age, and some trans people know from a very young age that they are trans, and experience deep distress until they’re in a position to affirm their identity, so it’s not as if this narrative has no connection to real people’s experiences.

But I don’t think that emphasizing dysphoria is necessarily (always) the best way to respond to the question of why transitioning still matters even if gender is a construct. Characterizing being trans as a medical condition is politically useful in some respects: even though it makes it easier for people like Ben Shapiro to claim that being trans

is a form of mental illness, it gives a comfortably “scientific” reason for why someone’s gender expression should be socially tolerated and why they should have access to whatever surgical and hormonal interventions they might need or want. But not all people who identify as trans experience dysphoria, or at least, don’t experience it in the same way. People relate to their bodies and identities in a multitude of ways that the standard narratives around dysphoria may tend to flatten. Making the distressing experience of “dysphoria” the threshold necessity for transition doesn’t always make things easier for all trans people, as they try to gauge whether their desire to alter their pronouns or their appearance or their bodies is “really” gender dysphoria, or whether they are miserable enough to be “really” dysphoric. Additionally, a number of trans people have written about the experience of transitioning as something that has, whether in the long or short term, increased their sense of mental distress or wrong-bodiedness, rather than lessening it. This is psychologically understandable, as pursuing something very important to you in the face of great obstacles is an emotional experience that everyone is bound to process differently, but it doesn’t fit into the narrative that transition is a “cure” for dysphoria and thus gives grist to the mills of badly-intentioned people who want to say that transitioning is inherently a form of self-harm.

There’s a lot of debate within trans communities about the whole issue of “the gender binary” and whether basing one’s desire to transition on “stereotyped” notions of masculinity and femininity reinforces the whole Gender Traditionalist belief in the existence of only two genders, who are distinct types of person. In the other direction, there’s debate over whether it makes sense to consider yourself trans if you don’t experience dysphoria and/or don’t have the desire or intention to alter your appearance after transitioning. That these tensions and questions would exist makes sense, given that gender is both a theoretically wobbly and incoherent concept, and also something of extreme psychological importance to most people, since popular views on gender shape our social, romantic, sexual, and professional lives in countless ways.

Unfortunately, the fact that all trans and gender-nonconforming people don’t fit into the same tidy category is often used as a way of attacking the “gender is a construct” camp as logically incoherent. Here, alas, it becomes necessary to bring up trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), the popular term for a category of “feminist” who opposes recognizing trans women as women, and—in a usually quieter and less virulent way—sometimes treats trans men as delusional, self-hating women whose desire to transition is the product of internalized misogyny. TERF-like language is sometimes adopted opportunistically by the right, but not all people who think this way consider themselves right-wingers: J.K. Rowling and Graham Linehan are two examples of “liberal” public figures who have espoused transphobic views in the name of feminism. The general thrust of TERFism goes like this: being a woman isn’t about wearing dresses or makeup, it’s about the experience of growing up and living in a body that has a uterus and a vagina, and all the challenges and traumas that are unique to that kind of body. Therefore, a person who doesn’t have those anatomical structures and wasn’t assigned female at birth and consequently never had those experiences cannot be a woman: trans women are, to a TERF, not women, but just men playing dress-up. This is summarized neatly by a tweet that Rowling lobbed off over the summer defending a TERF activist who had been dismissed from her job: “Dress however you please. Call yourself whatever you like. Sleep with any consenting adult who’ll have you. Live your best life in peace and security. But

New York Times Mad Libs

CREATE A TIMES ARTICLE ON ANY SUBJECT IN MERE SECONDS BY FOLLOWING THE PROVEN FORMULA

Sexual Assault Allegation (Republican)

(Golf term) (town in New England where it's still inexplicably legal to refuse to sell property to POC), the two-term Senator from (red state or blue state, doesn't really matter, thanks DNC!) was accused today of sexual (euphemism so vague and beige as to be without any connotations whatsoever) by (unnecessarily dismissive adjective) (pick one: wife, secret girlfriend, paid secret girlfriend, intern, former classmate). Known for her (unnecessary physical description of the accuser's hotness or ugliness) and her (unsubstantiated adjective dismissing her personality), she has accused the Senator of sexual (second euphemism so vague and beige as to be without any connotations whatsoever) involving (shockingly graphic image) (shockingly graphic image)(verb formation so passive that it seems the aforementioned shockingly graphic image maybe just happened to her when she was walking down the street and the Senator was sorta in the vicinity.) Criminal and civil charges have been filed. The Senator's office (authoritative legal term) the claim, stating (/giphy "I don't know her.") We will follow this breaking story with (a small nitpicky object that only someone who lives in a five-bedroom townhouse in Gramercy would have), bringing you round-the-clock coverage of the accuser's most intimate and painful revelations, including (previous traumatic event that really doesn't have anything to do with the case), (previous traumatic event that really doesn't have anything to do with the case), and (previous traumatic event that really doesn't have anything to do with the case).

Sexual Assault Allegation (Democrat)

Beloved Senator (forgettable one-syllable first name)(random two-syllable last name), the champion of women's rights who was honored last year by the (foundation for the equitable hiring of women in bioweapons research) and (random acronym jumble for a women's organization that throws yearly galas to honor "wellness" and is currently under investigation for misuse of charitable donations), has been interrupted at his (description of fourth residence that makes it sound modest when it absolutely isn't) in the midst of his quest for (public office or lobbying firm position). This interruption comes in the form of a (disbelieving adjective), (disbelieving adjective) allegation by an (adjective that makes her sound crazy) (noun that isn't literally "bitch" but we all know what it means).

On a previous occasion, the possible (enemy nationality) spy alleged (entirely plausible scenario weirdly phrased in a doubting manner), but lately she has changed her story to suggest (other entirely plausible scenario that follow in logical progression from the first one, also weirdly phrased in a doubting manner). In response, fourteen former staffers who were all invited to the Senator's daughter's wedding, where the Senator famously did a "(popular sexualized dance move that obviously made everyone uncomfortable though they pretended to laugh it off)," have said that they (/giphy "I don't know her"). They all added that the Senator is a (cliched praise for a powerful man) to whom they owe their careers. We need not remind our readers that a false accusation against a (cliched praise for a powerful man) is illegal.

The Senator, while having been previously accused of (obvious sexual misconduct); (obvious sexual misconduct); (obvious sexual misconduct); (obvious sexual misconduct); (obvious sexual misconduct); and (obvious sexual misconduct) by (number greater than 5) (dismissive term for former employees), has no noticeable pattern of (euphemism for sexual predation so beige as to leech the color from its surroundings like a poisonous cloud.) [REDACT THIS WHOLE PARAGRAPH BY REQUEST OF THE CAMPAIGN] has declined to comment. We see no reason to cover this story again in the future.

Flattering Profile of a Billionaire

He shook my hand. (Glowing physical description of some obviously unattractive physical feature). "You know what?" he said. "(Inversion of business cliché)."

"Incredible," I said. "I never thought of it that way."

"I'm a (normally unpleasant descriptor, stated like it's a philosophical position). If you think about it, (observation roughly on par with something you might expect from a clever 14 year old who just read Nietzsche)."

(Ordinary first name) (short last name with an odd vowel/consonant combination that sounds computer-generated) was born in (famously racist state or country) in (year when open discrimination was still legal). This (adjective that implies hard work) son of a single mother says that money was occasionally tight. "Sometimes Mom even had to beg her father for help. They were estranged." His grandfather owned (miner-

al) mine in (area famous for its terrible labor standards). (First name) put himself through (prestigious university) with the help of nothing except federal grants and a (vague adjective for size which could be moderate or an absolute metric fuckton) gift from his grandfather. Now, the (adjective that if used for a woman would imply mental illness but if used for a man implies selectivity and genius) billionaire no longer believes college is essential. "People should just come to work in my (euphemism for hideously unpleasant factories that makes them sound like fun and not 18 hours of physical, mental, and emotional drudgery) or my (charming pop culture name for an office that also makes it sound like fun and not 18 hours of mental and emotional drudgery only)."

Three years ago, I wrote a piece critical of (last name) because of his company's (unconscionable violation of vulnerable people's privacy rights). In response, he engaged in an (extremely unethical business practice only possible because of his company's multilateral control of the struggling news, entertainment, and advertising industry). Today, having sat down and really had a nice conversation over (disturbing new health-food craze that's clearly a controlled form of anorexia for desperately unhappy rich people) I learned to stop worrying and love (warm nickname ostensibly given by employees which was obviously focus-grouped by marketing and doesn't suit this billionaire at all). Sure, maybe he's trying to conquer the world. But, on the other hand, (lukewarm and not reassuring caveat).

Alleged Electoral Fraud (nation currently designated as enemy)

Unrest continues in (adjective for weather) (nation currently designated as enemy) as (gentle euphemism for right-wing nationalist organization with a literal swastika on their flag) takes to the streets to protest the (accurate descriptor for sociopolitical system but wielded oddly here given that the political affiliation of the right-wing nationalist opposition has not been mentioned) government's alleged election fraud and corruption. "We just want freedom," said (name which a quick google search will reveal to be the heir of a local plantation crop fortune).

The government, led by (number less than 3)-term dictator (name of popular environmentalist and indigenous rights champion), insists that it intended no malfeasance by (extremely convoluted accusation that

makes increasingly less sense as it continues). But the U.S. State Department has said that (local electoral term you've never heard before and will never hear again) obviously constitutes fraud. U.N. election observers say they are still examining the evidence, but President Trump issued (extreme and unlikely threat), tweeting, "(ALL-CAPS TWEET WITH MISPELLED COUNTRY NAME)." Senior Democratic officials have already announced their opposition to (extreme and unlikely threat). Nancy Pelosi said, "I want to know how our Air Force could even (cold-blooded military term) against "(misspelled country name)!" After this epic (misused term that arises out of Black millennial culture), Ms. Pelosi added, "however, we are absolutely open to (euphemism for supporting a local right-wing coup and then disclaiming all knowledge or responsibility when the abovementioned swastika flag-wielding party begins to massacre indigenous and LGBTQ people)."

Alleged Electoral Fraud (America)

The residents of (state mocked on all other occasions as "flyover country") went to the polls today. Despite (low-key voter suppression tactic) and (low-key voter suppression tactic), particularly in (lower-income Black and brown neighborhoods in largest city), citizens bravely stood in (number larger than 4) hour lines to cast their votes. Many wore masks in the (description of inclement weather that makes them sound noble for braving it).

"It's cold, and I have a suppressed immune system so I'm terrified of getting sick," said one voter in a line outside a (chain store that an Upper West-sider would never be caught dead shopping at but gives a nice splash of local color). "But I'm a loyal Democrat and always have been. (Cliche about the power of voting)."

Researchers have found that (different cliché about the power of voting) is supported by (questionably deployed statistics). And yet turnout among (disadvantaged age groups adversely affected by the low-key voter suppression tactics named above) was surprisingly low. Only (understandable percentage given the circumstances) of (disadvantaged age groups) bothered to vote.

"If (disadvantaged age group) wants change, they're going to have to (yet another cliché about the power of voting)," said the self-described loyal Democrat, coughing slightly.

force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?"

I actually think that this line of reasoning probably sounds superficially reasonable to a lot of people who wouldn't consciously consider themselves transphobic, because it purports to say that people are free to dress and live and speak however they want, just that they aren't entitled to claim any identity they please and expect to have it universally recognized. (It's worth mentioning at this juncture that many TERFs go one step further and imply that there are lots of fake trans women out there who are simply using their identity to get access to female-only spaces and do sex crimes, so the transphobia is sometimes *extremely* unsubtle, but at other times TERFs are pretty good at sounding like people who are Just Asking Questions.) If we are in the "gender is a social construct" camp, where we think that there's nothing inherent about gender and that it *is* all really just a product of expectations and experiences, then, they argue, shouldn't we agree that the only thing that makes you a woman is being raised as and treated as a woman? Now, this is a place where we could bring up dysphoria again, and say that some people have a Recognized Medical Condition that causes them to identify as women, and that it is therefore Scientifically Correct to acknowledge them as women. But if we're in that camp that thinks that not all trans people necessarily experience dysphoria and that people transition for a variety of reasons, we might not want to bind ourselves that way. "Okay then, so what determines who's a man and who's a woman (and who's any third gender)?" your TERF interlocutor might ask. "Is it just what someone *wants* to be?"

And ultimately, I think, that is actually the only possible answer. For me, the only reasonable way to think about gender identity is as a desire: a desire which may feel like an unavoidable imperative to some people, and maybe a conscious choice or settled preference for others; but ultimately, what matters is what gender you *want* to be. The existence of gender as a concept is important to our physical, sexual, and social lives—we do, after all, *live in a society*—and because of this, we all have to orient our sense of self around it to some extent, whether we like it or not. If you want to transition, it shouldn't matter whether you have the right kind of backstory or personal history, or the correct diagnosis, or whether you have a perfectly worked-out theory of gender that neatly aligns with and endorses your wishes. On the left, I think, we should have the general principle that people should be able to do whatever they desire, as long as it doesn't involve immiserating and disempowering others for personal gain. Certainly, there are plenty of common desires people have that don't deserve social sanction—the desire to have political or physical dominance over others, the desire to have security and comfort at the expense of others' safety, the desire to shut your ears to other people's suffering when it inconveniences you—but you actually have to strain quite a bit to come up with a reason why someone's desire to identify themselves as a particular gender, and to be acknowledged socially according to their desired identity, could be morally *wrong*. And on the left, we should also be of the belief that any large group or community should be welcoming to a person who wants to join, unless there are extremely morally compelling reasons not to be.

I can think of three potential objections that someone might raise to this proposal that we all just respect and affirm each other's gender identities and try not to overthink it. One, which is barely worth addressing since it's almost always made in 100 percent bad faith, is the concern I mentioned that some gender traditionalists and TERFs

are fond of bringing up: that having minimal criteria for accepting someone's gender identification will enable fake(?) trans people to infiltrate female-only spaces to commit sexual assault. I've most commonly heard this argument raised in the context of public bathrooms and prisons. The bathroom one has always been a big puzzler to me: what is this weird belief that people are more likely to get sexually assaulted in a public bathroom than in any other place, and why would you need to "fake" being trans to do it, given how easy it is to just sneak into most bathrooms anyway? Why do we have gender-segregated but embarrassingly open bathrooms in the first place, given that my own personal desire to take a shit in peace has zero to do with the gender identity of the bastard standing there quietly checking their face in the mirror for ten whole minutes? The prison thing is *even worse*: do these people think that sexual assault isn't already happening in prisons? Isn't the fact that people get sexually assaulted constantly in prison, irrespective of gender segregation practices, an extremely stupid argument against trans acceptance and a *very good fucking argument against packing tons of human beings into cages*?

THE SECOND OBJECTION IS THE WHAT ABOUT The Children argument, or, what do we do when young children want to transition or express their gender identity, and—in particular—want access to hormonal therapy or surgery. I acknowledge that this isn't an uncomplicated question, inasmuch as consent issues with children are always a little tricky. People often claim that children who profess to be trans are too young to know what they *really* want, too inexperienced to understand the permanent physical or psychological effects of some of the changes they may seek, and too vulnerable to being influenced by adults with ideas of their own (such as a parent who theoretically might tell the aforementioned child who likes monster trucks that, because of their preference for certain activities or aesthetics, they are probably a boy). And if we don't have a particularly fixed notion of what being trans is "supposed" to look or feel like, then it presumably becomes harder for an outsider to evaluate why a child wants to be identified in a particular way, and requires them to repose more trust in the child's own judgment. The biggest concern seems to be that a child will commit to something when they are young that will then be *irrevocable* later, and which they could come to regret. But of course, if a child wants to take puberty blockers and is prevented from doing so, then this, too, is a choice that results in irrevocable changes. And children make, or have made for them, all manner of irrevocable decisions, often involving their bodies. We all know people who did permanent damage to their bodies playing high school sports, for example, which is generally considered normal and unobjectionable. I'm not a parent, but like many people I was once a child, and I err on the side of allowing children to have as much agency over their lives as possible. A child is certainly the only person qualified to dictate what they want to be called and how they will dress. I think they should also be entitled to make other decisions involving their bodies, once they've been advised of the risks and consequences like any other person, and with some effort made to ascertain that this is a reasonably independent decision made by the child and not by an adult who wields power over the child. Certainly, some children will make decisions they regret later, or that they wish to diverge from, just as adults do. TERFs' and right-wingers' obsession with

the (seemingly rare) phenomenon of “detransitioning”—people who once identified as trans reverting to a prior gender identity—as a means of delegitimizing all people’s right to make choices about their own lives is profoundly unfair. The (much more common) existence of divorce is not, in and of itself, an argument that marriage should not exist, or even that particular people should never have been married in the first place. We make decisions, and those decisions change us; sometimes we regret the change, but that does not mean we should be barred from making decisions.

The third objection is largely a political one, and it’s this: are there conditions under which someone who wants to assert membership in a group shouldn’t be allowed to do so, because they don’t have enough shared interests or experiences in common with other members of that group, and their inclusion would be detrimental to the group in some way? This is the claim that TERFs often raise about trans women. In arguing their point, some people will bring up, as a point of comparison, the case of Rachel Dolezal, whose identification as “transracial” garnered pretty universal condemnation and ridicule. The right in particular has been fond of seizing on this as an example of left-wing hypocrisy, since many people on the left, when pressed, have had some difficulty coherently stating why it was okay to reject someone’s self-professed membership in one kind of social construct—race—and not another kind of social construct—gender. Some trans writers of color tried to tackle what, exactly, was the qualitative difference between being “transgender” and being “transracial,” with Meredith Tauluson writing in the *Guardian* that her race is an identity imposed on her by society, whereas her gender is what she “is.” I don’t want to say that this is wrong by any means—I am a white person in a white-majority country where the majority of materially and politically powerful people are also white, so I can’t meaningfully assess the experiential difference between gender identity and racial identity. I also presume that individual people’s internal conceptions of how race and gender relate to their fundamental identity might vary quite a bit. But I think the difference between these two concepts is not intuitively easy to parse.

I don’t know that I have a very firm or satisfying answer to this question, but I tend to be pretty impatient with exclusionary group identities, and with overly elaborate articulations of what constitutes group membership. (This, again, is probably related to my frustration with legalism generally.) At the same time, it’s true that when groups bound by legitimate shared grievances and material interests are flooded by people who do not share or do not fully understand those concerns, it can be hard to organize around your goals. This is likely why being “transracial” in a political context feels unworkable, to the point of feeling offensive to even propose: if a large number of people decided to identify as a minority racial group, and then began actively putting themselves forward as spokespersons of the group with reference to interests and experiences of which they have no firsthand knowledge, this obviously creates a political problem. If their interests are too different from the group’s original members, or their manner of expressing those interests is detrimental to those members in some way, then you have a problem of social erasure and political ineffectiveness. This doesn’t feel as acute in the context of gender, because, for example, a large number of the harms that women face disproportionately and would organize around—harassment, discrimination, sexual and domestic violence—are faced by both cis and trans women, so it’s not really easy to see why treating all women social-

ly as women causes a political problem. (Certainly, people who were assigned male at birth may be statistically less likely to have faced certain types of harm growing up, but trans women unfortunately catch up pretty quickly as targets of gender violence, and the rate at which trans women are murdered is even higher than cis women.) Obviously, there are some things, like pregnancy, that many cis women experience and that trans women don’t, and it would be strange to have someone who has never been pregnant and can’t become pregnant hold themselves out as an authority on the needs and experiences of pregnant people. But there are also cis women who can’t become pregnant or don’t ever intend to be, and this isn’t usually raised as a reason to exclude them entirely from the category of “women.” I don’t know that this is a perfect response, but I think excluding people from a group is only justified if you have specific, tangible, morally defensible reasons for doing so, and this is more likely to be the case with a group defined by racial identity than by gender identity.

IN THE END, IT’S NOT ESPECIALLY EASY TO TALK about gender. Our political opponents are lucky because their view of gender is extremely simplistic. Traditional views on gender are very easy to pithily expound upon if you are a person for whom gender identity does not seem complicated, who feels comfortable with how you were socialized, or are at any rate eager to project that impression to others. It’s also hard because there are so many different ways to feel wrong in your body—not just because of gender identity, but also because of trauma, unrealistic beauty standards, unconventional sexual desires, and *The General Horror Of Mortal Existence*. Several of these things can coexist at once, and sorting through which one is the primary cause of the bad feeling often feels disorienting. (Cis men and women, after all, often find it difficult or traumatizing to live up to masculine or feminine norms.) If you decide that part of the problem is that you’re being constantly judged against gendered expectations that don’t suit your personality, or a body that looks wrong for the gender you identify with more strongly, it’s still not always straightforward to decide what you want to do about it. Maybe you feel, in the end, that actually your body or your assigned identity is all right, and society’s stupid expectations just need to be drowned out more effectively; other times, it feels like it would be better to change your physical self, at least a little, maybe a lot, to match what’s going on in your head and the kind of relationship you want to have with other people.

If we’re too wedded to a particular, simplified popular theory of how to think about gender, we might think that one of these choices—to transition or not transition—is “correct” and the other is “incorrect”; but the reality is that no one is qualified to decide how to best live with their body other than the person whose consciousness is trapped inside it. Some people will choose to continue identifying as the gender they were assigned at birth, while rejecting the idea that their gender has any intrinsic meaning; other people will transition to a different gender identity that makes them feel more like themselves. I think two people who seem quite similar on the surface could make opposite choices, and perhaps be equally satisfied—insofar as it’s possible to be satisfied with anything in life, at any rate. Much of the trouble—with gender, and with many other issues—arises from judging people for the personal choices they make or the reasons they make it. ♣



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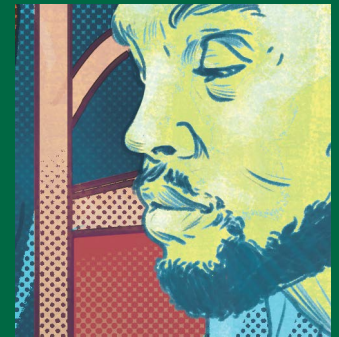
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