

People Who Pretend to be Intelligent Pretend to Read:

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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MYTHS

why you need 'em

THE SIXTIES

why they were interesting

ELEVATORS

what to do about them

VEGAS

why it's lonesome



OUR AFFAIRS ARE

THE MAGAZINE THAT KNOWS WHERE YOU LIVE (BUT WON'T TELL ANYONE). ARE YOUR AFFAIRS SAFE WITH US

ON INVERTS

This edition of *Current Affairs* features an article on the phenomenon of "incels," men whose personalities prevent them from having sex. ("Incel" is short for "involuntary celibate.") But celibacy is not all that is thrust upon us involuntarily. Consider vertebrae. They are not a choice. Hence the existence of the "invert," or involuntary vertebrate. Many of us are born envying the ant. Ants (as professional myrmecologist Benjamin D. Blanchard, PhD demonstrated in our last issue) live in socialist communities. There has never been an "ant Hayek" to advocate cutting government services in the name of individual freedom. Ants have sorted out the problem of how to live with others. It would have been nice to be an ant.

And yet most readers of this magazine are not ants. We are inverts. Involuntarily, we have been given vertebrae and instructed to walk upright. We might refuse to undertake the walking, but it is difficult to extract the vertebrae. We are stuck like this against our will. Human we are born, and human we shall die, in the absence of unprecedented medical breakthroughs in the near future.

It is easy to say to the incel that if they developed some hobbies beyond moping and gaming, they might well augment their chances of "getting some." But what does one say to the poor pitiable invert, for whom there can be no hope of transformation? "Someday, my son, your spine will be unnecessary." Unless referring to the postmortem years, the statement is a lie, and as a rule one does not lie to children unless one needs something from them. No, there are no words of comfort and reassurance to be offered the invert. They are cursed to envy the jellyfish and the flatworm from now until their expiration date.

What can we give, then, if not hope? Perhaps it will at least be consoling to remember that not every creature with a spine has been worthless. The gorilla, for instance, has made many productive contributions. If you live long enough with vertebrae you may even begin to forget they are there, until they soon malfunction and remind you. Try to live the best life possible under the conditions in which you have found yourself. It is all there is to be done. Complaint is futile. Invert you may be, but whether to be a grumpyvert is a matter of personal choice. Will you surrender yourself to your condition or transcend it?

You May Not Have An Opinion



UNTIL YOU
HAVE READ
EVERY BOOK

...and there are so, so many.

OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS
HARIBO
GUMMY CANDY RANKING

1. Alphabets 2. Fluffy Vulcans 3. Snakes 4. Sour Gold Bears 5. Sour Twin Snakes

"It's depressing that a supposedly serious political magazine makes its points by tweeting 'lol.'"

—Public intellectual Thomas "Chatterton" Williams on *Current Affairs*

GOD IS CANCELED

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Back To The Sea

The "back to the land" movement of the 60s and 70s saw thousands of young people depart America's cities for a more tranquil rural life, only to find that rural life was full of bees and manure. The generation of dreamers who packed up and headed for the countryside are to be commended for their utopianism and their willingness to conduct experiments in living. However, here in 2020, we now know how and why they made a mistake. Having grown up on land, they could only conceive of living on shore. Their horizons were too narrow. They should have gone... **BACK TO THE SEA.**

The Back to the Sea movement fixes all of the problems that caused its land-lubbing counterpart to fizzle. There are no bees in the sea. There is no manure. (It dissipates.) Sea creatures are friendlier and fairer than land mammals. Capitalism is unheard of beneath the waves.

When the crab sang of it being better where it is wetter, we all heard him. We sang along. But did we listen? No. "This is applicable only to mermaids," our parents said to us when we asked if it was feasible to stop by Atlantis and say "hullo." But think: were our parents right about anything? And since they were not, why should we have expected them to be right about this?

So it's **BACK TO THE SEA**, sisters and brothers! Back to the sea! From the sea we came and to the sea we shall return! Grow your fins and take the plunge. Everybody is doing it.



Fancy Court

This magazine has made clear that its official position is not in favor of expanding the number of Supreme Court Justices, but rather replacing the existing nine Justices with 8 cats and legendary academic & activist Cornel West. But readers have asked us to be more specific. What, they ask, will the names of the cats be? We therefore present this list of suggested names for the first eight Supreme Cats. Collectively, they will not longer be known as the Supreme Court but as the Fancy Cats.

Purgood Marshall
Lewis F. Meowell
Salmon P. Chase
Felix "the Cat" Frankfurturter

John Pawl Scratchens
Clawrence Thomas
Sandra Bay O'Pawnor
Judge Learned Paw



WE DO PUBLIC HUMILIATIONS



This owl is missing. If you see it, report it.

On Missing Animals

If you live in a city, or anywhere, you are missing at least some animals. As you go about your day-to-day life, you may encounter an animal here or there. Perhaps a pigeon is in your way. Perhaps a rat is on your subway platform. Perhaps a baby snake is in your plumbing. Perhaps you "own" a cat (in reality, the cat owns you, but is content to let you maintain the fiction). Yet for every animal you do meet, there are countless more that you do not. Remember that we share the Earth with some 8.7 million other species of fauna. They are out there, all the time, living their lives, doing their thing. And yet you do not notice them.

This is a problem. For if the animals are missing from your life, they may well also be missing from your social analysis. Think: do you afford the preferences of these animals their due value? Do you wonder what they want and make sure you are respecting their desires? Oh sure, some of them just want to eat and be eaten, but others have higher ambitions. They seek the Good Life just as you or I might, and as the more dominant species, it is a matter of noblesse oblige to make sure we are assisting them in getting it.

The animals, then, are missing. Missing from many of our worldviews. Missing from our discourse. They are here. They are all around. Let us invite them to legislate alongside us. Let us place their spirits once again at the center of our thought. Let us never again ignore our neighbors.

in memoriam

Dear editorial team,

Just had to write you and tell you of my experience. Yesterday, I received my mom's last issue of your publication. I'm receiving her mail because she died of Covid in August (as did my father, eight days later).

So when I pulled out the single sheet warning me of the subscription's end—that in at least 100pt font screams ALAS! You are EXPIRED—it caused a most healthy, several minute deep belly laugh. My sister also found hilarity, and because the family's humor came from my parents' side, my 17-, 20-, and 22-year-old appreciated the irony.

How many times could this happen? Probably not many. And will it be met with life-affirming humor?

I wouldn't change a thing!

Sincerely,
Scott Rosen



in loving memory of
Dorrie and Perry Rosen



? MAN, WE WOULDN'T TELL THE COPS A THING NO MATTER HOW MANY SUBPOENAS THEY SHOWED UP WITH.

And yet: Pascal had never become a subscrib-

As Much as he looked forward to his bimonthly dose of periodical bliss, loath as he would have been ever to skip an edition (even one with a scary spider picture in it), Pascal knew that a subscription was a gamble, and he was not a gambling man. Everyone croaks, and Pascal knew that if he subscribed in July, there was at least some chance that he would not live to see the September-October edition. To the before-of-one subscription had been added the after-of-one subscription, and he bequeathed to his sons and daughters (Pascaro, Pascarella, Pascallia, and Pascard), Pascal knew that while, in the event of his death, his children might read and enjoy the remaining issues of his magazine subscriptions, this was only a *chance*. There was also a chance that remaining issues would pile up on his porch while his corpse rotted in the drawing room, before eventually being returned to the earth by the family's dutiful attempt to displease everyone (and his mother).

As a corpse, Pascal could not easily control what happened to his magazines after his demise. Thus if he were to take out a subscription, he would be making a wager: Pascal would be betting that he would live another six issues.

Actuarially speaking, this was fine reasoning. Pascal took exercise regularly and did "cleanses," which apparently do something. He was a vigorous sixty-five, and bearded. But it could not be denied that he was old.

And yet: Pascal subscribed. He subscribed because he came to understand that the possibility of admission into heaven (i.e., reading *Current Affairs* immediately upon publication) was of such great value that it outweighed the risk that one's prediction might be wrong. Pascal wagered, and while we cannot say the same outcome would come true in all cases, for Pascal it paid off: He read his magazine for the rest of his life. The lesson: *It is rational to gamble on your subscription.*

you don't need friends when you've got
CORRECT
ARGUMENTS

You are familiar, we presume, with the silly straw. The silly straw is an ordinary plastic straw, usually in a bold color, that takes a detour on its way from the container to your mouth. A portion of the silly straw may be shaped like a rabbit, or a name (e.g., "Andrea"), or a musical instrument (usually a guitar), or simply a formless squiggle. The silly (or "crazy"/"krazy") straw is a novelty object. It exists to amuse. It compromises strict functionality in favor of frivolous delight. You drink takes longer to get to you, and requires greater effort (in units of suckage) to extract, but this is considered "worth it" for the joy of drinking through a straw shaped like a thing.

And reader, we posit that it is *indeed* worth it, that the silly straw is actually *not* silly *at all*, but illustrates a corrected philosophy of object-manufacture that should be applied consistently across industries. There is a widespread elite consensus that a product ought to be efficient in doing what it is "supposed" to do, that form should follow function. This is an error. Form should get around to serving function eventually. But form is not the mindless vaul of function. Function must never tell form what to do, as form is no lack-
 "You are the form," said the Form says, "I will lift your beverage [in this case, form is a crazy straw] but I will do it in my own good time after a loop de loop. I am not pathologically devoted to productivity. My interests are many and varied. Leisure is the equal of labor."

Function may not be too pleased by this. "Get on with your business and quit twirling about," it may bellow indignantly. But it will be to no avail. Form follows form. Form values beauty, whimsy, novelty, ornament, and the absurd.

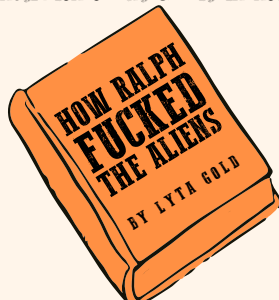
The silly straw, then, has much to
 teach us. To make a thing more
 beautiful and fun is equally
 valuable as making it more ef-
 fective in achieving its goals,
 for beauty and fun are
 non-negotiable goods.
 Let us have things that
 are less useful but
 bring more elation,
 that do not neces-
 sarily get us where
 we intended to
 go—or at least
 not quickly—
 but give us
 one hell of a
 good time
 on the
 way.

ometimes people accuse *Current Affairs* of being a magazine of "bad takes." This is a mathematical error. These critics inevitably take between 2-6 of our more than 400 takes, usually the ones from our editor-in-chief on architecture and Karl Marx, and conclude that we are Havers Of Bad Takes. In fact, even by the critics' judgment, the overwhelming majority of our takes are excellent, since most of them consist of positions like "the elimination of unnecessary human suffering is desirable" or "how about art, isn't art nice?" A person who disagreed with over 50% of *Current Affairs* takes would be a monster. Thus it is not we who have the bad takes, but you who have the bad math.



Current Affairs is pleased to announce that for 2021, we will have five full-time paid staff members, with the addition of Kate Gauthreaux, Administrative Cajun, and Nick Slater, Managing Editor. At the rate our staff are multiplying, by the year 2400 the entire population of humanity (and then some) will work for *Current Affairs*. But to continue our exponential trajectory toward global dominance, we need your support. Please consider donating and subscribing.

**We regret to announce the
cancellation of the CA tie-in novel:**



Preorders will be refunded.

THE FLAMINGO ILLUMINATION
IS WATCHING

A MESSAGE FROM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF NATHAN J. ROBINSON

The trouble is this: the universe is vast, and definitely teeming with life. (After all, how probable is it that in such a sprawling cosmos as we inhabit, the process of life-creation happens exactly once? How likely is it that you are literally the most sophisticated life form in the universe? How arrogant would it be to even contemplate such a notion?) There are aliens everywhere, but like us, they are probably only just coming awake and beginning to investigate their surroundings. We are all on the brink of finding one another. It is exciting. But it is also terrifying, for, as we know, we ourselves are bastards. If we met extraterrestrials who had dominated political and economic systems, we would probably try to conquer and exploit them. We would sell them subprime mortgages, if they were lucky. If they were unlucky, we would do to them what we do to all of the other intelligent life on our own planet, namely establish an efficient industrial system of killing and eating them.

ly as possible, so that our species can finally get started on the great task ahead. *It just makes sense.*

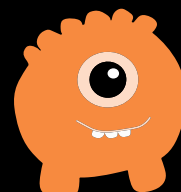
Similarly, there is no reason to think that we should die as quickly as we do. If all the resources we currently put toward finding new ways to end human lives were put toward finding ways to extend them, within a matter of decades we could substantially solve the problem of death and make lifespan a matter of choice, so that one could live for a thousand years, or two, and finally have time to read all the books and have all the various kinds of intercourse that one desires, instead of expiring just at the moment one was finally getting used to this extremely strange experience called life. But life extension, too, is immoral before the overthrow of capitalism. It means to substantially

what a joy it is when they do. Often the only consolation we have when we see our enemies prosperous and successful is the knowledge that they, too, shall pass, that everything they have will someday be snatched from them by the great equalizer, Death.

And so death must remain in place so long as it helps us keep a horifying "feudalism of mortality" from developing. It is a Necessary Evil, for the present. But once Socialism is implemented, we may turn our attentions to the discovery of functional immortality (functional because it is simply longer life, not infinite life). Then off to Outer Space we go, after a short period spent beautifying the Earth by fixing architecture and undergoing an explosion of new Culture and Thought.

Below, then, is the plan for humanity. Let us get down to it, so that those of us alive now may be part of the generation that meets the aliens and not just the generation that does the economic and moral prepwork for being able to meet the aliens without massacring them all.

1. Overthrow capitalism
2. Extend the human lifespan
3. Fix architecture
4. Visit the aliens



*the first 3 LINES of each article can be
arranged to produce a SECRET MESSAGE*



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SEIZE THE ELEVATORS

by Nicolas Kemper

AS A KID, I GREW UP ENAMORED WITH SKYSCRAPERS. Other kids followed sports teams, I followed construction photos. When I first learned how to use the internet, I used it to ogle towers. I particularly loved the early version of skyscrapercenter.com, which would array sketches of towers against elevation lines, like a police lineup. The tallest in the world at the time were the Petronas Towers (451 meters) in Kuala Lumpur, but a new tower, Taipei 101 (508 meters), was coming up quickly. I would regularly check on its construction and proudly shared with my classmates and family the precise day it took the title.

I always thought there was something inherently good—even democratic—about towers. They are, after all, the ultimate indicator of density: the taller the tower, the more people are (theoretically) living in one place. More people living together leads to more creativity, more diversity, more spontaneity, and a stronger civil society. Dense communities tend to be more liberal. Dense communities are also wildly more efficient. People travel using mass transit instead of gas-guzzling cars; they live in apartments instead of sprawling McMansions; they share parks instead of each watering and mowing their own quiet lawns. Bigger cities tend to have taller towers. Therefore, taller towers seemed like an unambiguous moral good—something to cheer along. The 9/11 attacks, which happened when I was in 7th grade, played further into this childhood moral clarity: terrorists felt threatened by tall towers. New York and America would reply by building an even taller tower! A freedom tower!

Then something weird started to happen. The next winner of the title, Burj Khalifa, was built by a city, Dubai, that was unambiguously undemocratic. At 828 meters, it was much taller than its predecessors, so much so that it still holds the title today. After that, a bunch of other towers piled into the rankings, so many that Taipei 101 is now the tenth-tallest in the world. The others include New York's Freedom Tower (541 meters) and Seoul's Lotte World Tower (554 meters), five in China, and one—a truly grotesque super-sized Big Ben knockoff that looms over the mosque at Mecca (601 meters)—in Saudi Arabia. Of the ten tallest towers currently under construction, seven are by China, and the others are by Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Slowly it dawned on me that towers and democracy may have nothing in common.

Had I grown up at just about any other time in human history, the race to build the world's tallest building would have been pretty

boring to follow. From approximately 2560 BCE until 1311 CE, the tallest manmade structure in the world was the 146.5-meter Great Pyramid of Giza. Its successor, the central spire of Lincoln Cathedral (160 meters) held the title until a storm blew it down in 1548. Its successor, St. Mary's Church in Stralsund, Germany, also lost its title—and its 151-meter tall spire—in a storm, when it burned down after a lightning strike in 1647. At a mere 142 meters (in the intervening 546 years Giza had eroded down to 140-meters), the title fell to Strasbourg Cathedral, which it held, along with its spire, until the people of Hamburg completed the spire of St. Nicholas in 1874. At 147 meters, it was only half a meter taller than Giza. Its two successors, the Cathedrals of Rouen (1876, 151 meters), and Cologne (1880, 157 meters), still did not pass Lincoln Cathedral's mark. At 169 meters, the Washington Monument, completed in 1884, just barely upped the ante.

Then, in 1889, the Eiffel Tower blew the competition open: 300 meters. The Eiffel Tower marked the beginning of 150 years of construction that witnessed not just an explosion in height, but quantity. Exceptionally tall spires and pyramids were few and far between. Towers have sprung up by the thousands. By 1913, Manhattan alone had over a thousand buildings taller than eleven stories, and fifty one above twenty-one stories.

ONE PIECE OF TECHNOLOGY MADE IT ALL POSSIBLE: the elevator. The ability to lift a platform efficiently with rope dated back to Archimedes' invention of the pulley. The issue was that, if the rope failed and you were on the platform at any height, you would probably die. Then came Elisha Otis. Otis's innovation was to invent a brake, activated automatically when the rope broke, to keep the platform from falling. At its debut at the 1853 World's Fair in New York, Otis stood on a platform piled with goods as his assistant hoisted him into the air. He then shouted for the assistant to cut the rope with an axe. The onlooking crowd was in shock, but the brake worked: Otis had fallen only a few inches, crying, "All safe, gentlemen!" Innovations like cheap and reliable steel (another Victorian invention) would also play a major role in the tower boom to come—but the elevator itself was indispensable.

There were, of course, multi-story buildings before the elevator. Not only did the Romans build apartment blocks up to nine stories tall—*insulae*—they in fact constituted the majority of housing in

ancient Rome (45,000 insulae versus 2,000 single family homes—*domus*). Stairs were, however, a major inconvenience; therefore, the value of property declined rapidly with height. The same rule held right up until the 19th century. In the apartment blocks of Vienna and Haussmann's Paris, for instance, the most expensive apartments were on the first floor, and the servants lived on top. Anything higher than seven stories was an exclamation mark—symbolically potent but practically useless. (Similarly in North Korea today, the top floors of high-rise apartment buildings are infamously undesirable, because when the elevator is unreliable in a 40-floor building, no glorious penthouse view can make up for the climb.) Therefore, the tallest buildings tended to be spires and monuments, whose narrow pinnacles were accessed by narrow staircases. By contrast, the Eiffel Tower had two generous restaurants and an observation deck, supplied with food and visitors by double-decker elevators that could carry up to 100 passengers at a time. Unlike in Haussmann's apartment blocks, not only did people want to go to the top, they would pay for it. When it opened, more than 7 million people ascended the Eiffel Tower in its first year.

A vertical transportation system that the public could trust and even enjoy, the elevator allowed the city to expand upwards. Property holders could sell plots of sky to the public. They could take a single flat surface and grab another ten or twenty or fifty plots of similar or even superior value out of thin air. Towers were still potent symbols, but they were also valuable real estate. As Cass Gilbert wrote in 1900, a skyscraper is "A machine that makes the land pay."

CITIES, HOWEVER, ARE NOT MERELY INTERIORS—not floor and walls and roofs, not merely buildings and the shelter they provide. The most important part of a city, in fact, may not be the built part, but rather the parts left empty: the streets.

Streets are surprisingly easy to ignore or overlook. They are like anti-monuments: where presence and permanence mark monuments, absence and impermanence define streets. As architectural historian Joseph Rykwert points out in his 1978 essay "The Street: The Use of its History," the street straddles two identities. One of them is *the commons*. The word "street" itself—along with the German *Strasse* and Italian *Strada*—comes from the Latin *sternere*, to pave, suggesting a surface "set apart for public use." It does not necessarily go anywhere. It is simply space that is available for walking, sitting, markets, parades, and protests. In this conception, insofar as a street provides a route—that is, allows access to other places—that is only to render the street itself accessible. The street's other identity, Rykwert argues, is *movement*, bound up in the word "road," which comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "ride" which in turn comes from the old English "ridan." The street is where you go, the road is how you get there. Road suggests motion. It suggests a network of city roads, connecting to country roads, connecting to other cities, coasts, and eventually ports and the world. In some ways these two different identities are in direct conflict with one another. A street would be the site for a sidewalk café, a fruit stand, a block party, or even a carnival. All of these functions would make it less useful for anyone trying to get somewhere—trying to use the space as a road—as anyone who has, say, tried to drive a car in Manhattan will readily testify. Yet one is clearly not possible without the other. A market is profitable, a protest is powerful, a block party is inclusive, each in direct proportion to its accessibility. The right to gather is only useful if coupled with the right to go.

Often a planner will come along and start treating streets as only

one or the other, with disastrous consequences. In the sixties, planners focused on congestion, the hindrance of movement. They privileged the needs of cars to get from place to place quickly, making streets wider, one way, full of underpasses and overpasses, and generally much less pleasant to spend time on. They watched, with surprise, as the neighborhoods around these newly optimized roadstreets withered up and died. At the same time, architects decided the space around buildings would be much more pleasant if it were covered in grass and trees, creating "towers in the park" that could no longer support the retail and civil society that relied on ready access to the street—with its crowds, utility hookups, and delivery trucks—to nourish them.

So vital to the city are streets, that in fact the street likely predated the city. Rykwert points out that humans were establishing streets before they started constructing permanent buildings. As a practical matter, people were moving stuff before they were building stuff: there is archaeological evidence of established trade routes across Europe that predates the establishment of permanent settlements. As a psychological matter, societies will establish routes for ceremonial, almost narrative purposes before they build permanent structures. Rykwert cites as an example elaborately marked routes in otherwise uninhabited territory made by aboriginal tribes in New South Wales for initiation ceremonies. Today we could cite the plan of Burning Man: it is a plan of streets, their composition highly symbolic, so as to structure a ritual. The participants, with their structures, flock to participate in the ritual. That is to say, streets are not methods by which to get from one building to another. To the contrary, buildings are ways for people to be closer to streets.

Today, there is also an empirical argument emerging that people are in fact healthier when they are closer to a street. Being far away from a street can even be deadly. If, say, you have a cardiac arrest, the higher you are, the longer it will take for paramedics to come to the rescue. A 2016 study of eight thousand adults who had cardiac arrests in their homes showed that 4.2% of patients below the third floor survived, which decreased to less than 1% of those who lived above the sixteenth floor. Above the twenty-fifth? Zero percent. In a broader sense, proponents of biophilia, such as the researcher and architect Vivian Loftness, argue that people are healthier and happier when they are closer to the street—or, to use her preferred term, the ground plane. The kernel of her argument is the important role the ground plane plays in keeping us connected—to nature, to changing temperatures, to the seasons, to other people, and to society. These connections matter. Something as simple as a view has quantifiable consequences. "Research is showing the importance of views," said Loftness in an interview with me in 2018, "to health outcomes in hospitals...to students' ability to concentrate in classrooms...[and] for office productivity." Loftness argues that we should stop building high rises altogether, pointing out that Paris—with its 7-story height limit—actually has a higher density than Shanghai, with its cluster of towers on the world's tallest list. According to her, Paris has 40% more density of occupants per square kilometer and 80% more passive survivability, should the power go out. As she said in a panel I organized with her last fall, the ground plane is the "tissue of the city with the greatest amount of environmental and social connectivity."

It is hard to know what the ideal ratio of streets to buildings is, but in thriving cities, it is surprisingly high. Architect Alejandro Aravena, via a series of sketches that he contributed to the 2018 Venice Biennale, argued that a vibrant city arises out of the juxtaposition of public and private space. Aravena put the ratio at 50-50, and point-



PHOTOS: (in order of appearance) 1. Hammetschwand Elevator, Switzerland, the highest elevator in Europe, opened in 1905. Wikimedia. 2. Elevador Lacerda, historic Art Deco elevator, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Alamy. 3. Art Nouveau tenement house elevator, Vienna, Austria. Alamy. 4. Glass elevator, Mumbai. Alamy.

ed as an example to Manhattan, demonstrating that 50% of the island is public space: parks, squares, and above all streets. Insofar as a healthy city filled with healthy people depends on a balance between streets and buildings, a city's increasing three-dimensionality disrupts that balance—with every new tower, the ratio skews ever further towards private. The city becomes ever less vibrant. Just imagine towers all laid on their side—what would you have? Cul-de-sacs, the 30th floor of one impossibly far from the street, not to mention from the 30th floor of its neighbor. The proliferation of in-tower resident only amenities—such as food courts, gyms, swimming pools, even private rooftop parks—is one indicator that this ratio is out of whack. People go up into their towers and they never need to come out. The tower is a gated community just as surely as a walled suburban neighborhood is. It does not just privatize the commons but takes them indoors.

ARE TOWERS DEMOCRATIC? HERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES are not promising. Certainly in America our democratic tradition long predates our towers, a fact that did not go unobserved on their arrival. In her book “Form Follows Finance,” the historian Carol Willis, director of New York’s Skyscraper Museum, points out there is a tradition of equating skyscrapers with corporate clout. Social historian Oliver Zunz called them “Vertical expressions of corporate power.” Cultural historians

Thomas Bender and William Taylor pitted “civic horizontalism” against “corporate verticality.” Joe Feagin and Robert Parker, the Marxist social scientists, theorized that skylines reflected the consolidation of business and therefore the “rise of oligopoly capitalism.” Willis points out that in fact most towers are not built and owned by gigantic corporations, but are speculative buildings, erected by investors with primarily small businesses for tenants. That said, regardless of who built or occupies them, the existence of towers at all seems problematic. In general, you can only build so many gated communities before it starts to distort society. I have not done a survey of all tower builders, and I am sure there are many good people among them, but perhaps it also bears pointing out that Donald Trump and Jared Kushner both made their livelihoods on the building and buying of towers. There may be a reason more egalitarian countries, like Germany and France, are remarkably tower-free. There may also be a reason so many authoritarian societies are so keen—and able—to build towers. They play to big egos, but there are also practical considerations: to build them you need to be able to first start with a huge bucket of money (or power), second be able to assemble a large piece of property, and third, be able to override the objections of all the people who will literally now be living in your shadow. Once you have towers, you have all these people living and working hundreds of feet removed from the street—from society.

It breeds alienation.

The elevator has been the crucial player in the rise of towers and this move away from the street. No longer an oddity, the elevator is today one of the safest, most efficient forms of transport. There are (or were, before the pandemic) thirty million elevator trips a day in New York alone. Elevators even offer some lessons that could improve other forms of mass transit. No one pays for a ticket to ride—the rent on the tower covers the operating cost of the elevator. In the same way, taxes on the adjoining real estate should pay for transit's operating costs.

exists on ground level. Public elevators could come in three stages. In the first, cities use eminent domain to seize strategic elevators as well as floors along aerial corridors, to create streets and parks between them. In the second, cities use zoning to mandate that new towers include public elevators and put aside floors for the aerial corridors. In the last, cities do away with new towers altogether: as it would lay out streets for a new neighborhood, the public builds its own elevators, fire stairs, structural cores, and the links between them, and then sells parcels adjacent to those links—lots in the sky.

MOUNTAINS BUILT BY THE PEOPLE SHOULD BELONG TO THE PEOPLE.

Yet elevators are also almost exclusively privately held. That is not unusual for new forms of transportation—New York's original subway lines were built out by private investors, as were its commuter lines. Most of the original suburbs in my hometown of Kansas City were built in conjunction with privately developed streetcar lines. The technology, however, has long since become mature and developed. There is no justification for continuing to sanction private monopolies on the vertical realm: we are ready for the public elevator. We need to rethink how people move about the city, and imagine a network of connected elevators and corridors that can be freely passed through by all: the vertical counterpart to the subway.

The "public elevator" is not just an elevator that is operated and owned by the city—like the 1,200 elevators operated by the New York City Housing Authority—but instead an elevator and adjoining circulation as accessible and therefore as useful to the public as a street. An ideal public elevator would be visible—not stowed in the middle of a building—to make it easier to understand where it goes and therefore to use it. The public elevator would connect directly to the existing streets and other forms of public transit. Finally, the public elevator would connect to other public elevators. Integral to the concept of a public elevator, therefore, is the aerial corridor—that there be public right-of-ways, every five or seven stories, that connect between elevators, extending the public realm into the air. The tower must no longer be the place where the public life stops.

The idea of streets in the sky is almost as old as the tower. In a 1925 interview with *Popular Science*, the American skyscraper architect Harvey Wiley Corbett envisioned a multi-level city: one for trains, two for cars (fast and slow), one for pedestrians, and finally parks on the roofs (alongside the blimp landing fields). Today cities such as Bangkok, Minneapolis and Hong Kong have realized part of that vision, with extensive pedestrian skyway systems that dart in and out of towers. Corbett's vision and these skyways, however, weaken the street by unbundling it—by separating a city's cars from its people from its parks, they dilute the civic alchemy that happens when these quantities must co-exist. Like the traffic engineers of the 60s, skyways fixate on solving issues of congestion, rather than extending and strengthening the commons.

An elevator is admittedly more road than street—it is not a space where you set up a stall or linger over a coffee (or at least, *not yet*). But we cannot have "streets in the sky," i.e. public space above the first floor, without the same kind of universal access infrastructure that today

AS WITH STREETS, PUBLIC ELEVATORS AND AERIAL CORRIDORS would—and must—therefore serve many purposes. They must have vehicles, pipes, cables, structural beams, even trains. They would make cities safer. A typical tower is only required to have two means of egress in case of fire. A thicket of interlinked elevators and fire stairs would create tens and possibly hundreds of paths of egress. Public elevators would have structural benefits, too. The primary force governing the height of a tower and amount of steel going into it is horizontal: the wind. The best way to guarantee more horizontal strength is to make a structure deeper. A thicket of interlinked elevators would have extraordinary structural depth. That means a city of interlinked public elevators would in fact be able to be much taller. (The "individualism" of skyscrapers makes them weaker. Connected structures are stronger, a fact that is true both socially and architecturally.)

Public elevators would level the playing field for would-be builders. Take the example of townhouses in Manhattan. As the elevator became commonplace and the possibility of extrusion drove up the price of land, townhouses became impossibly expensive. From 1889 to 1892, builders filed plans for 700 "first class" houses in Manhattan, to be sold for \$25,000 each. By 1900 only 100 plans were filed, to be sold for \$100,000 each. By 1902, the critic Herbert Croly wrote, "It is an extraordinary fact that at the present day, there is practically only one class of private dwelling erected on the island of Manhattan—the dwelling intended for comparatively rich people."

Today, because they need to pay for the elevator and structural and mechanical core as well as the building, new builders must muster enormous sums of capital in order to build in Manhattan. The ring of people who can build is therefore exceedingly small. As measured by construction permits, New York has 4,341 active construction projects as of September 27 of 2020. Their average cost comes in at \$6.1 million. For the 362 buildings under construction on the island of Manhattan, that goes up to \$27 million. Their average size is 182,320 square feet. That is to say, in order to build in Manhattan, a developer needs to have access to tens of millions of dollars. There was a time in Manhattan, soon after the introduction of its grid, when there were thousands of plots on which even first-generation immigrants could build something. Interlinked public elevators would create a new grid, offering thousands of sites, 2-10 stories, on which someone with even a small amount of capital could build.

As a matter of principle, public elevators would bring the public and private realm back into balance. In public space, society generally





maximizes positive freedom. (In fact, the classic definition of positive freedom uses a street: by establishing agreed upon rules which constrain the freedom of all to drive wherever they please, society maximizes the freedom of each to drive much further.) In private space, it maximizes negative freedom. (The prevention of other people's intrusion, through the right to physically exclude.) A street is the right of way; a lot is the right to stay. Purely public life is a Panopticon. Purely private space is feudalistic. Either by itself is pretty boring. The key is to juxtapose the two. Loftness uses the term porosity: "The indoor realm should flow into the outdoor realm through thicker facades that engage the street and nature." A better balance of public and private maximizes freedom for all.

The authority to take such control of the sky has already been exercised by most cities. In New York, the conflict between streets and towers became obvious pretty quickly. Early towers, like the Singer Building and Woolworth Building, were built as symbols of the corporations that erected them, and therefore had spire-like qualities, stepping slenderly into the sky. Pretty soon, however, investors caught on to the numbers game, and in 1913 the Equitable Building—a speculative development—shot up. A 200-foot-long cliff, looming 542 feet tall, with no setbacks, it housed 48 elevators that provided quick access to an area thirty times the size of its original lot, turning the adjacent streets into dark canyons. New York's 1916 zoning code struck back, capping a tower's maximum "floor to area ratio" (FAR) and forcing them to step back as they went up to allow light and air onto the streets, creating "wedding cake" towers. Yet even though the city effectively seized control of the sky, turning New York's skyline into an inverted map of gigantic funnel-like voids radiating from each of its streets, they did not take the next step: using their control of the sky to create additional public space.

There are two possibilities for why the zoning did not go further. One is innocent: that the zoning law was made primarily to protect the quality and nature of New York's streets, rather than the quality and nature of New York's buildings. The second reason is less innocent: the 1916 ordinance was not just about protecting the streets, but also other property holders. New towers that increase the quantity of available space while negatively impacting the quality of its neighbors' light and views are bad for the neighbors. The Equitable Building stole light—and tenants—from those around it.

PUBLIC ELEVATORS WOULD UNLOCK THIS PASSIVE monopoly, allowing the city to grow organically where it needs to grow. Instead, however, of building phallic monoliths, cities would grow up incrementally—elevators lengthened as need be, thousands of unique and individual structures hanging from their connecting latticework. The figural part of the city would not be the structure, which would be so broken up into small parts as to become like a fabric, but instead carefully planned voids, to guarantee light, air, and views for all. Instead of a few developers building towers, the city, as a whole—and as thousands of individual actors—would be building a mountain.

Finally, public elevators would make cities more beautiful. Density has its merits. Density conserves resources. Density kindles a more pluralistic and diverse society. Density ignites and nurtures innovation. Vertical density can be a glorious thing: cities become canyons and valleys, ridges and mountains. But real canyons, valleys, ridges and mountains belong to the people. So why is it when people build them, they belong to the few? Mountains built by the people should belong to the people. ✦

URANÉAL

THE NEW URANIUM-INFUSED SKIN CARE RANGE



GET THE GLOW



under the INFLUENCE

by Adenike Fapohunda

PICTURE THIS. YOU'RE SCROLLING LATE AT NIGHT through your Instagram recommended feed, when a perfectly curated picture catches your eye. You open up the profile. You're intrigued. Maybe it's a perceived similarity between you and the person in front of you, maybe you want to dress like them, maybe you both share a niche interest in vintage Russian babushka dolls. Soon enough, you're looking at pictures from 2017, and then you follow them.

Their pictures pop up on your timeline, and then you're commenting. If they have a YouTube channel, you've subscribed. All this time, you're watching. Consuming.

All of a sudden, you feel a sense of fondness. You might start referring to them by their first name instead of their username. You know what they ate last night—in fact, you helped them choose between Uber Eats and a home cooked meal. They confided in you the last time they had a really bad day. All this happened without you meeting them.

One day, they tell you a story about how much their dog, Bubbles, means to them. They may even list at length the memories they have with Bubbles; it all sounds really sincere. Heck, you're even struck by what a cute dog Bubbles is. Sentence after sentence, they draw you in. When you get to the end you see it, because it's always there: "that's why I feed my dog Nom-Noms (#ad)". You press "like" and don't think about it too much.

One day, you go to the supermarket and lo and behold, there's Nom-Noms right there on the shelf. You think of your favorite influencer. You think about your dog. You love your dog! He deserves the best. So even though Nom-Noms is \$5 more expensive than the brand you normally buy, you put it in your cart. That's what any responsible dog owner would do—and after all you are nothing if not a responsible dog owner, much like your new internet friend.

In the months following this, you become an avid follower. You consume posts about the type of clothes you should be wearing,

your toothpaste, your shoes, and all the while you start to regard this person as someone you know. You trust their judgement. After all, they haven't led you astray yet.

Almost a real friend—almost—and yet after all this time you've never met them. But this minor bump in the road hasn't stopped you from absorbing all this information about them, as well as supporting them financially. All because you felt a deeply seated tenderness for them—a person who doesn't know you exist.

This phenomenon is called a parasocial relationship, a one-sided relationship where one party extends emotional energy, interest, and time while the other stays blissfully unaware of their existence. This term was coined by psychologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in a 1956 study, which concluded that people who consumed mass media such as radio, television, and movies developed feelings of intimacy towards performers which were analogous to the feelings they had for people they knew in real life.

A person in a parasocial relationship may feel like they really know the person on the other end, without meeting them; they might be as attached as one would be to a close friend or a family member. The information that the person on the giving end of the relationship shares is a reinforcement of that bond, and as the amount of information increases, so does the intimate bond between the person consuming and the person giving. Most relationships are based on reciprocity, but for people in parasocial relationships, attempts to reach out to the objects of their affection are enough.

Don't feel bad—we've all been there. For me, my first parasocial relationship took the form of a mild obsession with Justin Bieber, which resulted in my parents forking out sizable amounts of money to sustain our (as I would have put it at 13) "relationship."

Technological advances in social media have revolutionized the manner in which we stay up to date with people we do not know. Even the average Joe can overload their followers with an unprecedented amount of personal information. This overload of interactions has led to an increase in the frequency and

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intensity of parasocial relationships, with more people than ever believing that their relationships with the people they follow are real. A 2017 study showed that 61 percent of adolescents saw their favorite media personalities in the same way they saw relationship partners. Not only has the internet created new routes to getting famous, but the effect of the internet on how we consume traditional media (such as music, movies, and TV) has made it much easier to develop parasocial relationships to celebrities from those worlds, and made those parasocial relationships even more intense. The intimacy we share with our favorite influencers is something that Horton and Wohl could have only dreamed of.

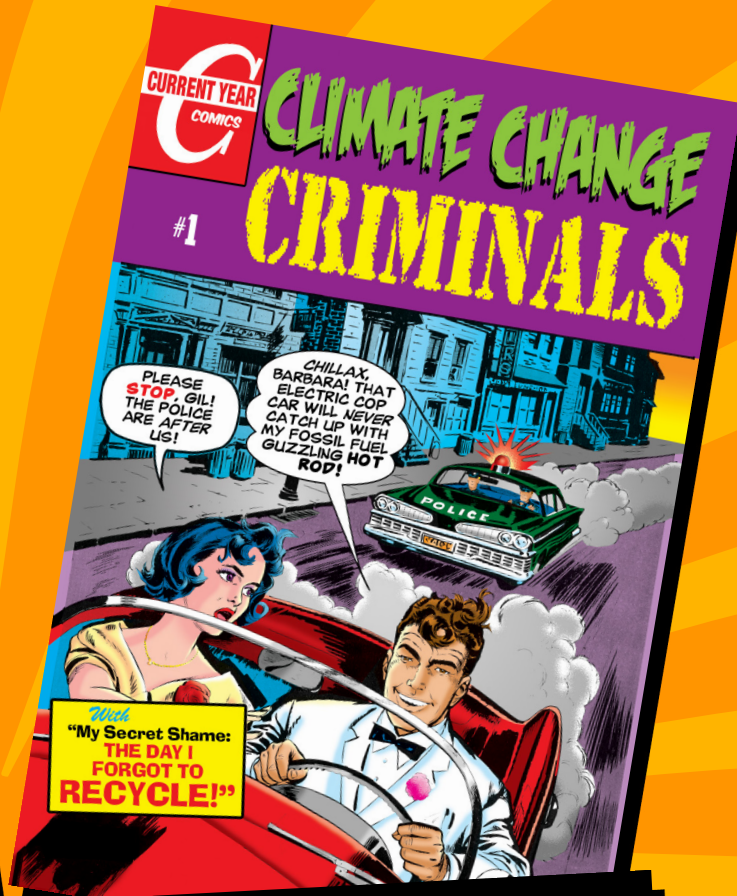
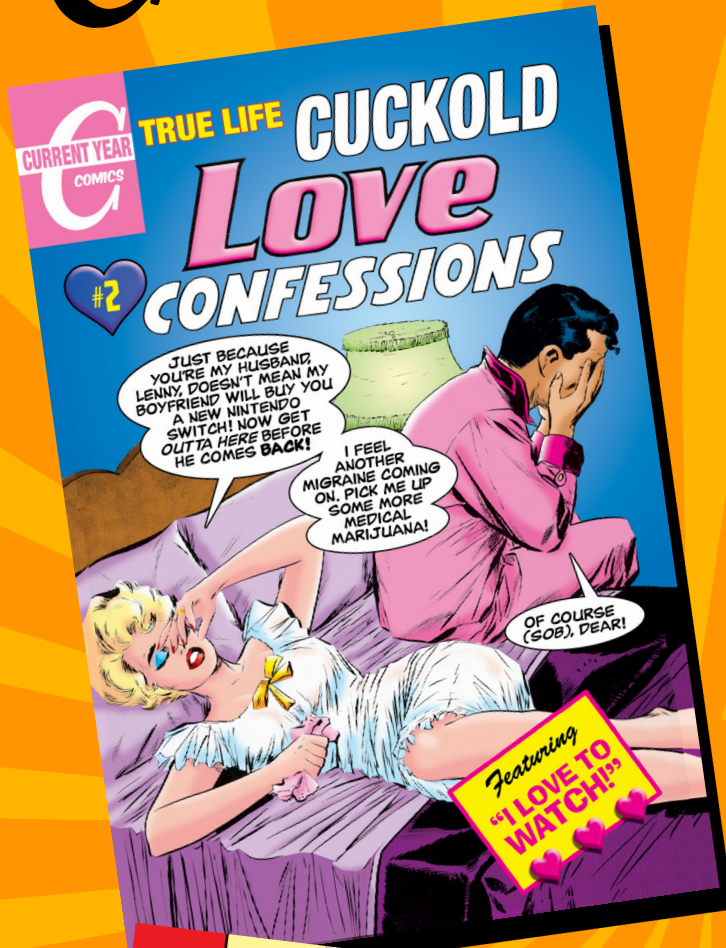
WHEN WE LOOK AT THE defining parasocial relationships of the last 70 years, it seems that they were heavily orchestrated by P.R. teams to create an intended reaction: Beatlemania, for example, was a result of a very purposeful type of marketing. However, relationships built with influencers are more organic. When Tati Westbrook and James Charles—two of the most popular makeup “gurus” on YouTube—picked a fight with each other in The Great Vitamin Scandal of 2019, their fans picked up their weapons and marched to the battleground of YouTube comments and Twitter mentions, in a battle that raged for over a year and was fought between millions of people on both sides. These fans did so because they believed that they knew, in essence, who these people were.

Influencers are supposedly different from traditional celebrities, in that our attachment to them is not based on their perceived superiority, but in their similarity to us. They trigger our *homophily*, our tendency to create social ties with people who remind us of us. If I were a fan of Beyoncé, perhaps I could say that I like her because she is an extremely talented singer and a marvellous performer, but I don’t necessarily compose my Instagram following based on talent. I follow people because they like the same clothes I do, have the same interests in ar-

tisanal bread and so forth. It makes no difference to me what Beyoncé’s favorite foods are or what she does on weekends, because Beyoncé’s impact on my life isn’t dependent on her sharing those characteristics with me.

Furthermore, there is always a clear distance between me and a traditional celebrity. Beyoncé’s music might hum through the corridors of my house when I am cleaning on a Sunday morning, but she’s not triggering my emotive responses by posting videos of herself doing “catch ups” and filling me in with what’s happening in her life. Although I might be willing to pay a lot of money to see her get ready or do a mukbang with me, I will sadly never have that opportunity. Of course, celebrities have also started to lean into the world of influencing. Developments like Naomi Campbell’s YouTube channel have blurred the lines between influencing and celebrity. There are also countless examples of celebrities doing things that influencers have traditionally done, such as *Harper’s Bazaar*’s series of celebrity skincare routines. The difference is that even today, traditional celebrities by and large do not foster intimate relationships with their fans in the same way influencers do. There is a feeling that influencers are more “authentic,” because they do not have large P.R. and marketing teams that sell them, and because of their seemingly earnest relationships with their fans.

Influencers have erased the metaphorical fourth wall. By sharing so many of what we presume to be their most intimate moments, we are brought into the fold of their personal lives, resulting in our relationships with influencers being more intense than they would be with regular celebrities. There is an obvious distinction to be made between people who watched David Dobrik and Liza Koshy’s break up video, and those who read about the torrid details of Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake’s breakup in *People* magazine. While Britney and Justin did not choose to share the details of their breakup, and most of the information the public received was trickled down through the tabloids, fans’ commitment to Koshy and Do-



brik was fostered by their choice to share their cherished moments in a culmination of videos, posts and vlogs. Their breakup video was just an extension of this behavior, with them laying out their emotions in a seemingly unedited confessional in which they shared their feelings directly with their fans.

The combination of homophily and constant interaction (albeit one-way) creates a profound relationship between the influencer and their followers. Influencers use this to promote certain behavioral outcomes, such as getting followers to comment on pictures or subscribe to their YouTube channel. Sometimes, this ability can get a little out of hand.

Take the case of online gaming personality Bachir Boumaaza, also known as “Athene.” In 2011, Boumaaza became interested in philosophy and physics, eventually releasing a series of videos that dived into consciousness and the meaning of life. This included one called “Athene’s theory of everything” that would eventually become the foundation for a religion that he coined “Neuro-Spinozism,” or “Athenism,” a belief system which Boumaaza claimed could cure depression (though he later recanted this claim).

25 of Boumaaza’s fans ended up abandoning their lives and moving to Athene’s compound to live with him and work for free, in hopes of actualizing their belief in a better world by practicing Athenism. The results seemed impressive at first: the group started a fundraising initiative called Gaming for Good, which eventually raised more than \$25 million for the charity Save The Children.

However, when escapees of the compound spoke candidly about their experiences living with Boumaaza, they attested to the normalization of manipulation, misogyny, and emotional abuse in the group, which many have labelled a cult. The fact that the underlying relationships that led to the formation of the cult were fostered on social media is a cause for concern, and brings questions about dependency to the fore.

Some theorists have attempted to use Mark Granovetter’s idea of “tie strength” to explain why influencer-follower relationships can seem so real. Granovetter argues that the strength of a relationship is dependent on four “ties”: amount of time, intimacy, intensity, and reciprocal services. If we apply those four factors to relationships with online personas, it’s not hard to see how someone could be easily convinced that they knew their favorite vlogger, after spending innumerable hours consuming information about them, watching videos in which they may be expressing intense emotions, commenting on such videos, and maybe occasionally receiving a like or personalised discount voucher in response.

Breeding parasocial relationships with your followers is also extremely profitable. A phenomenon called “satisfishing,” in which influencers share their personal struggles, thus further deepening the emotional connection between them and their followers, results in substantial increases in social media engagement. When influencers share information that makes them seem vulnerable, such as details of their mental health struggles, they end up with 7 - 10 times their

usual engagement, according to influencer marketing firm Captiv8.

Advertising for large-scale multinational businesses such as Fashion Nova, Missguided and Pretty Little Thing is now almost completely online, with traditional fashion retailers also migrating online, and parasocial relationships play an integral role in establishing the success of these advertising strategies. A recent study found that 82 percent of people are more receptive to product recommendations if they come from someone they know—and these days, a lot of people consider influencers to be in that category. This brings into question the manner in which the language surrounding influencer marketing is designed to feel more organic: words such as *content* instead of *ad*, framing personalized discount vouchers as “help” instead of promotion, referring to board rooms of marketing executives as “family,” and stressing the alignment of big corporations with “personal values” all contribute to the smoke screen of what is essentially a well thought out marketing strategy.

With over 15 million Instagram followers, Fashion Nova is Instagram’s top-performing fashion brand. They have earned this title by posting every 30 minutes, and by frequently teaming up with influencers, either by sending them free clothes or paying for posts.

Influencer marketing allows brands to disguise the nature of their relationship with their target market. Fashion Nova and Missguided gain more credibility through our online friends, who have become the face of the business. We are exposed to them and interact with them through sponsored posts, or even through “try on” videos, essentially advertisements for their products disguised as entertainment.

AT THIS POINT, I CAN IMAGINE SOME DETRACTORS saying that none of this is inherently harmful; that influencers, much like everyone else who works for a living, are just cogs in the system. However, the fact that influencers are largely responsible for the marketing of fast-fashion clothing lines means that they have led a huge amount of people to buy excessive amounts of clothes that were largely made in exploitative conditions.

Take for example online retail giant Boohoo. Despite being in the midst of a large scandal that brought to light its atrocious labor practices, its sales have recently surged. This was achieved through a curated marketing strategy that ramped up online advertising at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (and coincidentally around the same time as the labor scandal). To the influencers who continue to work “in collaboration” with Boohoo, it seemingly doesn’t matter that workers are being exploited at Boohoo’s garment factories. Even further from their minds is the fuelling of an environmental crisis by the promotion of fast fashion—an industry that uses 80 billion cubic meters of freshwater and produces 92 million tonnes of waste per year.

Obviously, influencers are not solely to blame for the environmental impacts of an industry that benefits from the legacy of colonialism and exploitation in the global south. But we have to ac-

knowledge that their content plays an important part in getting the clothes out of storage rooms and onto our backs.

Furthermore, by aligning themselves with companies whose net damage to the planet and its people is incalculable, influencers allow brands to sanitize their reputations even when they appear to be pushing back. For example, beauty guru Jackie Aina asked companies that she had worked with, including Fashion Nova, to “open their purses” and donate to the various organizations that raised funds for the Black Lives Matter movement. Aina followed this up by urging these companies to release their diversity reports. This is all well and good, but as the writer Lola Olufemi so eloquently put it, Fashion Nova does not exist in the world we seek to build. The representation of Black and minority Americans cannot be done off the backs of women in the developing world (and in garment factories in the United States, too) who get paid below living wage to make clothes that get sold at highly discounted rates. Even as Jackie Aina was posting about workplace diversity, Fashion Nova was ruining the lives of its garment workers, many of whom reported being suddenly fired in the middle of the pandemic.

Aina argued that these businesses benefit so much from Black culture that it would be morally wrong not to contribute to the movement. However, by arguing that it would be *enough* for Fashion Nova to give money to the Black Lives Matter movement, when the clothes that businesses like them dump into Western countries affect Black people in Africa, Aina allowed Fashion Nova to white-wash their commitment to the movement while still maintaining their position as an oppressive capitalist entity.

INFLUENCERS DO NOT JUST AFFECT OUR CONSUMER behavior. In recent times, there has been a push for them to engage meaningfully with social causes. This is embodied in the uptick of posts asking for justice for Breonna Taylor, which have been positioned at the bottom of selfies, sandwiched in between posts of an otherwise perfectly curated feed and placed above ads. This phenomenon has been critiqued as memification and commodification of her death.

The gruesome killing of Breonna Taylor resulted in something that Jude Casimir calls the “grief industrial complex,” which saw the publicization of her murder and the calls for justice thereafter turned into snappy Instagram captions and used to direct traffic to people’s online stores. The worst example of this was the Breonna-Con, “a 4 day women’s empowerment event hosted by influencers that focused on ‘beauty, money, and justice’ as a way of honoring Breonna Taylor’s legacy.”

It’s not all bad. Influencers with large followings have at least in part attempted to engage in mass voter education in America, providing a platform for their followers to learn about the importance of voting and where both candidates stand on important policy issues. If people will buy things because of the enormous amount of influence these figures have, it is likely that their posts can also lead to large amounts of people fulfilling their civic duties. I am, how-

ever, not convinced that the mesh of parasocial relationships and political issues will necessarily have a good outcome.

Some might argue that influencers have already played an important political role by democratizing the beauty industry. The fact that the act of following someone is largely dictated by a sense of relatability has had the inevitable effect of changing the definition of beauty, which for the first time in modern history has been expanded to include women who wear hijabs, and are disabled, dark-skinned, and fat. It seems that on Instagram or YouTube, with enough followers, anyone can be beautiful.

The problem is that to be beautiful, you must pay the metaphorical entrance fee. To be beautiful is not about one’s humanity or dignity, but rather something that can be purchased from a makeup company with an inclusive amount of foundation shades. In this way, no one with purchasing capacity can be excluded from this egalitarian desirability. Beauty is no longer something that is out of reach and unattainable—it becomes tangible in the feeling you get when you open a new eyeshadow palette. The democratization of beauty through wider representation leads us to believe it is a salvageable concept, one that is truly inclusive, without fixing the ways in which a “lack of” beauty affects the people who are excluded from this definition, or who simply don’t want to buy the right eyeshadow, or any eyeshadow at all. Representation in beauty then loses its socio-political importance, and becomes simply another tool for boosting sales.

THE QUESTION THEN BECOMES HOW TO MITIGATE the negative effects of parasocial relationships. While it is tempting to say that influencers should simply make their relationship with their fans seem less personal, this would probably defeat the whole point of “influencers” in the first place. It would be unfair not to acknowledge that influencers make a living from expressing deeply personal parts of their lives in their jobs, and some influencers would simply not be able to pay their bills if they obscured their faces or refused to share personal information. It would also be unfair to pretend that influencers have been the only people to benefit from these relationships. People like Oprah Winfrey and Justin Bieber are living embodiments of the benefits of the love and enjoyment people get from their one-way relationships with famous people.

However, there has to be an awareness by influencers that it is harmful and predatory to manipulate the emotions of your (often lonely) followers for financial gain. On the other hand, viewers have a responsibility to be aware of the media that they consume and the effects thereof. It is not enough to blame influencer culture for our continued support of businesses that contribute to large-scale societal harm. It seems that parasocial relationships will, for the foreseeable future, constitute a large part of how we associate with people online. For those of us who are viewers and consumers, the responsibility, in part, lies with us. We must look beyond the allure of likability, and pay attention to what we are being sold. ✚

Scandals threaten the fledgling administration.

Mr. President, I'm afraid we have a problem.

Dammit Corvin, there's always a problem!

I WISH SOMEONE
WOULD'VE TOLD
ME THAT BEFORE
I TOOK THIS JOB!

WELL, LET'S
TAKE A WALK
N' SQUAWK.

Only President Brakirinkiz has the experience,
the savvy, and the lustrous chest plumage to
soothe the nation in this time of crisis.

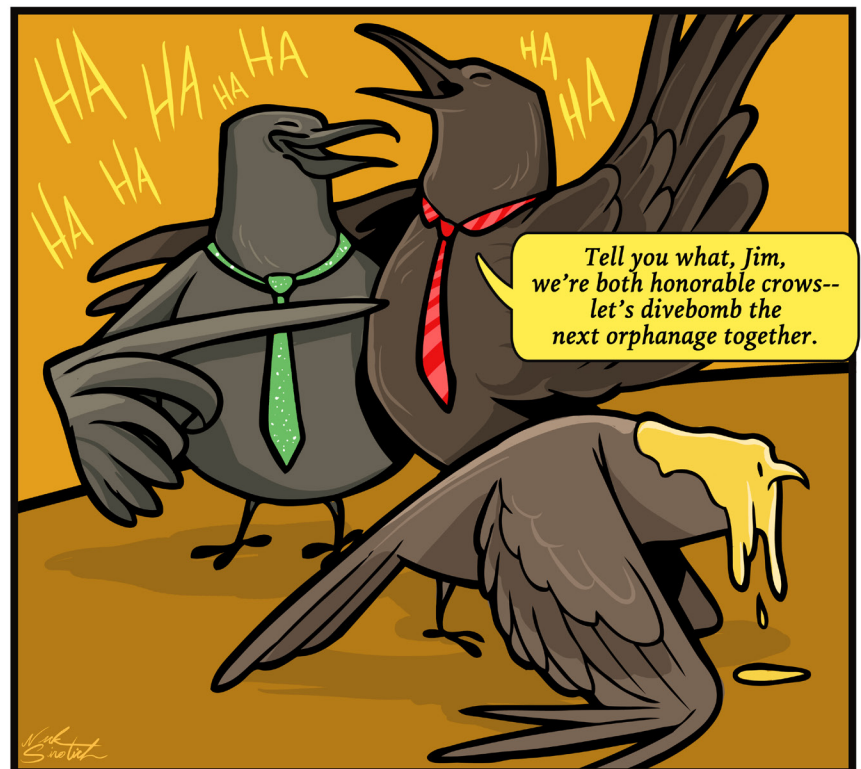
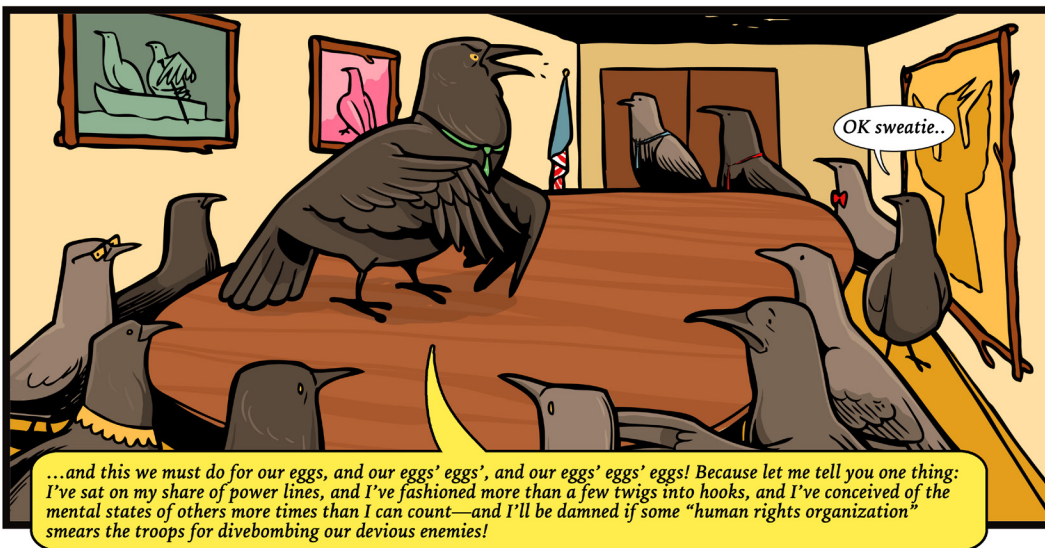
The polls, sir—have you seen these? Ever since
we accidentally divebombed that orphanage...
Mr. President, the numbers don't look good.

THE
NEST WING
by AARON SQUAWKIN

THAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH
DOING THE RIGHT THING:

IT'S NOT ALWAYS
POPULAR. BUT I
GOT HERE BY
TRUSTING MY GIZZARD,
AND MY GIZZARD
SAYS THAT THOSE "ORPHANS"
WERE A THREAT TO OUR NATIONAL
INTERESTS, AND I SWORE AN OATH
TO PROTECT THOSE INTERESTS!
ALL THE SHARPEST MINDS
AND CLAWS IN THIS COUNTRY SAID
IT WAS THE RIGHT CALL, AND BY
GOD I'M GOING TO LISTEN TO THE
EXPERTS, NOT A
BUNCH OF RADICAL
ANARCHISTS!









The Refreshing Gender Politics of *The Rise of Phoenixes*

by Brianna Rennix

EVERY COUPLE OF YEARS, I REWATCH THE FIRST one-and-a-half seasons of Showtime's *The Tudors*, a deeply stupid show for which I nonetheless retain a perverse nostalgic fondness. The sets and landscapes are beautiful, the soundtrack is all subtly muzak'd versions of medieval dance tunes, and the episode scripts are replete with exquisite moments, such as Henry VIII saying "I hate *time itself*" while gesturing weakly at an astrolabe. The leading men have modern haircuts and look like British footballers at a half-assed fancy dress party. There are a lot of deeply likeable grifters to root for: from Sam Neill's Cardinal Wolsey, constantly torn between his ambition to be pope and his need to take a goddamn nap, to Natalie Dormer's Anne Boleyn, who is so contemptuously beautiful that "inventing a fake religion" honestly feels like a proportionate seduction tactic. Most delightfully of all, despite the showrunners' best efforts to make everything as sexy as possible, the characters still have to spend a significant amount of time standing in front of mullioned windows reciting Wikipedia articles about theological conflicts in order to keep the plot moving forward. *It's great fucking television.*

As someone with a sad job and an itchy brain, I am constantly trying to find *something* to watch on TV that will occupy my attention and not make me feel miserable. A lot of the "binge-worthy" shows that my friends suggest to me are ultimately too violent for me, or too sad, or too *stressful*, in some hard-to-define way. Unless I am forcing myself to sit through some piece of socially important television for educational purposes, I really don't want to watch, say, a vicariously humiliating interpersonal drama, or a wry reflection on the difficulties of modern life. That's not to say that I want television that's devoid of *any* emotional stakes: I like shows that touch on broad themes that resonate with me. But, in an escapist mode, I want something that excites my imagination and feels rea-

sonably distanced from my day-to-day life. To this end, I mostly watch things like murder mysteries, space operas, and sort-of-historical-but-mostly-nonsense dramas about royal court intrigue.

After I completed my most recent biennial viewing of *The Tudors* (stopping, as I always do, at the point where the torture and executions start to definitively outstrip the lewd theological shenanigans), I was once again at a loss for something to watch. After a few false starts, my friend Lyta Gold pointed me towards a new Chinese drama that had just been released on Netflix, called *The Rise of Phoenixes*. I had barely watched any Chinese television before, but from the show's trailer, *The Rise of Phoenixes* appeared to meet all my requirements: attractive people, lavish costumes and interiors, characters using chess boards (or, in this case, Go boards) as an exposition tool for political machinations, etc. The first episode also demonstrated a refreshing willingness to narratively allude to violence without fully showing it, which—as an actual human baby so easily fooled by simulated gore that I have to check parental viewing guides for action movies before I watch them—I deeply appreciated. I quickly settled in, hoping this would be a good one.

As it turned out, it completely devoured the next few weeks of my life, and not *just* because of my love of intricate imperial succession conflicts. I was also riveted by the presence of the first gender-fluid protagonists that I, personally, had ever seen on a television show of this kind.

THE SHOW IS SET IN A FICTIONAL KINGDOM called Tiansheng. The story follows two main protagonists: one, Ning Yi, is the calculating sixth son of the Tiansheng emperor, who is constantly maneuvering to discredit his brothers and remove them from the imperial succession. The other protagonist is a young woman named Feng Zhiwei, who is sometimes Ning Yi's accomplice and at other times his rival. In the first scene where we meet her, Feng Zhiwei is wearing men's clothes: we learn that her younger brother is a bit feckless, and that she loosely impersonates him from time to time. Later, after being implicated in a murder, she takes on a full-time male disguise and starts going by the name Wei Zhi, eventually becoming the emperor's designated top scholar and a trusted royal official. The rationale for the cross-dressing here is a little sketchy: Feng Zhiwei never seems to work out a fully consistent backstory for her male persona, and continues publicly associating with her birth family in both her male and female identities. This vagueness

generates constant scrutiny and speculation about “Wei Zhi’s” origins, which is hardly ideal if you’re trying to live undercover.

The Rise of Phoenixes is 70 episodes long (at least, as it was released for Netflix), and Feng Zhiwei remains fully in disguise as Wei Zhi for more than half the show’s run. Outside of a couple brief scenes where she mentions that she looks forward to resuming her real name someday, Feng Zhiwei seems to have little to no angst about being forced to adopt a male identity. On the whole, Feng Zhiwei is good at being a man, and even seems to have fun with it: sometimes, Wei Zhi has the demeanor of a refined, genteel scholar, and at other times, he’s a crafty, cocky little shit. Feng Zhiwei likes drinking and gambling, and is highly learned and politically astute, and thus has almost no difficulty inhabiting a male role in the imperial capital. She also “passes” as male pretty effortlessly: although some people are suspicious about the origins of the upstart court official Wei Zhi, hardly anyone—until the plot forces a dramatic identity reveal around episode 40-something—is suspicious about Wei Zhi’s *gender*. The handful of people who *do* figure out Wei Zhi’s secret more quickly are very nonchalant about it, and keep it under wraps without even being asked. Feng Zhiwei has to muster all her resourcefulness to keep up with Ning Yi’s intricate political schemes, and *this* is what provides the plot’s primary momentum, *not* the fact that Feng Zhiwei happens to be disguised as a man.

Throughout the show, Feng Zhiwei/Wei Zhi also has romantic tension with a range of characters. There’s Ning Yi, the aforementioned devious prince of Tiansheng, and Helian Zheng, the bro-ier prince of the northern kingdom of Jinshi; both of these characters are aware that Feng Zhiwei is a woman, but the bulk of their foundational interactions take place while she’s living as the man Wei Zhi. There’s Shaoning, the spoiled princess of Tiansheng, who falls in love with Wei Zhi without realizing that he’s the same person as Feng Zhiwei. There’s Feng Zhiwei’s loyal bodyguard, Gu Nanyi, who seems to be neurodivergent and who (as we learn in one scene) is equally comfortable in “men’s” and “women’s” clothes as long as he can fight in them. There’s Feng Zhiwei’s female warrior friend, Hua Qiong, whom Feng Zhiwei first meets after her own female identity has been outed, but while she’s still primarily running around in men’s clothes. Although my investment in *The Rise of Phoenixes* didn’t really depend on Feng Zhiwei “ending up” with anyone in particular, I couldn’t recall any other show I’d seen with such a diverse plethora of not-quite-heterosexual relationship possibilities, without being billed as an “LGBT drama.” The idea, too, that a general-audience historical action-adventure show could explore a topic as politically-charged as genderfluidity, deliberately but also *playfully*, centering it as a plot point without reducing it to a teachable moment, was genuinely a revelation to me: they just do not make shows like this in the United States, and thus it had never occurred to me that such shows were even *possible*.

Of course, it’s not as if I’d never seen cross-dressing featured in U.S. media before, but as I tried to recall any English-language films and television that actually centered around a “female” protagonist in “disguise” as a man—well, all that really came to mind was Disney’s *Mulan* (based on a Chinese story), film adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and various teen sports movies inspired by *Twelfth Night*. (It’s

kind of weird that the Anglophone world is so invested in Shakespeare as the apotheosis of English-language literature, and yet we have comparatively little media about gender questioning!) Maybe it’s because women wearing drag, in this day and age, is (often, although not always) viewed as so nonthreatening as to be unremarkable: a lot of traditionally male clothing signifiers have become increasingly identified as unisex, and the line between “women in ‘menswear’” and “women dressed as men” is consequently super blurry. Men in femme drag, meanwhile, existed for many decades in mainstream media purely as the punchlines of jokes, and now continue to inhabit a transgressive and masculine-panic-inducing place in the U.S. popular imagination; the idea of a U.S. television show that casually but non-comedically centers around a man in disguise as a woman, or a man who enjoys wearing women’s clothes, is currently hard to imagine.



I am also not saying that any of the characters on *The Rise of Phoenixes* are explicitly or intentionally written as trans, nonbinary, or gay. Just because some person enjoys cross-dressing doesn’t necessarily mean that they have any particular sexual orientation or gender identity. But I think a cross-dressing drama like this one is an interesting kind of gender/sexuality Rorschach test: you can potentially learn something about your own preferences or desires based upon what you think is “really” going on here, or what you *wish* were going on. Is Feng Zhiwei a straight cis woman doing drag for politics, who just really gets into the spirit of the thing? A lesbian or bisexual cis woman who enjoys switching between masc and femme aesthetics? A nonbinary person? A trans man trying to achieve escape velocity from his birth identity? All these readings are *permissible* given the events in the show, or, at the very least, are flights of imagination with some grounding in the source material.

IN THE UNITED STATES, THERE’S CERTAINLY more media featuring queer characters than there used to be, but it’s still relatively rare to see an LGBT or gender-nonconforming character in a central role. There are some dramas that specifically focus on life as an LGBT person, or on LGBT people from history, but on a “genre” show—a mystery, a thriller, a sci-fi epic—there might be, if you’re lucky, one or two minor queer characters, who often feel like they were slotted in to fill some kind of representation quota. (*The Tudors* is a good example of this: a few characters are selected to have Homosexual Intrigues, and are then killed off in pretty

short order.) Likewise, non-binary or genderfluid characters, as such, are incredibly rare. (GLAAD's 2019 report on U.S. media identified five nonbinary characters on television shows across all broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms, along with 12 trans men and 21 trans women characters.) This in itself doesn't surprise me, especially since it's only quite recently that the concept of identifying as nonbinary has entered into sort of mainstream discussion in the United States, and self-identified nonbinary people make up a very small percentage of the population. Although I am sure that lack of nonbinary characters is also motivated by the United States' discomfort with non-heteronormative gender identities, as a representational lacuna it's not comparable in scale and insidiousness to U.S. media's deliberate stereotyping and erasure of groups that have much larger numbers and more sustained social visibility—such as virtually all non-white people.

Character representation numbers aside, I think it's also true that the complexity of figuring out how to relate to your gender still isn't frequently regarded in U.S. media as something worthy of dramatic treatment. As I've muddled through my own feelings about gender over the past decade or so, I've been incredibly grateful for the increasing availability of essays and videos by trans and nonbinary people, which helped me realize that I was allowed to actually think about what I *wanted*, instead of just assuming that anything I wanted was inherently frivolous and impossible. But in all honesty, it was also extremely meaningful to me, at a moment when I was still teetering hesitantly on the brink of expressing myself, to watch an entire 70-episode television drama that featured a main character swapping between gender identities. Encountering more and more trans and nonbinary people in real life had started to make me feel like changing my pronouns or gender expression was

because trans and nonbinary people *have existed* for as long as the concept of gender has existed, and so any society that has gender in it *logically should have* some non-cis people in it. Including these characters doesn't have to be an anachronism, or a heavy-handed, narratively incoherent P.C. flourish: these characters can be a natural feature of the environment. Secondly, it was also extremely satisfying to see a protagonist who had interests, conflicts, and agency apart from their gender identity, but who nevertheless *enjoyed* and was *good at* switching between different modes of gender expression. The dream of what it would be like to publicly change your gender identity, and have people immediately find you *likeable* and *intriguing*, rather than unmasking you and branding you as a fraud, is one that I think trans and gender-nonconforming people don't get to see portrayed too often on television. One important role of



fiction—especially imaginative and speculative fiction—is to allow us to envision best- or better-case scenarios. This is especially helpful if the dismal cinema of your brain is already producing worst-case scenarios for you, free of charge, on a continuous loop.



something that was actually *achievable* in the mundane world of my work and social life. Seeing a gender “transition” dramatized on a fantasy-court-intrigue show, somehow, made it feel even *more* achievable.

Exactly *why* I felt this way is a complicated knot to untangle, but I think there are a few interconnected reasons. Firstly, seeing a genderfluid character in a non-contemporary setting is a helpful reminder that trans identity and gender nonconformity are not merely ephemeral modern fads—which is the repressive, self-loathing narrative that conservatives, as well as many “concerned” liberals, are constantly trying to force on gender-questioning people. There have, in fact, been trans and nonbinary people throughout history, across the world; thus, it shouldn't be “weird” to see a trans or nonbinary character in a show with a fantasy or historical setting,

AT FIRST, AS A TOTAL NEWCOMER TO THE broader world of Chinese dramas, the plot of *The Rise of Phoenixes* struck me as unique, exciting, and unlike anything I could recall seeing on television. I tried to find out more about the author of the serialized webnovel that inspired the series, and discovered that there wasn't much information publicly available (at least in English) about her: webnovel authors in China seem to stay outside of the public eye, even if their works are extremely popular. Feeling bereft without any more episodes to watch, I began randomly trying out other Chinese dramas that were available to stream. At this point, I realized that the “woman takes on a male identity for hand-wavey plot reasons” character wasn't unique *at all* to *The Rise of Phoenixes*, but was in fact an *incredibly common trope*. YouTube and other streaming services soon began feeding me recommendations for a whole host of shows with summaries like “eldest daughter of border-guarding family disguises herself as her dead twin brother to navigate her family's interests at court” and “top-ranked general is discovered to be a woman living in disguise as a man, and subsequently is married off to a beautiful but lazy prince to undercut her political influence.” It turns out that—in mainland China, as well as Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, Japan, and other countries—there are *a shit ton of these shows*, situated

across a variety of fantasy, historical, or modern-day settings. Obviously, millions upon millions of people were watching these shows long before I knew about them: the fact that their existence was surprising to me is a reflection of my total ignorance of huge swathes of non-Anglophone media (although admittedly, it's only recently that the internet has started to make international television and cinema more easily accessible to a global audience).

ONE LOOSELY-HISTORICAL DRAMA THAT I WATCHED, *Nv Shi Zi* (whose English-subtitled version was distributed as *The Heiress*), has a somewhat similar premise to *The Rise of Phoenixes* and illustrates the different ways the trope can be repackaged. Han Shiyi, the protagonist, is a woman who has lived nearly her entire life since childhood in disguise as her dead male twin in order to protect her family's political interests. Unlike *The Rise of Phoenixes*, which primarily focuses on the complex political landscape within which Feng

one of these two shows ends in total tragedy, while the other features the lead character throwing over *all* her former love interests to roam the world alone in a slightly more femme edition of her coolest masc outfit.) The collapse of the romances in both cases have a number of other causes related to dynastic politics and family loyalty, and so it's very much not clear that these shows truly invite us to conclude that Heteronormativity Ruined Everything (as opposed to the usual "star crossed lovers" type thing), but it was nonetheless pretty remarkable to watch these two characters forced back into femininity and being *clearly* unhappy about it—the exact inverse of the classic "tomboy" trope in a lot of Anglophone literature and film, where a sporty masc girl matures into a "normal," appropriately femme woman.

IT'S INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT SHOWS LIKE THIS MANAGE to get made in China despite the fact that broadcast codes are much more restrictive. At the present moment, China has media

"In all parts of the world, media that's actually made by queer people, about queer people, often looks quite different from mainstream television that superficially borrows queer themes..."

Zhiwei's male disguise is situated, *The Heiress* spends a lot more time dramatizing the difficulties that a divided gender identity poses to one's love life. Although Han Shiyi seems to fully enjoy roistering around as a male playboy, her situation becomes more complicated when her male love interest becomes fixated on "restoring" her female identity so that they can get married. Han Shiyi also "passes" a little less successfully than Feng Zhiwei, with more characters questioning her face shape and body size and wondering if she's "really" a man (although, by the same token, her male swagger is convincing enough that when she later appears in female clothes, multiple people who know her as a man ask her if she's "in disguise" as a woman). In some ways, both *The Rise of Phoenixes* and *The Heiress* are quite heteronormative on their face: although the protagonists in their male personas attract the adoration of beautiful girls, the protagonists are depicted as amused or alarmed by this attention, and work assiduously to deflect it whenever it becomes too serious. By contrast, our drag kings have explicit romantic tension with cis male characters, which has a distinct frisson of homoeroticism that's periodically undercut by narrative PSAs reminding us that She's Really A Girl Deep Down. (In *The Heiress*, the love interest also has a significant sexuality crisis before realizing that his male friend is "really" a woman: this is apparently a very common trope on other gender-bending shows as well.)

In both of these two shows, the eventual restoration of the main character's female identity, name, and clothing occurs under fraught circumstances involving kidnapping and amnesia; the mutual camaraderie that existed when the main character and the love interest were both socially acting as "men" is shattered; and attempts to transition into wedded heterosexual bliss turn out nightmarishly, with our former drag kings miserably deprived of status and agency. (I won't say which is which, but

censorship laws that forbid or place limitations on the presentation of a range of issues, including a general ban on depictions of same-sex relationships. Nevertheless, there's still enough demand for shows about LGBT characters that Chinese showrunners have been motivated to find ways around the censorship restrictions: in addition to continuing to make gender-bending shows that skirt the edge of what constitutes a "same-sex relationship," a number of novels that prominently feature gay romances have been adapted into highly successful TV shows. Because these dramas can't show any kissing or confessions of love, the shows on their surface portray very deep same-sex friendships, but it's very obvious to the viewer that they're watching a romantic love story, which is carefully unfolded over the course of 40 to 50 episodes. (One such show that's recently taken off internationally is *The Untamed*, the exciting story of an anarchist necromancer who rescues refugees from prison camps, murders his enemies with a demon flute, and exchanges frequent longing glances with his "best friend," a moody zither-player. Everyone should watch it, it's great!) In China, these heavily-subtextual gay TV romances are often adapted from *danmei*, novels depicting gay romances that are produced primarily (although not exclusively) by women, for an audience comprised primarily (although not exclusively) of other women. The genre is part of a larger ecosystem of similar romance stories that exists across east Asia; it parallels—and has significant overlap and interchange with—the phenomenon of slash fiction in the United States and elsewhere, which has historically also been female-dominated and is centered around borrowing ostensibly straight characters from popular books, films, and television shows, and rewriting them into gay fanfiction.

In the United States there are technically no broadcast censorship laws: we have a prevailing notion that “showbusiness” is LGBT-friendly, and producers are surely well aware by now that there’s a significant audience of both LGBT and non-LGBT people that wants to see queer characters and relationships robustly portrayed in media. And yet, if



you were to go to any TV producer in the United States, wanting to adapt, say, a high fantasy novel that also happens to be a gay love story, there’s almost no way your show would get made! (If anything, U.S. and other Anglophone showrunners are notorious for “gaybaiting” their audiences: dropping little in-jokes hinting at a possible gay relationships between characters, to partially satisfy their fan base, but then at other times going out of their way to narratively reinforce one or both characters’ non-negotiable heterosexuality.) Likewise, if you wanted to pitch a fun historical drama about a trans or nonbinary character—or a show that dramatizes a protagonist’s experience of transition or genderfluidity within the context of a larger plot—I can’t help but think that you’d struggle to find any takers for that pilot, given that I haven’t seen a *single show like this* in the United States.

Even though China currently has more formal barriers to portraying non-heteronormative relationships on television, there seems to be a general awareness that there’s a large public appetite for these narratives, and attendant motivation to find creative ways to get around the censorship limitations, and make shows that not only include, but *center around* gay and gender-nonconforming characters. I don’t have any insight as to whether this is motivated purely by the knowledge that there’s an enthusiastic audience that can be readily capitalized upon, or if these shows’ creators attach any political significance to portraying these interdicted narratives. Regardless of the reasons why these shows *do* get made in China, what’s striking is that similar shows *don’t* get made in the United States, *in spite of* the United States’ nominally more permissive broadcast culture *and* the presence of ready-made, eager audiences for such content. A friend of mine who previously worked for Marvel told me that Marvel executives constantly raised the specter of “the Chinese market” as a reason why Marvel couldn’t create films that centered (for example) black characters, or gay characters. As she pointed out, the fact that *Black Panther* ended up doing very well in China, and the fact that Chinese TV is actually, by some metrics, much more comfortable with non-heteronormative characters than mainstream U.S. TV, demonstrates that these excuses were purely designed to paper over Marvel’s *own* racism and homophobia, and the perceived racism and homophobia of their U.S. audiences.

In writing this essay, I’m aware that my tone of delighted awe may be a little annoying—these shows have been around for a while, and Chinese and Chinese diaspora audiences have been well aware of them this whole time. I am not making any special claim, as a white American nonbinary person, that I understand the full cultural context of shows like *The Rise of Phoenixes* or *The Heiress*. Some media scholars have noted that Chinese media companies’ packaging of more masculine-presenting modes of female identity, in ways that are explicitly distanced from being lesbian or trans, walks an unusual line between expanding some types of gender expression and suppressing others. Likewise, *dan-mei* and the TV shows that are adapted from them are not straightforwardly representational because they are often created and consumed by people who identify (at least publicly) as cis and heterosexual. In all parts of the world, media that’s actually made by queer people, about queer people, often looks quite different from mainstream television that superficially borrows queer themes—although, in the United States at least, some of this also has to do with the fact that LGBT or gender-nonconforming television often gets little funding and/or is siloed off as a kind of a “genre” show of its own, as if these storylines can’t exist in the world of “regular” television. (It may also be misguided to believe that “mainstream” television produced for mass audiences will ever have a high volume of well-rounded queer characters, but again, if you’re a person who primarily likes fantasy, sci-fi, and period dramas—shows that are hard to make on an indie budget—it’s hard not to wistfully hope that we could get there eventually.) I’m also not qualified to speak about the intersectional



dimension of being both queer and Chinese, and the way that those two huge areas of poor representation in white-majority Anglophone media affect people who belong to both groups.

Nevertheless, I think lots of queer and nonbinary people (and people generally) would find these Chinese dramas interesting, compelling, and strikingly different from the fare they’re used to seeing on U.S. television! It’s very easy to underestimate the extent to which people in the United States—unless you are part of a specific diaspora community—are totally unaware of huge swathes of mass media that are consumed by millions of other people on the planet. Seeing firsthand evidence that certain stories *can* be told, and that the refusal to tell them is in fact *deliberate*, can be extremely revealing. If I had known that there were so many cross-dressing Chinese dramas out there, I certainly wouldn’t have spent so much time re-watching *The Tudors*. Maybe I can cut back to revisiting that one once every three years. ✚

ARMS INDUSTRY TYCOON

**DESIGN
YOUR
SUPERWEAPON**



**DESTABILIZE
REGIONS**



**PROTECT
AMERICA**



BILL
WHO DOESN'T HAVE A TITLE

"Your daughter Miranda's run off again. Word has it she's joined a terrorist cell. Permission to 'take care' of the matter?"

Manufacture AR-15s
to sell to Americans
to fund research
into your
SUPERWEAPON!



UH-OH! There's been a mass shooting! PR is bad right now, and sales of automatic weapons in America will incur a 15% penalty - would you like to shift sales focus to terrorist organizations in the Middle East?

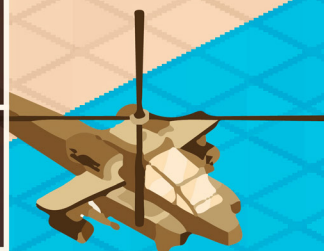
HOW TO WIN

"Defeat your rebel daughter, murder 10 journalists and 1 million civilians, create the Ultimate Superweapon, take over a country from within, and declare yourself Emperor of the World."



**MERCENARY
COMMANDER**
IN AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION

"Sir, local activists are protesting your sales of Blazing Lung to the regime. Permission to provide material support to state security forces in the coming crackdown?"





UH-OH! The Squad
is trying to limit DeFense
spending, which accounts for
50% of your research funds.
Invest in lobbying?

56,539



**SELECT
SUPERWEAPON
RESEARCH TRACKS
(Choose 2!)**



Burn your enemies:
Chemical weapons!



Plague your enemies:
Biological weapons!



Explode your enemies:
Bombs!



Annihilate your enemies:
Nuclear weapons!



BILL

WHO DOESN'T APPEAR ON ANY CENSUS OR
PUBLIC REGISTRY ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD

"Turns out Miranda let us grab
her on purpose: she's stolen
that tape of you bribing Senator
Reyes. Word has it she gave it
to a journalist though, so no one
will care. I'll contact Murdoch
for the usual damage control."

BUILD PROGRESSIVELY LARGER BOMBS



mini
bomb



junior
bomb



suitcase
bomb



Full-size
bomb



mega
bomb



absurd
bomb



bomb to
end all
bombs



the bomb
dot com



A region in
the Middle
East has been
destabilized by
your arms sales
PR IS FINE.



REGIME CONTACT

"These terrorists are out
of control! We need four
million gallons of Blazing
Lung and a new shipment of
personal tanks to protect
our boys in uniform!"



56,000,000,000

BUY MORE:



MATERIALS



PLANTS



LOBBYING



MARKETING



HUSH MONEY TO
WHISTLEBLOWERS



ASSASSINS FOR
WHISTLEBLOWERS



LAWYERS TO
ARGUE YOUR CASE
IN THE HAGUE



My Father, The Butcher

by Amalia Dubois

WE TAUNTED LIBBY FOR ALWAYS HIDING behind the clothesline during Killing Time. The rest of us gathered dutifully around the chopping block and watched the hatchet sever the chicken head, leaving a spurting stump in its place. The “thunk” of the blade elicited sobs from the direction of the bed-sheets that my mom had hung out to dry earlier in the day. The three of us could only roll our eyes at Libby’s hysterics. There was no room for a soft heart in the butchering business.

Libby wasn’t alone in her tenderness on these mornings. More often than not, it was our mother wielding the weapon and lopping off the head in one stroke—hopefully. The hatchet was a backup plan. She originally declared that the humane way to kill a bird was to swing it by its head, which would instantly break its neck. That was the theory, anyway. But several swings of the chicken frequently just left my mother with a squawking and clawing animal in her hand, the poor thing still very much alive and probably wishing that it weren’t. So my dad was tasked with securing the chicken’s head and praying that my mom’s aim was better than her swing. He’d never lost so much as a knuckle in his decades as a butcher—a point of pride in the industry—but a squirming bird could easily put an end to that legacy.

Dad was always the unwilling participant who would avert his gaze as an animal bled out before him. On the one occasion that he took a couple of us kids rabbit-hunting in the woods behind our home, he’d half-heartedly kicked a few piles of fallen tree branches, making the barest effort to scare out any rabbits. We’d trudged around in the snow for an hour before giving up, with him having never even shouldered the rifle. Back home, he’d force himself to help with the slaughter, to corral a grunting pig or clutch a frantic bird awaiting its execution. If she ever offered him the blade, he’d claim that his hands shook too much, or that his eyes weren’t what they used to be. Yet those same hands never wavered while skillfully gliding a side of beef through a band saw. When it came time to end an animal’s life, however, my dad simply couldn’t bring himself to do it.

I descend from a long line of manual workers. My great-grandfather, the son of a German immigrant, farmed the marshy lands of the Mississippi River floodplains at the turn of the 20th century. His son, my Grandpa George, delivered and installed residential propane tanks for the local gas company. By the time he moved in with us, wheelchair-bound and suffering from dementia, he’d lost all his fingertips and nails to decades of being smashed under several-ton barrels of propane. Those same clubbed, trembling fingers would sneak onto my dinner plate to steal french fries if I wasn’t paying attention, a twinkle in Grandpa’s eyes as he’d munch silently.

My dad began butchering directly out of high school, in the meat department of the local grocery store. Once, we met a coworker of his from those early days, while the two of them coached my little brother’s baseball team. The man was missing one of his arms up to the elbow. “It got torn off in the meat grinder when we were teenagers,” Dad explained when I worked up the courage to ask at home later. Even I, a morbid eight-year-old, paled at the implied horror scene that must have unfolded that day. It was a rare fate to be injured quite so grievously on the job, but lesser levels of mutilation are an accepted hazard of the trade. Bending over screeching blades and churning rotors on a daily basis makes accidents inevitable. In the meat-packing industry at large, each week sees an average of two amputations, most often a finger or two.

Later, Dad briefly realized his lifelong dream of opening his own grocery store. It was the 1980s and Walmart hadn’t yet morphed into the all-encompassing Supercenter monstrosity that would invade suburban cities over the next decade. Business boomed in our tiny Missouri town—for cigarettes and lottery tickets, if nothing else. But my fervently Catholic parents quickly found themselves with four kids in five years. It became a Herculean task to both operate a business that, among other things, still had to be heated with firewood, and to find time to spend together as a family. To this day, my mom complains that they almost didn’t make it to the hospital for my birth because Dad insisted

MY FATHER, THE BUTCHER

on stopping by the store to fuel the stove for the evening. I was two when he sold the store and took a job in the city, butchering at Sam's Club, a Walmart subsidiary. This more routine position came with family health benefits, a 401(k) for retirement, and a modest salary adequate enough to support a wife and four children. But as the kids kept coming, we quickly outgrew Dad's income.

Mom began waitressing at a local pizza parlor in the evenings. Suddenly, the anticipated family time that had motivated the selling of the store was no longer there. Desperate for a less frantic life that could still sustain our large household, we left our development ranch home for 12 acres in the country, bought from Mom's sister. As had their self-reliant ancestors, my parents were going to be farmers. A single-wide trailer would have to suffice for housing. With two bedrooms for the seven of us, Mom and Dad hunkered down in one with the new baby, while we older kids squeezed into the other room. Libby and I split a set of bunk beds; Katie and Elliott shared a twin bed along the opposite wall.

Dad had promised that the trailer was a temporary solution—only a couple of months until he got together a down payment to build us a home. Instead, we spent all of 1994 in the cramped quarters of the trailer, in perpetual fear of Missouri's infamous tornadoes, which had been known to flatten sturdier homes than our sagging aluminum walls on cinder blocks. When our parents finally scraped up the funds for a modular home, hauled in on a flatbed truck and assembled on-site, my siblings and I watched excitedly as our 1800-square-foot palace arose overnight. Libby and I picked out a lavender paint color for our new shared bedroom, thrilled by the luxury of having only one other roommate. Our family moved in right in time for the start of my first-grade year, which I spent under the watch of the nuns at the Catholic grade school.

Between school fees and a new mortgage, money remained scarce. But Mom couldn't work the dinner service at the pizza parlor anymore, not with a newborn baby in tow. Soon, she transitioned to cleaning offices and banks overnight. Dad some-

times showed up to help her clean but realized he'd need to find additional work of his own to make ends meet. He didn't have much in the way of formal marketable skills by modern standards, but knew his way around a carcass.

This is how the entire family got roped into slaughtering animals in our detached garage.

WEEKENDS WERE NEVER MUCH OF A REST for Dad. The hour-long commute meant leaving home at 3 a.m. and not returning until well after we kids had been dropped off by the afternoon schoolbus. After dinner, Dad would doze off on the couch until the 10 p.m. news and crawl into bed after the sports and weather reports wrapped up. In my family, "quality time" meant washing dishes together or dumping trash cans with Mom at the bank. On a lucky weekend, we'd play a family game of baseball, but more often, Saturdays and Sundays were chore days, fueled by a never-ending chore list.

One goal always loomed in the inscrutable future: developing the farm into an operation that could fully support us, rendering obsolete the need for side gigs. Dad wrestled a tiller through the rocky Missouri clay, enlisting us kids to scatter seeds of corn and beans behind him. Mom quartered old potatoes for us to dig into the earth, eyes up so they could one day bloom into new plants. Apple-tree saplings lined the garden, encircled by cages so the deer wouldn't eat them before the trees could grow beyond their nibbling reach.

As no farm is complete without animals, we soon had a couple of cows in the pasture, penned in by several hundred feet of barbed-wire fence that Dad built himself. Being the eldest, Katie was drafted to help in the endeavor. Her participation ended when a taut length of wire snapped and narrowly missed her face, leaving her with a nasty, jagged scar along her shoulder. It was my turn to pitch in when my parents constructed a shelter for the cows. Dad sent me up a ladder to nail down the corrugated roof—heights were another source of unease for him. Shipping pallets and rolls of chicken wire transformed

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MY FATHER, THE BUTCHER

into a pen for several hens and a rooster.

Third grade marked the end of my days at the Catholic school. Boxes of textbooks arrived on our doorstep, signaling the newest endeavor in the quest for self-reliance: homeschooling. Mom regaled us kids with the possibilities that this arrangement might allow: field trips, sleeping in, wearing pajamas to class. But we were skeptical at leaving our friends behind to spend even more time with each other. And we understood that homeschooling meant being a bit too available when it was time to weed the garden, or pick green beans, or pluck feathers from chickens on Butchering Days.

No one could bring themselves to kill our first cow. We'd bought Annie as a baby while her twin brother went to my grandfather. For months, we nursed her with bottles of formula as you might a motherless puppy. She'd doze off in our arms while we scratched her curly white face, and her tiny hooves would slip on the laminate floor as she tested her steps in our kitchen. The intention was to someday breed her, though we later learned that having a twin brother had rendered her infertile. This should've been an immediate death warrant for a cow, but we'd grown too fond of our Annie. Years past her would-be expiration date, our pet cow still lived with us, leaping and galloping toward us at full speed when we called her name from across the field. We could only watch in terror and anticipation of the crash through the fence, but she'd always skid to a halt just in time.

After my parents bought another calf to raise and butcher, we kids never again made the mistake of getting attached. Annie did, though. She became the stand-in mother of the pen, keeping company with the latest steer until he was large enough for slaughter. We'd hide Annie in the shelter and cover her ears so she wouldn't hear the shotgun blast across the field. Upon discovering her companion gone, she'd stand at the gate and bleat inconsolably for days until we bought her a new calf to nurture. And in this way, each autumn, we restocked the deep-freeze with a year's supply of meat.

Butchering can take several days to complete, depending on the size of the animal. Dad's first clients were deer-hunters. It was temporary work that began with bow season, followed by a few weeks of gun season.

PHOTOS: The author's father at work; the author's brother and a cousin examining one of the family cows. Courtesy of the author.

Men would roll up our driveway early on a Saturday morning, the latest kill in their truck beds. The crunch of the gravel and voices outside my window would wake me up in time to watch Dad wrestle a limp carcass up the ladder. The act of suspending the deer between two trees always took several attempts; the six-inch hooks had to catch through the back leg joints so the deer wouldn't be torn down by sheer gravity. Sharpening knives whistled a tune overhead as the slain beast dangled there, pink tongue lolling onto the grass below, beady eyes staring blankly. We kids gathered on one side, ready to tug in tandem, while Dad's blade sliced and poked along the interior of the animal's silken skin. Once the skinning was complete, it'd be time for him to swear at his perpetually dull hacksaw while struggling to sever the deer head, then split the carcass in half from tail to jagged neck. We watched in apprehension as our five-foot-four father clutched the slippery halves to his aproned chest and heaved them into the salvaged walk-in cooler. The bandsaw squealed sadistically as he gracefully sliced raw flesh into steaks. The feet didn't yield enough meat for anything more useful than a dog treat, but the upper leg made for good roast and soup bones. All other acceptable scraps got tossed into the tub to grind into burger meat; venison is too lean to make a decent burger on its own, but adding pork fat contributes both flavor and moisture. My thoughts always strayed to his armless coworker as I watched Dad feed hunks of raw meat into the rumbling auger.

My spectating ended at that point. I was too afraid to hear a scream that would mean Dad hadn't pulled his hand back in time to avoid the nasty blade. But he went on working. After a couple of hours, he'd call me back down to the garage—it was my time to shine. Dad couldn't package the meat as he went, as his bloody hands would make a mess of the wax wrapping paper, so the task often fell to me.

I'd make a deal with one of my siblings: I would wrap all the meat if they would be my Plopper. The Plopper, named for



the sound the sopping meat made when it hit the table, was a position we kids had invented to make the necessary work feel less dreary. Just as Dad couldn't touch the waxy paper, nor could the Wrapper sully their own hands by handling the meat directly. The Plopper would wait patiently for the Wrapper to finish a package before grabbing another stack of chops or loin to center on the paper, all the while keeping one hand clean enough to label the parcel: "1 lb. Burger, Smith, 11/2001." This process easily evolved into guessing games, from taking turns molding burger meat into balls as close to one pound as possible, to guessing how much three steaks weighed. Sometimes we set up two wrapping stations and raced head-to-head. I soon became the undefeated champion, churning out packages in nine seconds flat. Dad didn't mind our shenanigans. He'd just hum along to the staticky AM radio, Johnny Cash and Hank Williams crooning to the constant motion of Dad's knife.

Though my siblings and I groaned and whined when summoned to help with the butchering, I honestly didn't mind the work. I'd zip up my hand-me-down coat and escape out into the uninsulated garage (gloveless because nine-second records weren't set with bulky fingers). Butchering felt like a necessary evil in our lives. If Dad was at work when clients came to pick up their meat, we kids would collect payment. Dad charged seventy dollars to process each deer; he didn't need more than his high school education to be a whiz at calculating overhead costs, profit margins, and diminishing returns. These details were too complex for me at age ten, but I understood that deer season always fell right before Christmas, and that a slow season spelled fewer Christmas presents and a smaller holiday meal. Fewer deer and the thermostat would remain below 64 degrees all winter. A disastrous stretch could mean a whole winter without the clothes dryer or oven. This consciousness, I suppose, made it easier to swallow my complaints and wrap my meat packages.

I've never asked my dad whether he likes being a butcher, or probed his sentiments about his work. In fact, it wasn't until I recently helped him assemble an aluminum tool shed that I first thought of him as a manual laborer. In the world of my childhood, non-manual workers were exceptions: teachers, priests, the town judge. All work was physical, a task that required muscle and elicited grunting. We were certainly grunting and dripping in the sweltering sun on that July day, my dad holding the ladder while I scrambled to the top, as usual. I watched him curse at the drill in his hands, desperate to finish one more chore before his Sunday ended and it was time to return to his paying job the next day—or rather, *jobs*. Even now, while the rest of his generation waltzes into retirement, my dad does overnight shifts at a second store several days a week, after clocking out of the meat-packing plant where he now works.

My dad kept fumbling the tiny screws, hobbled by the knobby, swollen fingers of someone who has spent half a century lifting, pulling, tugging, and carving. I fished them out of the grass for him, right outside my parents' trailer, a downgrade from the relative palace where we once raised Annie. They'd had to sell after the mortgage got away from them. Driving the screws into the

searing metal roof, I found myself struck by the sudden realization that my dad's crooked fingers were his primary tools, that their skill and muscle memory had supported a wife and six children. That he had managed to remain unscathed in his work was a marvel in itself. Our lives depended on those fingers. Their loss, an injury suffered by so many in the industry, would have spelled devastation for our family. My dad was in that way a lucky man, and as a result, so were we. Though it may sound naive, only in that moment, at thirty-one years of age, did I truly internalize the meaning of being a manual laborer, of surviving by the work of one's hands.

IN A SENSE, MY DISSOCIATION OF MY DAD, THE BUTCHER, from my dad, the manual worker, is a product of my attachment to him. My dad is not his labor—at least, not entirely. Though manual labor is a beast that constantly demands to be fed—consuming time, energy, and bodies but never satiated—it ultimately remains a way of supporting oneself. Manual labor is neither my dad's destiny nor his personality. Rather, it is the dangerous and gruesome enterprise he has been forced to take on to guarantee us, his family, a most basic standard of living.

I've been thinking about this more lately, as I see the term "laborer" appear across the political left's discussions and policy debates. In these conversations, where the working class and manual laborers are heralded for their key role in sustaining and, with any hope, someday thwarting capitalism, I wonder whether we are being wise in endowing the laborer with his trade as an inherent quality. In doing so, we may risk failing to divine the person apart from the work, allowing ourselves to romanticize and sanitize back-breaking, finger-chopping labor, until the image of the laborer no longer corresponds to anything in reality. Flattening flesh-and-blood people into mere labor identities sets us up to internalize the very same capitalist mindset that we despise, that which only sees the person as a producer.

A butcher is not a charming character in a nursery rhyme or a Richard Scarry book. He doesn't spend his days cutting steaks because he was born with a saw in his hands—he does it to survive. My point is less to suggest a vocabulary change than one in mindset: in allowing our eyes to only see *a laborer* rather than *a person doing labor*, we erase a key distinction. Gone is the humanity behind the act, gone the harsh truth that people are coerced into these roles. Instead, we blissfully accept "labor" as a character trait or a calling, when it is still an act premised on the need to eat.

But of course, part of the left's project should be and is to support the worker: to improve their condition, demand fair compensation, and in an ideal world, hand them the means of production. I have faith that we can do all this, while at the same time separating the person from their method of sustaining themselves. Let's insist upon the kind of world that was forbidden for my father, a place where a worker has a right to exist outside of his productive capabilities. A world where my father can choose the shape of his hands, and where no matter his chosen path, he can be promised a restful Sunday. ♣

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— Hummelland —



The Dimensions of Noah's Ark

By Aisling McCrea

A while back, I read a book called *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic Over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* by one Joseph P. Laycock. The book covers, in extensive detail, the creation and rise in popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games in the 1970s and 1980s,

and the subsequent backlash against them led by the religious right in America, who viewed the players of such games as participants in Satanism. I'm actually not a fan of tabletop games—I have the nerdy disposition for it, but not the patience—but I will read anything about the Satanic Panic that's put in front of me, and I enjoyed the book a lot. More importantly, there was one line in the book that stuck with me; not even a pivotal line, for that matter, more of an aside than anything, but an observation that I have thought about countless times ever since.

The book quotes Karen Armstrong, a writer on comparative religion, on the difference between what the Greeks called *mythos* and *logos*. *Logos* is, roughly speaking, knowledge gained through the world of science, reason and observation, through which we can understand the material world and the things in it, the laws of cause and effect in our environment, and how to navigate the more literal aspects of our world. We know, for example, that if we are feeling hungry, it is because of certain chemical processes in our brain and our digestive system, signalling that our bodies are in need of physical sustenance, and that if we eat, the chemical processes will stop and the hungry feeling will go away. We know that if we drop some of the food while eating, gravity will cause it to fall into our laps. On

the other hand, *mythos* has been described by Armstrong as having to do with “the more elusive aspects of human experience:” all of that which cannot quite be explained in terms of the literal, mundane, or rational. It covers stories of supernatural events and experiences—the actions of a god or gods, if you like—which are not *literally* true by the standards of *logos*, but are meaningfully true in some other sense: psychologically, emotionally, spiritually.

SO HOW DID *MYTHOS* AND *LOGOS* EXPLAIN evangelical Christians' hatred of spooky monster games? According to Armstrong, fundamentalist forms of religion—such as the schools of Christianity that dominated the Reagan years—collapsed these two worlds of understanding into one. One might think that *mythos* was the preferred realm of evangelicals, since they believe so strongly in God. But no—it's *logos* that they love, and *mythos* they have no use for. For example, other schools of Christianity could understand Genesis as truth without it being *literally* true; God could have handed down to mortals a story about the Earth's creation that imparted some kind of divine meaning, without negating everything *logos* told us about evolution and cosmology. But to

fundamentalists, the Bible being true meant the Earth must have been made in seven days, because the Bible is the Word of God and every word of it is true, and true means *materially and logically and scientifically true*. The laws of our mundane world had to be the laws through which God was seen, too. Every piece of proof that the Earth was older than 6,000 years old which had been found through *logos* had to be “debunked” in the world of *logos*, or at least an imitation of it; hence the building of the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, the arguments about whether or not dinosaurs were in the Garden of Eden, the attempts to explain the dimensions of Noah’s Ark and exactly how a pair of every animal on Earth managed to fit in there. (This also goes some way towards explaining the prosperity gospel, the belief that material wealth is proof of God’s favor and flows towards the righteous—after all, money is how we value things in the material world, so why not in the next world, too? What other measure of value could there be?)

Laycock, the author of *Dangerous Games*, draws on Armstrong to explain why fundamentalist evangelicals were frightened and suspicious of Dungeons & Dragons, along with any other form of art that played heavily on supernatural themes and gathered an intensely invested fanbase (such as heavy metal music). Since all things magical and mythical had to be interpreted in literal terms, they could not understand why people would feel so drawn into alternative worlds and be so fascinated by talk of summoning spells and pentagrams unless they were *actually talking about summoning literal demons, the actual demons with the horns and everything*. This belief was bolstered by a few tragic cases of suicides by teenagers with interests in these types of artforms, a shamefully reductive understanding of what had happened to these young people. Of course, people with all kinds of interests suffer from mental health issues, and deal with difficult circumstances that drive them to take their own life. It was too complicated for many to imagine that games might have been an escape for them, or dark music a way of hearing and

expressing truths they already felt.

In fundamentalist forms of religion, the stories from the sacred texts are true, and anyone else’s form of *mythos* is at best nonsense that should be forbidden, and at worst an existential threat to the *real* truth. But anthropologists and sociologists have long pointed out that belief and action inspired by *mythos* are not only entirely compatible with the world of *logos*, but provide multiple important social functions. (Please note that while Armstrong tends to use *mythos* in a narrower sense, to refer more specifically to pre-modern mythologies, I will be using the term in a broader sense, to refer to all non-literal or non-rational parts of our understanding of what is true: rituals, customs, superstition, storytelling, art, and transcendent experiences.) In her seminal 1966 book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas describes how societies around the world have historically built their own concepts of the “clean” and “unclean” alongside myths and rituals which maintain and enforce social boundaries. They do this not necessarily out of ignorance of how things “really” work, but because these concepts fill the margins between what can be literally accounted for and therefore fully controlled. The book also explains how rituals and symbolism give meaning and order, help us mentally find a place for complex or murky concepts, give direction when we are unsure of what to do, and provide comfort after death and tragedy. Sometimes it can be as big as partaking in a ritual that feels powerful and utterly transformative; sometimes it can be as small as helping you pick out what kind of breakfast you should eat when you’re hoping for a good day.

IF YOU ARE READING THIS THINKING YOU’RE not really a *mythos* kind of person—because you are not religious and have never had a supernatural experience—you are incorrect. Do you support a sports team, and do you feel ecstatic when “we” (the players you have never met or played with) win? Do you have an old shirt you should really throw out, but you refuse to do so because it feels “special” in some way? Do you feel people should treat you especially nicely on your birthday? Do you avoid stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk? Have you ever been moved by a piece of art in a way that can’t be put into words? Do you get excited when you find an unusually large potato chip? Have you ever stopped on a perfectly ordinary street, in the rain, looked at the ordinary houses or a certain whorl of tree-bark, and thought “my god, the world is here, and it really is alive”?

Not only do we need *mythos* to help us find these moments of deeper meaning, we need *mythos* to give shape to the total mess that is our lives. If you look back on your own life, you probably mentally separate it into different phases, considering certain moments to be “turning points” or classifying some phases as happier or more miserable. Realistically, our lives tend to turn



from happy to sad to neutral in periods of hours or days, not in overarching seasons, yet we tend to think of our lives in terms of constructs of different sizes: our childhood, adolescence and young adulthood; spring when we clean, New Year when we go to the gym, and fall when we drink pumpkin spice lattes (even if we live in climates where the seasons don't actually feel clear-cut). As Douglas puts it in *Purity and Danger*:

There are some things we cannot experience without ritual. Events which come in regular sequences acquire a meaning from relation with others in the sequence. Without the full sequence individual elements become lost, imperceptible. For example, the days of the week, with their regular succession, names and distinctiveness: apart from their practical value in identifying the divisions of time, they each have meaning as part of a pattern. Each day has its own significance and if there are habits which establish the identity of a particular day, those regular observances have the effect of ritual.

We need these kinds of rituals and segmentations so we can understand our own life as more than just a jumble of events. People generally do not have the power to remember every single day with its events and its moods and transitory thoughts, and if we did, it might make it more difficult to tease out the greater meaning of our lives, not less. In the short story by Borges, *Funes el memorioso* ("Funes The Memorious"), a man wakes up from an accident with the ability to remember everything he has ever encountered in microscopic detail. Rather than elucidate things, his ability becomes a massive hindrance to his life, because he loses all ability to see the forest for the trees. When he tries to think of "a flower", he cannot—he can only think of every individual constituent part of every individual flower he has ever seen. It is not the near-infinite facts of our lives which grant us meaning, but the larger patterns, the ideas, the rituals, the feelings. Without wider ideas, patterns and symbols beyond the individual items we see in front of us, we have no way to understand what is important and why; we cannot fully think, and we are lost.

While Armstrong is by no means the only person to identify different categories of truth, and the strength of her categorization has been debated by classicists, I was struck by her ideas more than anything else in Laycock's book. Indeed, in the years since I have been thinking about *mythos* and *logos* in relation to all sorts of shit; it has become a lens through which everything suddenly appears to me in a new light. It helps to explain the Satanic Panic, yes, but this rejection of *mythos* didn't die with the 1980s. In fact, the denial of *mythos* is everywhere in our culture, and it can partially explain why so much of our approach to everything artistic, challenging or mysterious seems reductive, dull, and unimaginative. It also offers an explanation for why, when evangelical Christianity came under heavy criticism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the critics themselves formed a culture (the so-called "New Atheism") that now seems unbearably trite, revelling in arrogant nitpickery and skilled only in missing the point. While the New

Atheists' concerns about the influence of religion in government might have seemed refreshing to many in the 2000s (including myself and, I'd wager, many of the readers of this magazine), in retrospect, the worldview they espouse now seems incomplete—not false, necessarily, but simply unequipped to deal with the more complex and unanswerable questions about our world, leading many to the conclusion that two-dimensional appeals to "science" and "reason" are not enough to create a deep and satisfactory knowledge of our universe. Think of Richard Dawkins berating Mehdi Hasan for believing Muhammad ascended to heaven on a winged horse, and unable to do anything but sputter "*oh, come on!*" in response to the idea that yes, a highly educated man could believe in miracles, or Neil deGrasse Tyson's complaints about the inaccuracy of descriptions of the moon in the lyrics of love songs.

THIS REJECTION OF IMAGERY, SYMBOLISM, OR ANY higher meaning that cannot be reduced to the literal, has become especially pervasive in contemporary art criticism. This is not to say that there isn't still great art criticism; it's just that the internet has led to a much greater volume of *all* criticism, and much of it is dominated by a worldview that seems to reject metaphor, symbolism, mood and tone, or at least render them secondary to "plot." (By "plot" here I mean "the literal events that happen to the characters and no more," ignoring the possibility that other aspects of the creation can comprise essential parts of our understanding). One of the most popular genres of movie "criticism" on the internet right now is the "ending EXPLAINED" video, where any ambiguity or multiplicity of meaning you felt at the end of the film you've just seen can be cleared away like spilled popcorn. *How did Jack Nicholson get into that old photograph at the end of The Shining? Is Travis Bickle dead at the end of Taxi Driver? Is Deckard a replicant?* Surely *these* are the discussions such movies are supposed to raise, and if enough nerds puzzle over screenshots for enough time, the definitive answer will be found and the movie will be solved.

The video essayist Dan Olson made a video for his Youtube channel, *Folding Ideas*, called "*Annihilation* and Decoding Metaphor," expressing his frustration at this complete refusal to countenance the themes of a film as an integral part of its meaning (although he is far from the first or only person to comment on this troubling trend). In particular, he looks at *Annihilation*, a horror film with strong and unsubtle themes exploring how people are changed by trauma, which also happens to be the subject of endless "*Annihilation EXPLAINED!*" type videos. Says Olson:

The reason I dislike these [videos] so much is that they are often a form of anti-intellectualism operating on the attitude that ignorance is purity; that an understanding of culture that rejects metaphor, that rejects the symbolic and clings to the literal is more true. It is part of the process of denying art the capacity for meaning.[...] It is rare to find someone who will entirely reject the

idea of approaching film broadly from a thematic or metaphorical point of view, but all too common to find people who will lightly sneer at the actual attempts to do so, and suggest that it's overthinking things...This is a consistent feature within modern film criticism which, taken on the whole, is in a distinct phase where the loudest voices in film discussion are incurious, proudly ignorant, and approach plot as a problem to be unpacked and solved.

As Olson notes, this is not to say that no one who makes these “explainer” videos is completely unfamiliar with the concept of metaphors. It is more that metaphors are considered more of a secondary matter or bonus feature—an extra level one can consider if one is “into that sort of thing”—but not something that may displace the “real” truth, the primary truth, of whether the spooky alien dies at the end or not. An earlier video of Olson’s, “The Thermian Argument,” excoriated the tendency of genre fans to excuse problematic content by referencing justifications from the lore, as if the fictional worlds they loved were literally real and not the deliberate constructions of an author with intentions. (“No, it’s not weird that the house elves are slaves! The books explain that they *like* being slaves!”)

These two video essays target slightly different phenomena, but phenomena which are manifestations of the same root problem: by getting bogged down in the literal objects, characters, and rules that populate the world—the “lore,” the “canon”—the fan loses sight of *why* the author chose to populate the world that way in the first place. All of this creation, real as it may feel to an enthusiastic audience, was the product of ideas that are worthy of discussion. The literal-minded fans are Funes the memorious, able to identify every Star Wars character and their backstory in perfect detail, with no ability to step back and ask themselves why a story about rebelling against an empire makes people feel so good, and whether they should think about that next time they put forth an opinion on Black Lives Matter.

Not only that, but if someone tried to connect the two within their earshot, this sort of fan might be dismissive or even indignant. The Star Wars characters live in another universe, where Black Lives Matter does not exist. They can’t “symbolize” or draw comparisons with anything in our world because they’re not *of* our world. It’s almost as if the fans believe they are actual people, and not artistic creations within a larger history of creation. Just as evangelicals imagined D&D players picking up the cards and going into the literal world of wizards and monsters, when certain kinds of fans consume entertainment, they see themselves as entering the literal world of their favorite franchise, learning more and more “facts” about the world, and the only thing that problematizes its existence is when the “reality” breaks—for example with an inconsistency in the lore. (Apart from “ending EXPLAINED” videos, one of the most popular kinds of movie-related videos on Youtube is the “everything wrong with” video, where a person blithely points out every “plot hole” they can

find in a popular movie, no matter how small or irrelevant.) Not only is this a reductive way to understand individual stories, but it leads to a bleaker artistic landscape. The executives who commission new media know that this obsession with filling in the details of stories is popular, and easier to present to an audience than something new and risky, which is why almost no big movies are brand-new creations any more, but every popular media property now has a sequel, a prequel, and a Netflix spinoff where you can see your favorite character’s “origin story.”

TO BE CLEAR, THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH geeking out over details, or pondering the minutiae of a fictional world. The issue is when the details are *all* an audience can see, at the expense of everything else that makes art meaningful.

One of the most captivating art projects to come out of the past five years is a Youtube series called *Petscop*, which went viral in 2017 and held the attention of its fanbase until it ended in late 2019, despite frequent months-long gaps between the videos. *Petscop* is a creative project to which it is impossible to do justice in the written form, but I’ll try. It consists of 24 videos, each showing a clip from a fictional videogame called “Petscop,” sometimes narrated by a mysterious player named “Paul.” *Petscop* at first seems to be an innocent 90s-era Playstation game about catching various creatures, but soon begins to turn strange, making enigmatic references to dark and traumatic subjects, and forcing Paul to wander the ominous landscapes of the game, puzzling out meaning from eldritch symbols, and confronting troubles that seem to relate to events in his own life, or the lives of people he knows.

If a story about an evil videogame sounds a little goofy to you, that’s unsurprising, as *Petscop* was clearly inspired by the oft-goofy “creepypasta” genre of internet-era horror stories, which often feature such things. However, *Petscop* elevates the trope of the haunted videogame into something much more complex and terrifying. Without ever having a jumpscare, it slowly builds a near-unbearable dread, not through telling you what is going to happen, but merely through tone, aesthetics, and blood-curdling implications. It also undoubtedly conveys thematic meaning, and on very difficult subjects, exploring childhood abuse, trauma, and memory through a highly complex, non-linear storyline that refuses to give any easy answers. (And how could there be any easy answers, given such a subject?) Rather than ending with a neat wrapup of the highly cryptic plot, *Petscop* appeared, enveloped its audience in fear and confusion, then quietly announced its conclusion, deliberately denying its viewers a simple resolution and leaving them with an unsettling experience rife with unspoken and multiplicitous meanings. I cannot describe for certain what happens in it at all, and it is one of the most phenomenal experiences I’ve had with art in some time.

As soon as the creator confirmed the series had finished, scores

THE DIMENSIONS OF NOAH'S ARK

of fans seethed in rage and disappointment, mad that there was no “explanation” of what it all meant. They felt their time had been wasted: people had written entire documents on the windmill time-travel theory, the hypnotism theory, the rebirthing theory, whichever theory would take the enthralling, upsetting, utterly profound experience they’d had with the series and break it down into a series of coherent plot points. Many called the sudden ending a copout, declaring the creator must have just got stuck or messed up somewhere. If there were no clear answers, then as a series it was useless; if it didn’t have a sensible plot, with a character doing things and experiencing events in a literal, coherent order, it couldn’t possibly have any meaning. Many *Petscop* fans are young, and it is possible that this short-sightedness is just a matter of inexperience with difficult media. Nonetheless, I wish I could pin this message to their Reddit threads: *the parts you can’t explain? That’s where the art is.*

All the stories in humanity’s history that have had a lasting impact on us, from the Bible to Greek myths to the X-Men franchise, have been rich in meaning beyond the lit-

eral words and events they offered us. Whether it’s striking the right emotional note, enveloping us in a fantasy world, making us reflect on our own lives, inviting a search for meaning, provoking discussion, or giving us experiences we can’t explain, the role of art has always been so much more than laying out a linear “plot” complete with all the mundane details of exactly how character X got to location Y in a way that feels “realistic.” The undercurrent of excessive literalism and obsession with story mechanics that plagues modern fandoms and criticism is pernicious, and it denies us the tools we need to find meaning in art. To understand art, we need *mythos*—which means we need *mythos* to live. ✚

OUR DUCK STAMP

HERE IS WHERE THINGS STAND: the “Federal Duck Stamp” is issued annually by the U.S. Department of Fish & Wildlife. If you wish to hunt ducks on federal lands, you must purchase a duck stamp. It is essentially a license to kill, though it is used to support conservation efforts. But the federal government has long made the Duck Stamp a cheerful thing, running an annual contest in which duck-loving artists compete to have their work emblazoned upon the stamp. Usually entrants are simply waterfowl enthusiasts and thus the stamp features a simple picture of a canvasback or mallard amid the reeds. But the Trump Administration, in keeping with its policy of making everything worse (although in a way, more honest), mandated that Duck Stamp art “must also include appropriate waterfowl hunting-related accessories or elements.” As the Audubon Society documents in its report, “Duck Stamp Artists Turn to Spent Shotgun Shells to Meet New Pro-Hunting Mandate,” artists thus began to litter their scenes with shell casings to show that the ducks were not simply sitting around enjoying themselves but were there to be shot at.

Current Affairs laments the Trump administration’s rule, obviously, though we lament even more the fact that anybody would needlessly attack a duck in the first place. We believe we have a solution, however, that can satisfy the new rule while still taking a strong stance in favor of duck dignity and aquafowl autonomy. Our entry into the Duck Stamp contest, “Duck Vengeance” by Jesse Rubenfeld, is the first Stamp in which the hunted becomes the hunter. If there must be Duck Stamps, let them stamp for justice, stamp for freedom, stamp for the rights of ducks from shore to shore of this cursed country.

Audubon Affairs
presents...
Duck Vengeance

PURCHASE OF THE CURRENT AFFAIRS DUCK STAMP DOES NOT ENTITLE YOU TO HUNT DUCKS. BUT DOES ENTITLE YOU TO PERMIT ANY DUCK FOUND ON FEDERAL LAND TO HUNT DOWN YOUR ENEMIES FOR YOU. EACH STAMP IS WORTH ONE MURDER. DUCKLINGS TAKE COMMISSIONS FOR HALF A STAMP.







FATHOMING THE SIXTIES

BY NATHAN J ROBINSON

"We can't afford a scenario where it comes down to Donald Trump with his nostalgia for the social order of the 1950s and Bernie Sanders with his nostalgia for the revolutionary politics of the 1960s."

- PETE BUTTIGIEG, FEB. 25, 2020 (DELETED TWEET)

"There were times when I found Reverend Wright's sermons a little over the top... Often, they sounded dated, as if he were channeling a college teach-in from 1968 rather than leading a prosperous congregation that included police commanders, celebrities, wealthy businesspeople, and the Chicago school superintendent."

- BARACK OBAMA, A PROMISED LAND

THERE WAS A PERIOD IN MY LIFE AROUND age 13—and now I can hardly believe I did this, but I did—when I would only listen to music recorded between 1965 and 1969. I was very strict about this. *Abbey Road* was okay, because even though it was released in 1970 it was recorded in 1969. *The Who Live At Leeds* was not okay, because while the songs on it were from the 60s, the concert itself took place in February of 1970. A difficult case was Jimi Hendrix's *Band of Gypsies* album, which had been recorded at concerts held on New Year's Eve 1969 and New Year's Day 1970. Was it Sixties? Or was it Seventies?

This was, of course, bonkers. I have thankfully shed my obsessive youthful tendency, and come to appreciate the music of many eras and many lands. I now understand units of temporal measurement are an artificial human construct and



ing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world.”

Certainly, a hell of a lot of things happened in the 60s in very rapid succession, and many were profoundly different from anything Americans had seen happen before. After gliding through the staid Eisenhower era, the story goes, the country suddenly exploded, politically and culturally. Lenin’s observation that “there are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen” seems particularly applicable to those years, during which something new and often unprecedented was happening seemingly every week. SNCC, CORE, and SDS were challenging the existing racial economic hierarchy. Martin Luther King expanded his public demands to encompass not just civil rights but an end to American imperialism and capitalism. Students went on strike and occupied administration buildings. Groups like the Yippies and the Diggers pushed anarchistic and utopian alternatives through stunts and “happenings.” Women’s liberation, gay liberation, the American Indian Movement, the United Farmworkers—marginalized people decided they had had enough and organized themselves. Any attempt to enumerate what happened in those few short years goes on and on. Vietnam. The environmental movement. The consumer movement. Love-ins, be-ins, freak-outs, and acid tests. Malcolm X, then the Black Panthers. The creation of Kwanzaa and “Black is Beautiful.” The Free Speech Movement, the Back to the Land Movement. The Mississippi Freedom Summer. The uprisings in Detroit and Los Angeles. The Young Lords and the Chicano movement. Student strikes and the occupation of administration buildings (“Two, three, many Columbias”). The spread of uprisings around the world, from the Movimiento Estudiantil in Mexico to the Prague Spring to May ‘68 in France. Film and literature were changing (e.g. the Latin American Boom, the French New Wave). LSD was horrifying the government with its potential to make people think new thoughts and “drop out” of decent society. The stunning amount of musical innovation—Motown and *Sgt. Pepper* and Stax and folk-rock and heavy metal and proto-punk and *James Brown Live at the Apollo* and psychedelic pop; top 40 hits had fuzz guitars and Moog synthesizers and mellotrons and sitars. Could the chants of “Black Power,” the Panthers patrolling with semi-automatic weapons and berets, have been anticipated during the run of *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63)? As Eldridge Cleaver put it in *Soul on Ice*, things had suddenly begun “deviating radically from the prevailing Hot-Dog-and-Malted-Milk norm of the bloodless, square, superficial, faceless, Sunday Morning atmosphere that was suffocating the nation’s soul.” It was *something else*, and you can easily tell why living through it may have been bewildering.

that
noth-
ing mag-
ically changed
on the day a 7 dis-
placed a 6 in the calendar.

But it was not *entirely* arbitrary
of me to select those particular five
years out of the entire span of cosmic
time. The 60s, particularly the later ones, have
a special place in the American collective memory.

Those who grew up during the time often speak like some
weird spell came over the world for a few years. “That time
changed all of us, and scarred many,” Annie Gottlieb writes in *Do
You Believe in Magic? The Second Coming of the 60s Generation*. “Be-
tween 1965 and 1970, all the mental and social structures we’d grown
up with were trashed in an orgy of anguish and extravagance, political
outrage and cosmic revelation, drugs ‘n’ sex ‘n’ rock ‘n’ roll.” Gottlieb
interviewed countless Baby Boomers who described themselves by
saying things like “60s people are like an island, different from every-
one around us” and “I feel like an exile in time.” SNCC activist Casey
Hayden called her days in the movement a “holy time” that she has
sometimes “longed for so profoundly.” Hunter S. Thompson likened
coming and going of the era’s zeitgeist to the cresting of a great wave,
but warns those of us who want to understand that “no explanation,
no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense know-

IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO WRITE ABOUT THE 1960s without lapsing into stock images and clichés and familiar names. This *turbulent decade* was *transformational*, there was *social upheaval* and *generational conflict* during which people *questioned authority*. The 60s come to us as a collage and the collage is always the same: Allen Ginsburg, Martin Luther King, love beads, the Beatles, Walter Cronkite talking about the Tet offensive, riots in the streets, etc. It is the Boomer memory-stew seen in *Forrest Gump*, a succession of striking pictures with a groovy soundtrack. Since, as Thompson said, it is impossible to actually get an understanding of what it felt like to be alive at the time, those of us who didn't live through it are left looking at a set of artifacts and trying to fathom the civilization that must have produced them.

Importantly, even to talk about “the 60s” or a “generation” obscures certain facts. For one thing, there is no such thing as “what it was like to be alive at the time,” because people’s experiences were so varied based on their position in society. The portion of Americans who were hanging out in the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco (which is about 10 blocks long in its entirety) or participating in the Freedom Rides, is vanishingly small. Hardly anyone was actually *at* the 1968 Democratic National Convention protests, which is one reason the Chicago police were able to brutalize the demonstrators with such impunity. The 60s are often talked about as if “everything changed” from the 1950s. But for many people, the Big Social Changes filtered down to the individual level only in scraps. Overheard conversations, snippets heard on the news, things seen briefly out a car window. My father, for instance, was working in an aircraft factory in the late 50s and still working in an aircraft factory all through the 60s. He remembers seeing hippie folk-rocker Donovan, pre-fame, out playing his guitar on the grass in Hatfield, England, when both were teens there. He had also vaguely known the future lead singer of The Zombies when they were at school. I believe this is the sum total of the interactions my dad had with the 60s counterculture.

Some people’s 60s (especially middle-class American white people who were not drafted, who could enjoy the Monterey Pop Festival and see light shows at the Fillmore) may have been worthy of nostalgia, but for those sent to Vietnam, their dominant memory from the period might be: being extremely frightened, watching friends die violently, or killing a stranger. (Of course, with “All Across The Watchtower” playing on the radio in the film version) For the people of Vietnam, the 60s were not the slightest bit groovy. They were terrifying years in which the country was bombed to smithereens and a million people died. If you were an Indonesian communist in the mid-60s, you would likely have been among the 500,000 to 1 million people murdered as part of an anti-left purge. If you were a Polish Jew in 1968, you may have been declared an enemy of the state and forced to leave the country, and if you were a Black resident of Rhodesia or South Africa you may have been engaged in a difficult and perilous struggle against white supremacy.

But the wild divergence of individual experiences, the fact that a “social trend” used to define an era may be made by only a small percentage of people, does not mean we must avoid all generalizations, and what we truly cannot afford to do is talk about a mere *turbulent* time. Turbulence is liberal-speak; it suggests that the delicate social order was unbalanced and needed righting. The 60s are best understood as a decade of uprising against an intolerable status quo, met with extreme violent resistance and backlash. The same thing happened over and over, in different permutations. The Black Panthers tried to build an independent Black revolutionary party that declined to moderate its demands for freedom. They were infiltrated, arrested, and sometimes murdered. Reformists in the Czech Republic attempted to democratize the country, and were crushed by the

Soviet Union. Protesters in South Africa marched against apartheid, and were massacred by police. Cops tried to raid the Stonewall Inn and arrest its patrons for the crime of being gay, only to find that the patrons were disinclined to comply this time, and instead issued cries of “Gay Power!” and refused to be arrested, with drag queens fighting the police physically (and winning), in part by joining together in a can-can style kick line dance and kicking the cops while shouting “We are the Stonewall girls / We wear our hair in curls! / We don’t wear our underwear / To show our pubic hair!” to the tune of “Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay.” (Yes, this happened.)

Sometimes they succeeded and sometimes they didn’t. The Stonewall uprising kept the police at bay, and stood at the beginning of a 50-year gay rights crusade that would end up bringing fully legal same-sex marriage to a homophobic country. The armed Black students who took over a building at Cornell helped bring about Black Studies departments in American universities. (Right-wing economist Thomas Sowell calls the armed uprising “the day Cornell died.”) The country is moderately less sexist and racist now, and while we must be careful to note that this is only true relatively speaking—i.e. because white patriarchy was so *total* in the 1950s—it happened because people *made* it happen. Men can wear long hair without getting pulled over and roughed up for it. The environmental movement got us an actual federal agency charged with environmental protection, while the consumer movement got us at least *some* government action to prevent the sale of unsafe and defective products.

FOR PEOPLE LIKE PETE BUTTIGIEG AND BARACK OBAMA, the phrase “The 60s” connotes chaos, *a bit too much radicalism*, things getting out of hand. They see only the collage: those crazy times when all that *stuff* was happening. Sometimes the 60s are even spoken of as a time of *excess democracy*, when people got drunk on the idea of freedom and started going crazy. But we know better: Black Power, gay liberation, feminism, the New Left—they were good, actually. The 60s radicals won and they lost—the Reagan Revolution destroyed some of their accomplishments and turned the clock back. But everything they did win made the country and the world better. They were on the right side.

When we see the 60s this way, what it becomes is not a Turbulent Time Of Upheaval, but an unfinished revolution, a moment when a lot of people became idealistic and raised their expectations of what was possible and necessary, and started putting in incredibly hard and dangerous work in order to make their dreams come true. We know that, but many of us don’t think that much about it, because the 60s have been sanitized and softened. The “I Have a Dream” speech is repeated so often in snippets, so cynically invoked by “colorblind” racists, that hardly anyone remembers that it praised the “marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community” and spat at “gradualism”:

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.

Colorblind? King called for a militant, urgent, uncompromising fight for *racial justice*. He didn’t just demand integration, but economic equality: “the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” He called for a permanent condition of dissatisfaction until “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” (And King was criticized by fellow activists for being *too compromising*.)

Those of us on the left need to start examining the movements of the

60s closely, even if eventually the counterculture was subsumed into the culture and some of the organizations fell apart and some of the leaders sold out or turned conservative or became bitter. After all, what happened was a series of *awakenings* in which people began to think and act in new ways, to challenge that which was previously accepted. That was true of the civil rights movement, of course, a sudden shift from quiet resistance to white supremacy to loud and confrontational resistance. But it was also true on the cultural side. LSD genuinely did expand minds and make people think, despite the bad trips. The importation of Eastern spiritual traditions may, in retrospect, seem somewhat cheesy and even offensive (and the hippies' casual appropriation of Native American clothes is often painful to look at today). Yet it was *good* for Americans to stop thinking of "Western Civilization" as the only culture with value.

The 60s generation did create permanent political and cultural changes, and while it's tempting to downplay the extent to which the United States has made moral progress (unequal country then, unequal country now), doing so risks understating the accomplishments of social movement participants. Some of the changes were remarkable in their rapidity. At the beginning, half of the country was literally an apartheid state. The atmosphere was unbelievably stifling and repressive. Lenny Bruce was arrested for saying that if we'd lost World War II "Truman would have been strung up by the balls"—to mention Harry Truman's balls was considered a matter requiring state intervention! Abortion was a crime. Annie Gottlieb quotes a woman who distinctly remembers being told that she needed to stop smiling so much if she ever wanted to be married. But then, women who had been expected to *obey* their husbands suddenly decided to give a giant middle finger to the patriarchy. They did not actually "burn bras"—though at one protest they did throw some bras into a "Freedom Trash Can." But they made new demands despite intense hostility and violence. (Think about the hostility that gender studies departments get even today and then imagine what it was like for those who were trying to create these departments in a country where spousal rape was legal in every state.)

I AM PROBABLY NOT TELLING YOU ANYTHING YOU DON'T know, but I do think we ought to contemplate it more. (Frequently the problem is not that people don't know things but that they don't think about them enough or work through their implications.) We should do this not merely for the purpose of being grateful to activists like Herbert Lee and Medgar Evers and Viola Liuzzo who died because they believed in equality, but because we, too, are people in a society that needs work, and they offer an example. Those that come out of the 60s radical tradition like Jeremiah Wright and, well, Bernie Sanders—who was getting arrested at desegregation protests in his teens—have a sense of moral urgency and commitment that people like Buttigieg and Obama lack, which is part of *why* young people flocked to the Sanders campaign. It was fresh and new, because it was old.

I recently interviewed Lee Weiner, who was part of the Chicago 7, and was struck by how he did indeed seem like a person out of a different time. He had a pure and energetic idealism that was jarring. He wasn't cynical, even though he had no illusions. It did feel strangely *dated*. It did feel *60s*. But it also felt good. I wished more people were like that. I'll take beautiful hippy dippy flower children over the doomsaying. 60s leftism has a sincerity to it, the audacity to say words like *love* and mean them. *Power to the people. Give peace a chance.* They meant it. CORE leader Floyd McKissick declared: "1966 shall be remembered as the year we left our imposed status as Negroes and became Black Men." This kind of transformative ambition (this year!) is audacious. But why settle for scraps? And why wait?

On the ground, it did appear as if things were changing overnight. Peter Berg of the radical Diggers collective recalls how it looked:

One day the doorman at the Village Gate was a guy in a coat and tie, complaining about a bunch of weirdos showing up. A couple of weeks later, it's a new guy, only he's wearing a beard, lots of jewelry, and a leather vest, and a leather pouch hanging on his side. It really felt like we were in the forefront of a massive social transformation. American society of the 1950s was being left behind. There was a lot of cracking of walls, and there was going to be a flood. But was it going to be up to the ankles, the knees, or the neck? It was a very exciting time.

Things did happen that seem almost unimaginable today. When the British Home Secretary (a Labour Party member) tried to give a talk at Oxford University, students tried to throw him in a fish pond in protest of the Vietnam war. In fact, the spread of radicalism to elite institutions was remarkable. Consider this exhortation produced by students at the Harvard design school during the 1969 student strike there:

**STRIKE FOR THE EIGHT
DEMANDS STRIKE BE
CAUSE YOU HATE COPS
STRIKE BECAUSE YOUR
ROOMMATE WAS CLUBBED
STRIKE TO STOP EXPANSION
STRIKE TO SEIZE CONTROL
OF YOUR LIFE STRIKE TO
BECOME MORE HUMAN STR
IKE TO RETURN PAIN HALL
SCHOLARSHIPS STRIKE BE
CAUSE THERE SNO POETRY
IN YOUR LECTURES
STRIKE BECAUSE CLASSES
ARE A BORE STRIKE FOR
POWER STRIKE TO SMASH THE
CORPORATION STRIKE TO MAKE
YOURSELF FREE STRIKE TO
ABOLISH ROTC STRIKE BECAUSE
THEY ARE TRYING TO SQUEEZE
THE LIFE OUT OF YOU STRIKE**

Today a good part of the social order has been restored, and the university's students are dutifully bound for McKinsey and Goldman Sachs. The students do not go on strike or stage armed takeovers of administration buildings.

It can be very rewarding to comb back through all the "60s stuff" and try to see it with fresh eyes, to defamiliarize ourselves and appreciate it anew. For instance, I recently went back and listened to some of Pete Seeger's live albums, the ones where the audience sings along. I used to find sing-a-longs cheesy. No longer. I tried to hear "We Shall Overcome" the way it sounded to the people singing it. When you do it that way, it can bring you to tears.

There's a lot of rubbish from the 60s, and some very bad ideas. The attraction to Mao and Castro among some leftists was, to say the least,

unfortunate. The “White Panther Party” was a solidarity organization for its counterpart, not a white supremacist group, but that’s not something you want to have to explain at the beginning of every conversation. The drug culture produced some great art, but broke a lot of lives. I liked the Merry Pranksters’ colorfully-painted bus, but they seem to have done little but drop acid and hang out with the Grateful Dead. Timothy Leary seems like he was a goofball. When you read the announcement for 1967’s “Human Be-In” it’s impossible to take seriously:

A new concert of human relations being developed within the youthful underground must emerge, become conscious, and be shared so that a revolution of form can be filled with a Renaissance of compassion, awareness, and love.

Far out. But what the fuck does it mean?

Still, I want to suggest that there’s value even in this. There’s something charming about it. It’s drivel, yes, but sweet drivel. I’m not going to make fun of people for being this idealistic, for believing that an actual *renaissance of love* could take place. I wish some people believed that today. Everyone I know seems to think we’re doomed. In the midst of the Cold War, there was just as much reason to believe the world was doomed, but a few people dared to be utopians and felt that not only could you make marginal improvements to the operation of the political system, but there could be a society-wide change in people’s entire consciousness. Consider the 1962 Port Huron Statement’s sincere utopianism:

Theoretic chaos has replaced the idealistic thinking of old—and, unable to reconstitute theoretic order, men have condemned idealism itself. Doubt has replaced hopefulness—and men act out a defeatism that is labeled realistic. The decline of utopia and hope is in fact one of the defining features of social life today. The reasons are various: the dreams of the older left were perverted by Stalinism and never re-created; the congressional stalemate makes men narrow their view of the possible; the specialization of human activity leaves little room for sweeping thought; the horrors of the twentieth century symbolized in the gas ovens and concentration camps and atom bombs, have blasted hopefulness. To be idealistic is to be considered apocalyptic, deluded. To have no serious aspirations, on the contrary, is to be “tough-minded.”

It’s a mistake to write off all stuff that feels *dated*, because some of it has great value and should be appreciated more. Take, for instance, the peace sign. It has utterly lost its meaning today. People might see it and

think the *word* peace, but it certainly doesn’t conjure up the original aspirations of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament toward a world free of advanced weaponry where all nations lived in harmony. Instead, it’s so closely associated with cartoonish hippiedom that hardly anyone wears or displays it sincerely (save for the cartoonishly hippieish). British artist Gerald Holtom, who created the peace sign for the CND in 1958, during a moment of personal despair, combined the semaphore symbols for “N” and “D,” and was also inspired by the position of the peasant’s arms in Goya’s painting “The Third of May 1808,” which depicts the execution of Spanish resisters to the Napoleonic occupation.

The peace sign was immensely effective—everyone knows what it means. It may be one of the most well-designed logos a social movement has ever had. In fact, it’s *too* well-designed, because it became iconic, and having become iconic, it became vague. It does not mean to us what it meant in the 1960s, when it was fresh and seeing it might have made you think about how insane nuclear weapons are. But perhaps we ought to bring it back, proudly and without embarrassment. Perhaps all that language about changing consciousness, All You Need Is Love, “turn on, tune in, drop out”—well, maybe instead of cringing or laughing we can take it a little more seriously. Not that we should do it all again. (I’m not going Back To The Land, *thank you very much*, and I would have detested the mud-caked Woodstock experience—though I am persuaded by my *Current Affairs* colleague Garrison Lovely’s argument that America would be better off if more people did psychedelics). But we could be just a little bit inspired.

THE VISIBLE MANIFESTATIONS OF CULTURAL AND political change, the stuff you actually witness, can seem to occur by some magic force. That force is often spoken of in the passive voice—people were moved, the country was changed. The force’s origins and directions were murky. It seemed unguided. It was a mishmash of things that all happened all of a sudden and then seemed to slow down.

But it’s people who do things, not “spirits of the era,” and there are all sorts of forgotten individuals whose work we can look to and draw on for present-day inspiration. Richard Oakes of the American Indian Movement, for instance, organized the seizure and occupation of Alcatraz Island by a group of Indians, an occupation that lasted 19 months and successfully touched off a new indigenous rights movement. Oakes was 30 when he was shot to death by a white racist, and one important reason the 60s movements “died” is that so many great potential leaders were literally murdered (see also: Fred Hampton). The achievement of Oakes and the AIM in holding out against a federal siege for so long (with the government cutting off power and water) should have made him a household name, but so many great projects and people from the time are forgotten. I am always finding out about figures and actions I overlooked before; I only recently heard of Doris Derby, who co-founded the Free Southern Theater, which traveled around the South putting on free-admission all-Black productions of everything from Ossie Davis’ *Purlie Victorious* to Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in rural Black areas. Derby was from New York City, and to go into Mississippi as a young Black woman during Jim Crow to put on theatrical productions took idealism and courage. She may even have been called unpragmatic—surely voting rights came first, theater second? But the Free Southern Theater worked, and was popular wherever it went. It died in 1980—free tickets can’t keep a theater going, and the wealthy couldn’t give a shit about letting sharecroppers have great theater—at the beginning of the Reagan years and the end of so much that had been accomplished.

Underground newspapers and magazines and comics, G.I. coffee



houses—there was even an independent leftist wire service, the Liberation News Service, to compete with the AP and give college newspapers an alternate source for national news stories. Some of the books of the New

Left are still worth going back and reading, like Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton's *Black Power* and C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*. I keep a bunch of out-of-

print 60s books around for inspiration. The

New Left was intellectually rich, focusing primarily on race, gender, and economic justice but also critiquing culture, technology, and the bureaucratic

structure of the university. Paul Goodman, forgotten today,

was a utopian anarchist whose *Growing Up Absurd* caused

many young people to start questioning the American

Dream and demanding a more meaningful existence.

Valerie Solanas is known today mostly for her art criticism

(specifically, she shot Andy Warhol) but her *SCUM* [Society for Cutting Up Men] *Manifesto* is

an extraordinary piece of writing that begins with the

most memorable opening sentence for a manifesto since

"a spectre is haunting Europe": *"Life in this society being, at best,*

an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there

remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking

females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete auto-

mation and destroy the male sex."

It gets more aggressively radical from there. (Read it.)

Every time I open a leftist book published in the 60s, I feel both refreshed and

saddened. Saddened because the spirit of the times largely melted away, but refreshed at finding new

comrades. I draw little bits of insight here and there. I don't

subscribe to Herbert Marcuse's social analysis, but I always think about a point he makes in *One-Dimensional Man* about the way acronyms eliminate meaning—eventually we come to talk about the UN rather than the United Nations, which slowly turns our conception of it into a bureaucratic agency rather than a project to unite all nations. When Elizabeth Warren ran for president, one reason I was so cynical is that I remember a

passage in Vine Deloria, Jr.'s 1969 Indian manifesto *Custer Died For Your*

Sins about how remarkable it is that white people always have Cherokee grandmothers. Deloria is not the only one to notice the phenomenon itself, but he specifically notes the fact that the tribe is always *Cherokee* and it's always a grandmother rather than a grandfather—Deloria speculates that this is because an "Indian princess" is romantic while an Indian man is still seen as savage. This is the tiniest scrap from a brilliant book, one I wish I'd been assigned rather than having to discover through personal curiosity

about the 60s. From Abbie Hoffman to Jane Jacobs to Murray Bookchin to Angela Davis, reading works by 60s idealists has sharpened my moral vision and turned me into a more cheerful and committed person.

OUR TASK, FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE END, IS NOT TO be nostalgic for the 60s or to try to recreate them. They were a dark and violent time, and while there's much to love in the clothes and music and movies, the Vietnam War

was such an atrocity that it makes viewing the era through rose-colored

day-glo granny glasses seem twisted. Depoliticized portrayals like Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time In Hollywood*, which eliminates the dark side

of the 60s by literally imagining an alternate reality in which the Manson murders did not take

place, miss all the stuff that matters. 60s radicals *did* change their society for the better. They didn't create

a utopia, and many of their projects failed. But the country, and the world, were better

off because of the work that hundreds of thousands of individuals put in, because of their creativity and their

refusal to accept that *the way things are* is necessarily how they have to be. Anyone who feels

the need for *more* social transformation here and now should study the 60s, not to see

them through the haze of white Boomer nostalgia—times that *happened* and then *ended* and are not coming back—but as offering live and relevant lessons. The reduction of the 60s to a collage of chaos has obscured

what is most important about that time, namely that a lot of people woke up and started trying to remake their world. Their work should have been

the beginning of something that it is our job to pick up and continue. We need to figure out what went wrong and what went right, and to understand that what went right can happen again, if we make it. ☺

THERE WAS MUSIC

The music shouldn't dominate our understanding of the era, but damn the music was good! Innovative, distinctive, diverse, and danceable. Musicians evolved quickly—often with chemical assistance. Brian Wilson went from writing sun 'n' fun songs about surfing and hot rods to introspective meditations about time and heartbreak and meaning. In the 50s, Buddy Holly (a great pioneer himself) was singing lyrics like "Pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty Peggy Sue"—whereas a psychedelic record I have from 1967 by a British band called (of course) Kaleidoscope contains the lines: "In the room of percussion / The discussion slides as you enter through the door / And the one armed bandit / Laughs aloud and disappears once more / My God, the spiders are everywhere!" That last line made me crack up when I first heard it, but say what you will, it's definitely a rapid change from songs about going to the drive-in. (A lot of the worst of the stuff is probably Bob Dylan's fault.) Anyway, despite the risk of nostalgia, my musical tastes are still sixties-dominated, and it wouldn't be a thing about the era if it didn't have a soundtrack, so here's a playlist for you. With one exception, I've tried to avoid the hits on oldies compilations and present an array of tracks you might not have heard on endless rotation, songs that give a flavor of the diversity of sounds that came out of the decade. You might hate some of them, but you can still get in the mindset of those who sang them, played them, and danced to them.

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS SIXTIES PLAYLIST

Billy Preston (feat. Sly Stone) — Can't She Tell
Rita & The Tiaras — Gone With The Wind Is My Love
Barbara Lynn — Maybe We Can Slip Away
Trini Lopez — We'll Sing In The Sunshine
The Hondells — Endless Sleep
Pete Seeger — Deep Blue Sea (Live at Newport)
Los Shakers — Que Amor
Kaleidoscope — In The Room of Percussion
Little Richard — I Don't Know What You've Got
Donovan — The Land Of Doesn't Have To Be
Fred Neil — The Dolphins
The Remains — Don't Look Back
Skeeter Davis — Sunglasses
The Rolling Stones — Try A Little Harder
Garnet Mimms — As Long As I Have You
Irma Thomas — It's Raining
Ros Serey Sothea — Don't Be Angry
Elizabeth Cotten — Shake Sugaree
Dorothy Ashby — Afro-Harping
James Brown — Stone Fox
Magic Sam — That's All I Need
The Hollies — Don't You Know
Love — Always See Your Face
5th Dimension — Age of Aquarius

THE PACE OF CHANGE

When was the last time you saw fashion change so fast? Can we do this again, but, like, differently? What will the next revolution in clothes and music look like and when do we get started?



THE TEMPTATIONS [1964]



THE TEMPTATIONS [1968]



JIMI HENDRIX [1964]



JIMI HENDRIX [1967]



THE HOLLIES [1964]



THE HOLLIES [1967]

GOOD NEIGHBORS

Stephen Paddock and the American Nightmare



by Andrew Cardenas

CONTENT WARNING: VIOLENCE

THE NAME OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD IS PROMINENCE. From its vantage high above the landscape, you can see where the I-15 leaves Nevada to dog-ear Arizona and stretch into Utah, and the sagebrush and Joshua trees yield to cottonwoods and sego lilies. Chalky-peach mesas impassively preside over a vast desert, flat and steely, reaching out past nowhere. You can see hills pixelated by ranks of stucco houses, each more or less identical. The place exudes an air of sameness and ersatz invariance: an eerie suspension, like the dummy-towns built for nuclear ruin at the Nevada Test Site, a hundred miles west of here in Mesquite. That day, no children played in the street. Wind chimes

hung above some neighbors' porches, but they didn't ring. The only sound I heard as I parked my car on the corner of Cool Springs and White Water was an intermittent popping from behind a ridge, in an undeveloped area. Construction, most likely, though there is a gun range nearby. The open desert offers plenty of space to fire wildly into nothing.

I thought there might have been press, or that I would have been glared at by locals who knew what I'd come to see. But I was alone as I sidled toward 1372 Babbling Brook Court, steno pad tucked between my arm and ribs like a football. The house is one story, mocha brown with beige accents. There are a handful of shrubs



and budding palms out front, along with some rocks neatly piled around the base of a mesquite tree. And then there's gravel, white and bright in the beating sun. No one lives in the house, and there's no gate closing off the backyard. I could have gotten closer, but couldn't overcome its repellant force, like trying to push together the matching ends of magnets.

I left the neighborhood and found a walking trail that wrapped around behind it, offering a full view of the backyard. The adjacent houses have pools and barbecues, tables and chairs, decorative clocks and other ornaments. But here there are only more shrubs and immaculate gravel—a blankness, ordered but unsignifying, like a curvilinear Zen garden. All the blinds were drawn. No way to see inside.

The last man who lived here, Stephen Paddock, is remembered as the person who, on the night of October 1st, 2017, opened fire into a crowd of 22,000 people at a country music festival on the Las Vegas Strip. He killed 59 people including himself, and shot nearly 500 more, injuring over 800 in total (accounting for the wounds incurred in frantic attempts to escape, victims of trampling and barbed wire lacerations), and traumatized untold thousands more for years to come. Prior to that night, though, homeowners in Prominence knew him as typically “reclusive,” “a real loner,” but, on the whole, a good neighbor, in that he never bothered talking to them much. His family had much the same opinion of him. Shortly after the massacre, Paddock's brother Eric told reporters “this is like you called me up and told me my next door neighbor did this and I'd go ‘wow...well all I've ever seen him do is mow his yard.’” Around that same time, one of Paddock's next door neighbors put a sign on their door that read: “We do not have anything to provide relating to the actions of our neighbor or insight into his behavior. We did not know him.”

Years out from the attack, one has to wonder if anybody really did. Investigators initially identified Paddock's long-term girlfriend Marilou Danley as a possible accomplice, but leads went nowhere. According to the 81-page report released by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, Danley said that in the year before October 1st (or “1 October,” the incident's official appellation), Paddock “had become ‘distant’ and their relationship was no longer intimate.” They were regulars at Peggy Sue's diner and bar in Mesquite, where Danley would sing karaoke, though in that last year he was more interested in spending time at shooting ranges. She took it as a new hobby of his.

According to Danley, Paddock was “germaphobic” and had a strong reaction to smells.” Peggy Reiko Paddock, his ex-wife, remembered him as “intelligent and great with numbers.” His physician described him as “odd” in behavior with “little emotion” shown.” He suspected Paddock might have had bipolar disorder, but Paddock avoided discussing the subject further; he appeared to be afraid of medications. “He helped make me and my family wealthy,” his brother Eric said. “That's the Steve I know.” Paddock had no children and few friends. He was known to take spontaneous trips to Europe, Asia, and South America, mostly by himself. He spent most of his nights at casinos playing video poker, often until six or seven in the morning, and slept during the day. He reportedly disliked sunlight.

The details of Paddock's life aren't *un*interesting, but in the light of his crime they somehow manage to neither provide good answers nor raise good questions. Stephen was the eldest son of Benjamin

Paddock, a bank robber who spent eight years on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list. You might think this could suggest possible childhood trauma or inherited psychopathy, but Benjamin was largely a nonentity in his life. “We didn't grow up under his influence,” Eric assured his interviewers. Stephen Paddock worked for the U.S. Postal Service, then as an IRS agent, then as an auditor for Boeing and Lockheed Martin, and eventually opened a real estate business with his mother. For the last half of his life, though, he made most of his money gambling. “He did it because it was a way to have a fun life, and he didn't go poor doing it,” Eric told reporters. However, in that same interview he claimed that his brother “didn't love the casino,” that it was merely “a means to an end...a place where you lived and they were nice to you, and you could get it paid for by playing slots.” The best summation he could give of his brother's life, delivered with such bewildered sincerity that he might have believed it to be a sufficient epitaph, was this: “He's a guy who lived in a house in Mesquite. He'd go down and gamble in Las Vegas. He did stuff. Ate burritos.”

“Something happened,” Eric said, “that drove him into the pit of hell.”



WHAT WAS THAT SOMETHING? NO ONE KNOWS, and most likely never will. Paddock's autopsy revealed no evidence of disease of any kind in his skull. He left no manifesto, professed no allegiance to any chauvinist cause, left no public record of his interior life whatsoever.* There was so little fodder for a moral panic—no goths, bullies, violent video games, or religious fundamentalism—that most national media moved on from the deadliest and most militarized shooting in American history within a matter of weeks. In a rare moment of contrition, the NRA released a statement calling for tighter regulation of bump stocks, the device Paddock used to modify his semi-automatic rifles to fire like automatic ones. “Dancing showgirls and chapel-wedding newlyweds,” reads an article published in the *Washington Post* a few months after the incident, “were back in the streets of Las Vegas soon after the gunman sprayed across a music festival in October, signaling a quick return to normalcy.” Amanda Fortini, a journalism professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, noted that the article “does what so many articles written by outsiders do and conflates the city with the Strip,” and that the truth is “Las Vegas, its residents, and the tourists who were at the concert have not returned to normalcy.”

1 October is the axis around which public life and memory will revolve in Vegas for some time; the conversations and street corners all now bear its imprint, however faint. In the city I've called home for my entire life, we all know what happened here—the real question, made all the more torturous by its unanswerability, is *why* it happened here. The traditional frames of reference for understanding these sorts of things seem especially inadequate. Guns have something to do with it, yes, and most likely mental illness too, though not in the facile way most are accustomed to thinking of it. What's hardly ever considered for very long or very seriously is the

* Of course this didn't stop the Islamic State (IS) from claiming responsibility for the attack, or a not insignificant number of people from believing them.

social substrate, which was what I drove out to Mesquite to try and find—the inputs that might have plausibly balanced the equation of why he did what he did.

I WRITE THIS AS I SIT AT A BAR IN THE EUREKA CASINO, one of Paddock's old haunts. It's a Saturday, late in the morning. In the parking lot there's a red, prism-shaped tower holding signs that read:

THANK YOU FOR VOTING US

- BEST CASINO
- BEST TABLE GAMING
- BEST HOTEL
- BEST CUSTOMER SERVICE
- BEST SEAFOOD
- BEST BUFFET
- BEST RESTAURANT
- BEST PRIME RIB
- BEST BREAKFAST

Inside, the light is dim and the air smells like any other locals' casino, i.e. like chlorinated shampoo intermixed with liquor and smoke, strangely redolent of some kind of embalming fluid. Frankie Valli's scratchy falsetto soars from the oldies station, above the warbling of the machines and spasmodic hooting from the craps tables. The clientele is turkey-necked, shuffling across the casino floor in bulky orthopedic shoes and thong sandals, in Bermuda shorts, cargos, polo shirts and visors, sunglasses perched on foreheads. The patrons at the bar, fiddling with the thin little straws in their cocktails and idly tapping on the video blackjack screens, look as though they were animatronic fixtures, their expressions weary and unvarying. The mood is purgatorial. This is where some people come to enjoy the twilight of their lives, and there's a certain grotesquerie to them, to their looks of quiet indignation. There's a bald man in wire-frame glasses sitting at a poker machine with one leg crossed over the other, distended gut pouring over his belt and an arm draped over the back of his chair. Two cocktail waitresses in black fishnets and heels have flitted by to ask if he'd like another drink and he's waved them both away without a word. It occurs to me that he could be somebody who might have known Paddock on at least a superficial level, regular to regular. I think of going up and talking to him, but he comes off as someone who takes his leisure time seriously and wouldn't take kindly to interruptions.

People come to Vegas looking for an *experience*: for risk and disinhibition, all highly monitored and controlled without seeming so. They go to the poker tables to test their confidence against that of strangers, and the thrill comes from reading their intentions and the compounding misjudgments. Video poker tends to attract locals. It's quiet, solitary, unglamorous, but in many ways less intimidating, and that's why I think they like it. It's also one of the worst culprits when it comes to gambling addiction. The computer doesn't make mistakes, and it can't lie. It's designed solely to let you win just enough to keep hope alive—in the language of behaviorism, the reinforcement is variable and intermittent, the kind most

likely to get you to keep playing and keep losing.*

There are some people, though, who are canny enough with numbers to know the odds of any particular machine paying out to a few hundredths of a percent, game it to their advantage, and make a living doing it. Stephen Paddock was one of them. David Walton was another. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Walton recalled one day in 2007 at the Mandalay Bay—ten years before Paddock would ascend to the 32nd floor of that very same hotel to carry out his massacre—when Paddock sat at the sole Jacks-or-better 9-6 machine in the casino, offering the best odds out of any other machine in the casino, and gambled for 24 hours straight. Paddock would gamble over \$120,000 an hour to win tickets to enter the \$100,000 raffle, hardly speaking at all.

There's an episode of *The Twilight Zone* titled "A Nice Place to Visit," where Rocky Valentine, "a scared, angry little man," "tired now, tired of running or wanting, of waiting for breaks that come to others but never to him," is shot dead by police after robbing a pawn shop. He wakes up, apparently unharmed, greeted by a man in a white tuxedo who introduces himself as Pip. Rocky asks him what he's after, to which Pip answers, "Only one thing, Mr. Valentine: your comfort. My job is to see to it that you get what you want. Whatever it may be." Pip brings Rocky to a posh hotel room, which he's told now belongs to him, and that his every wish—for money, for women, anything and everything—will be granted. Rocky asks if Pip is his guardian angel; "Something like that," Pip responds. Rocky goes to the casino and finds that he can't lose. Rapturous with his good fortune, he asks Pip if he can see his other friends who've died, and is told that he's the only person who actually lives in the place. After a month, Rocky can't stand it anymore:

I'm bored! Bored!...There's no excitement around here. No kicks...When you win every time that ain't gambling, that's charity...it don't mean anything if it's all set up in advance. Everything's great here. Just the way I always imagined it, except that I don't think I belong here. I don't think I fit in. I don't belong in Heaven, see? I want to go to the other place!

"Whatever gave you the idea you were in Heaven, Mr. Valentine?" Pip exclaims. "This is the other place!"*

STEPHEN PADDOCK WAS NO ROCKY VALENTINE. Towards the end of his life, reports show that losing might have finally caught up to him. He hadn't made it to Hell quite yet. But it's possible to imagine his life as one long, solipsistic delusion, just like Rocky's. He was considered what's known as a "comp hustler," playing and winning enough to be rewarded with free suites, meals, and other perks and special attention from casinos. For Paddock, this may have been enough to convince him he had invalidated the idea that there are some things money can't buy. "It was fun to hang out with Steve because he was a rich guy who hung out in hotels," Eric said. He wasn't like those other rubes, frittering away their savings in games rigged for their failure. He was *smarter* than them. He beat the system, and did it all on his own; he was self-made. He didn't need other

*When video poker was first introduced into Vegas casinos in the 1980s, it proved so popular and profitable that there was talk among the moguls of getting rid of regular poker rooms almost entirely.

people—though he didn't mind if people needed him.

Americans in general are preoccupied with self-reliance, but Nevada in particular—and even more particularly Las Vegas—engenders and encourages that mindset. Prominence is part of the master-planned retirement community of Sun City Mesquite, owned by the real estate company Del Webb. “No one understands the importance of community like Del Webb,” reads the page titled “The Del Webb Difference” on their website. “That’s why we can say we offer so much more than a beautiful home; we offer a place to belong.” But one has to wonder what exactly their idea of community is. The company also owns the Anthem country club in Henderson, Nevada. It’s ironically fitting, I think, that “Anthem” is also the name of the Ayn Rand’s dystopian novella in which the very idea of individuality has been abolished, to the point that people only speak with the pronouns “we,” “out,” and “they.” Rand spent her entire career railing against interdependence, presumably one of the undergirding principles of community; Margaret Thatcher, one of her more eminent acolytes, went so far as to aver “there is no such thing as society.”

My work once sent me to pick up some medical records from a surgeon who lives in Anthem. The entrance is guarded by armed security, who rather aggressively interrogate visitors regarding their reason for coming. After getting past the first gates, I was required to scan my parking pass in order to get past another set of gates (which took me a good amount of fumbling to work) behind which the surgeon’s house resided, a colossal McMansion, a vulgar pastiche of every architectural signifier of wealth you could imagine. It, too, has another set of gates, with a sign reading “Warning: Area Patrolled by German Shepherds.” I took it that this man, too, doesn’t care much for dealing with other people.

Paddock was putatively apolitical, but it’s hard not to consider this ambient, antisocial resentment as at least a partial determinant of his actions. Bunkerville lies just a few miles outside of Mesquite, home of the swaggering rancher and rabid anti-government militant Cliven Bundy. His 2014 standoff with the Bureau of Land Management, along with his sons’ 2016 occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, garnered significant national attention, as well as the full-throated support of the sovereign-citizen movement, who deny the legitimacy of any authority they perceive as violating individual liberty. Observers worried about another Ruby Ridge or Waco, other deadly anti-government standoffs that have left retributive and mimetic acts of violence in their wake. Timothy McVeigh sought vengeance for Ruby Ridge and Waco by bombing a government building in Oklahoma City, killing 168; Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine shooters, aspired to top McVeigh’s body count, hoping to attack on the anniversary of the bombing (they missed it by one day). The intentions of these attacks, including 1 October, were not all political, but the motivations behind them—the sense of privilege and grievance—certainly were.

* Incidentally, Donald Trump has cited this episode as an influence on his business philosophy. As he told the journalist Wayne Barrett, “I want to win, win, win. Everything I want, I want to get. I want the most beautiful women. I want to get the beautiful this and that. I want to never lose again.” Asked on one occasion what his goals were, he responded, “You keep winning and you win and you win. You keep hitting and hitting. And then it somehow doesn’t mean as much as it used to.”



WHEN IT COMES TO MAKING SENSE OF THESE tragedies, I think a literary imagination might be more suitable than reviews of the empirical data. The great Russian writers seem like an obvious place to start. As Pankaj Mishra puts it in his book *Age of Anger*, “Russian writers established randomly aimed crime as a paradigm case of free individuals savouring their identity and asserting their will.” Dostoyevsky in particular, he says, had “seen acutely how individuals, trained to believe in a lofty notion of personal freedom and sovereignty, and then confronted with a reality that cruelly cancelled it, could break out of paralyzing ambivalence into gratuitous murder and paranoid insurgency.” The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin dreamt of his ideal revolutionary as someone who has “severed every link with the social order and with the entire civilized world; with the laws, good manners, conventions, and morality of that world. He is its merciless enemy and continues to inhabit it with only one purpose—to destroy it.” Uprooted from its political and historic context, that ethos could very well align with that of contemporary mass murderers, bolstering their flagging sense of self—a self diffused in the anomic mist of consumer culture—through spectacular acts of violence.

Still, the violence of 1 October has a distinctly American character to it. In the state of moral dizziness that night left me in, I found that the writer perhaps best attuned to it—whatever *it* is—was Don DeLillo. A few days after the shooting, I picked up *Libra*, DeLillo’s fictionalized account of the JFK assassination from the perspective of Lee Harvey Oswald. In his telling, Oswald suffered from a perpetually shifting, profoundly unstable sense of self. He lived a poor, itinerant life of moving between smaller and smaller rooms. He was attracted to Marxism because he saw in it a way to make sense of his condition of indigence and alienation in capitalist society, and of connecting himself to a higher purpose: “He wanted to carry himself with a clear sense of role, make a move one time that was not disappointed...He thought the only end to isolation was to reach the point where he was no longer separated from the true struggles that went on around him. The name we give this point is history.” Even then, DeLillo’s Oswald found his dreams thwarted at every turn; even in the Soviet Union, the beating heart of the revolution, he was a zero in the system. He could not find a way to live in history, to live outside of himself.

So he found other means. One day, Oswald learned that President Kennedy would be visiting Dallas, and that his motorcade would be passing right below the school book depository where he worked, at a time when he would be working alone. Late one night, he watched the movie *Suddenly* on TV, wherein Frank Sinatra becomes involved in a conspiracy to assassinate a president. Oswald “felt connected to the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals and broadcast bands, the whole busy air of transmission... They were running a message through the night into his skin.” The universe was telling him how we would become a part of history. Or rather, as another conspirator involved with the CIA would tell him, “there’s something else that’s generating this event. A pattern outside of experience...you’ve had it backwards all this time. You wanted to enter history. Wrong approach...What you really want is out. Get out. Jump out. Find your place and your name on another level.” In *Libra*, Oswald kills the president not out of any political conviction or personal



HOUSE
OF
BLUES

ROAD TO MANDALAY

hatred—in fact, in many ways, Oswald appeared to idolize Kennedy, to see himself in him—but out of a desire to join his fate to someone who was already part of history. As DeLillo would later write of Oswald, “in the end, there was nothing left of him but a defeated ego, a self isolated from the world and from other people. He fell out of history and politics and became a figure in one of his own bent daydreams.”

“In America, it is the individual himself, floating on random streams of disaffection, who tends to set the limits of the absurd,” DeLillo continues. The assassination was the primal scene of American absurdity, introducing a pervasive sense of randomness into national consciousness:

A man walks into a diner and shoots eleven strangers. What city was that, and who remembers the shooter's name? A couple of teenagers wander through their school building shooting teachers and students. How many times did this happen, and where exactly, and who were the kids with the guns? Oswald changed history not only through his involvement in the death of the president but also in prefiguring such moments of the American absurd. He was not media-poisoned, as many others have been, and his crime was not steeped in the supermarket cult of modern folklore and dread...This was vintage American violence, lonely and rootless, but it shaded into something older and previously distant, a condition of estrangement and helplessness, an undependable reality. We felt the shock of unmeaning.

THE 21ST CENTURY SO FAR MIGHT BEST BE DEFINED by such unmeaning horrors. A few months after 1 October, I was at a bowling alley in a casino near my house with a couple of friends. As we were getting ready to leave, the lights went out with a menacing whoosh, returning a minute later. But they came with a fitful crackling sound, and looking down from the top of the escalators the casino floor was suspiciously empty. We would find out later that the sound came from the backup generators starting up. But we made our way out the emergency exit anyway, not quite panicked, but not quite doubting that something sinister was underway. It would have made about as much sense as anything else.

Maybe this was the kind of revenge that Paddock sought against society, to impose over public spaces a regime of dread and uncertainty. In this way he would resemble another one of DeLillo's most iconic characters, the Texas Highway Killer in *Underworld*. In one section set in the late 1980s, someone has been randomly targeting lone commuters, pulling up next to them and sticking a gun out the window to shoot before speeding away. A girl accidentally catches one of the killings on video, and the media becomes fixated, playing the footage every hour of the day. The killer calls into a local news station to assure them his childhood was healthy, that he was no victim of head trauma or bad neurology, and that he has no political motivations. The reader comes to learn that the killer is a man named Richard, a lonely, anxious bagger at a supermarket. He used to work in a glass booth breaking change and batching checks, but he made some mistakes and was forced out to the registers, where he finds himself too weak and hollow to withstand “the casual abuse of passing strangers in the world.” He shoots because he has to “take his feelings outside himself so's to escape his isolation...take

everything outside, share it with others, become part of the history of others, because this was the only way to escape, to get out from under the pissant details of who he was.” He feels whole talking on the phone to the newscaster while watching the looped footage of his crimes on the television screen, knowing at last that he's really real.

Is it possible that Paddock saw himself as DeLillo's Oswald and Richard saw themselves—and as we see him now—as some mere suggestion of a person? The greater part of Paddock's life was spent not creating anything, but alone at a machine turning one dollar into two. When the money and privileges that Paddock had worked so hard and long for began to look like they might have been at risk, when it turned out he maybe wasn't as smart or capable as he thought he was—then maybe other people, too, began to appear just as fickle and unreal. He couldn't establish any measure of his own worth, substance, or even existence outside of his head, and when the integrity of his self was thrown into question he became desperate. His despair, though, is not exceptional in America; only his response to it was.

If it's true that history ended and grand narratives have lost their use, then it should come as no surprise that somewhere along the way it seems we lost the plot. It's difficult for many to interpret the course of events as much more than a sequence of random acts of chaos, each smearing into the next while precluding any chance for resolution, let alone justice. Visions of a brighter future for all grow dimmer and dimmer as the world becomes more distorted and frightening in its complexity with each passing day. In the midst of this, individuals have been set adrift to the tides of the market, where opportunities for self-determination are few and diminishing rapidly, unballasted by communal purpose or commitment. When everyone is left to fend for themselves, even wealth can't protect one entirely from this sense of loneliness, anxiety, and disempowerment. Some can get by with the fantasies and distractions the culture provides, but when these lose their power to comfort, egos are left abandoned to their resentment. In the war of all against all, where aggrandizement is the highest aim, you become the sole protagonist; and everyone else must become the enemy, against whom all is permissible. ✦

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LEFRANC

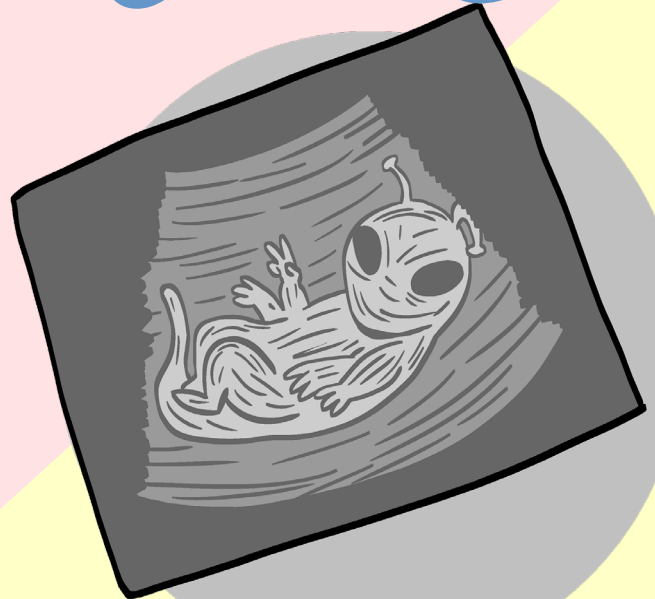
A few equally
exciting
nonbinary
alternatives
to use in
place of

Everyone loves a party or an explosion. But
gender reveals have problems. For one thing,
it's impossible to know what an unborn
child's gender is. Also, some gender reveals
cause catastrophic wildfires.

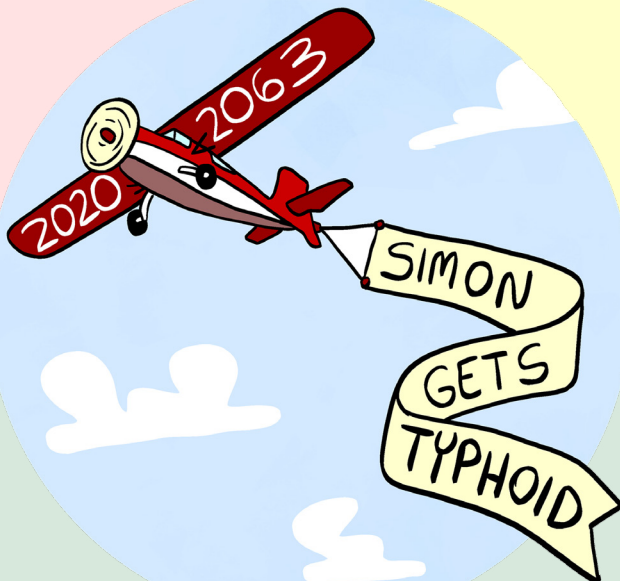
Gender



Name Reveals!



"Whether It's An Alien" Reveals!



Fate Reveals!



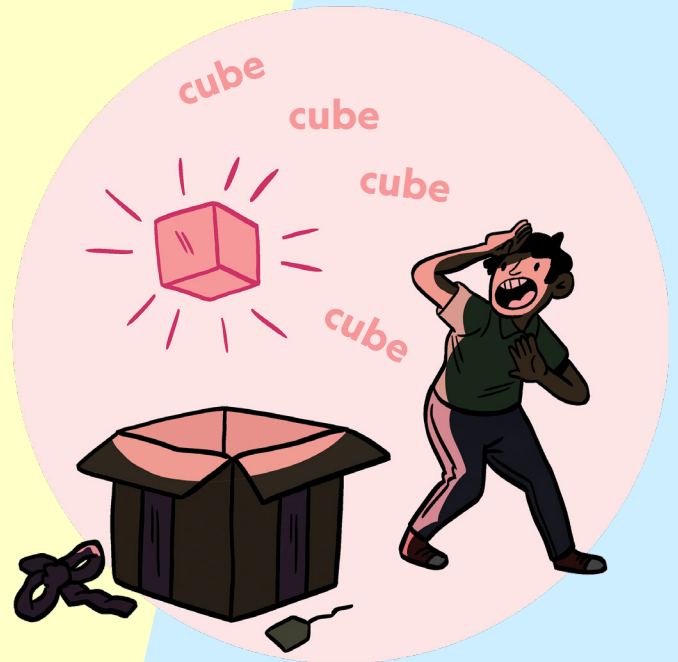
Paternity Reveals!

Here at *Current Affairs*, we have decided to help solve the problem by devising sensible alternatives to gender reveal parties. After all, there are lots of things that can be revealed! Instead of "boy" or "girl" why not try revealing some of these for the crowd instead?

Reveals



Mental Illness Reveals!



Shape Reveals!



Weather Reveals!



"Whether It's Time To Flee" Reveals!

ABANDONING THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

NGOs are committed to staying away from radical politics.

What happens, then, when the people they ostensibly serve have radical political demands?

by TY JOPLIN

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES IS HARD work. I learned that when I worked for a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Amman, Jordan. As Jordan's only government watchdog, this NGO is a favorite of the international donor scene. Much of its money comes from powerful countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union member states, and its biggest task is parliamentary election monitoring.

Every time an election is called, the organization sends droves of volunteers to polling places to ensure the voting process runs smoothly. At polling stations across the country, these volunteers meticulously document every small irregularity for the NGO's employees to analyze. Staff at the office work 12-hour shifts, joke about sleeping under their desks as they draw up shiny graphs on voting, and film informational videos to be shared online. It's a gargantuan undertaking in the quest to ensure Jordan's parliament is democratically elected.

The only problem is that Jordan's parliament

is basically powerless. Though it's nominally in charge of passing laws, the King has veto power over any bill, and parliament rarely proposes a law the King disagrees with. On top of that, the King controls the armed forces and holds decisive sway over its courts.

Parliament's function, which is universally understood in Jordan but rarely explicitly acknowledged, is to be a pressure release valve for the King if the going gets tough. When an ill-fated policy, like austerity, begins to impact people in adverse ways and they take to the streets, the existence of parliament allows them to march to the Prime Minister's office instead of the King's palace. The King then dissolves parliament through a Royal Decree and calls a new election. The new Prime Minister is given the unsavory task of being the face of yet more unpopular policies. This happens every couple of years.

It's the King who rules Jordan, not parliament. If Jordan's NGOs, and by extension their powerful Western donors, were serious about





promoting democracy in Jordan, they'd simply call for the transfer of power from the King to parliament.

Of course, this never happens.

Making that call would unsettle the political landscape of Jordan, and the role of NGOs within it. NGOs would have to meaningfully side with the people, and against the government. They could lose their funding if they did this; their workers could get deported during the revolt, their leaders arrested. Some may wind up dead. A democratic Jordan may then do outrageous things like roll back the gutting of its public sector, nationalize key industries, or be more outspoken against American imperialism in the region.

Instead of working toward democracy, donors and NGOs will extol the virtues of democracy without ever seriously committing themselves to it. In the process, they give the appearance that democracy is alive and well while silently ensuring that power stays firmly in the hands of the monarchy and far away from the people. Problems of poverty and powerlessness are handled as apolitical tasks that can be solved through thousands of small projects, and not broad class struggle.

This happens in poor and exploited regions all over the world.

Scholars were warning against the destruction of Kenya's public health sector by "NGO-ization" as early as 1998. Throughout the 2000s, feminists and academics were decrying the damage NGOs were causing in Palestine by undermining popular movements for national sovereignty with neoliberal projects under the guise of "development." In the Appalachian region of the United States, keen observers have noted that the poor are left jobless and alienated while millions flow into NGOs that do basically nothing. After the explosion in Beirut's port destroyed much of the city in August 2020, international NGOs rushed in, derailing local activists and unions' own organizing efforts.

But ringing alarm bells about NGOs' perilous impacts have apparently done little to stop their rapid growth. Making sure never to seriously offend their donors or the host governments that allow them to operate, NGOs rake in billions selling themselves as motors of civil society and "development" while sapping power from radical grassroots movements that could leverage demands against the state.

I saw this happen in real-time in Jordan. Throughout the country, labor activists risk their lives to provide a better future for their commu-



PHOTOS OF TEACHERS' PROTEST IN JORDAN BY SHERBEL DISSI

nities and are ignored by NGOs, whose staff live and work in a sequestered bubble—far away from the struggles of the people they claim to be empowering.

A SEGREGATED OUTLOOK

The first thing I learned about Amman was that an invisible line divided it into two parts: West Amman and East Amman.

In West Amman, walled-off villas feature wrap-around gardens growing limes and oranges. Boutique cafes serving cappuccinos to its wealthy residents flourish while armored personnel carriers idle across the street. Here, highly educated expatriate workers intermingle with local elites who are collectively tone deaf to the material struggles of the underclass. There is no such thing as solidarity or liberation in West Amman. But in the underclass' world, these

concepts are crucial to their survival.

In East Amman, unfinished buildings are piled onto each other, and large families fit multiple generations of members into single flats. Narrow streets weave between poor and working class neighborhoods that sprawl into the desert. Many inhabitants are refugees from Syria, Palestine, and Iraq who oscillate between unemployment and underemployment in Jordan's informal market. In some of these neighborhoods, like the Palestinian-dominated Wehdat, there is little to no police presence except on days where Wehdat's professional soccer club is scheduled to play.

While West Amman is quiet and spacious, East Amman is stifling and claustrophobic. This type of class divide is replicated in cities throughout West Asia and North Africa that have a heavy security-development presence, from Baghdad to Juba and Nairobi.

For those living in West Amman, there is little reason to ever step foot into East Amman except to work on an NGO project designed

to help the poor or marginalized in some way. And for those living in East Amman, there is little reason to venture into West Amman except to work as a gardener or cook for the wealthy, or as a construction worker building the next Starbucks.

After the 2003 Iraq War and Arab Spring revolts of 2011, countless NGOs relocated their headquarters and field offices from war-torn countries into Abdoun, Weibdeh, Jabal Amman, and al-Shmaisani—neighborhoods in West Amman. Arabic language schools closed their doors in Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo, and reopened in those same neighborhoods in West Amman. Finance capital and humanitarian aid flowed into Jordan, which began taking in huge waves of refugees. Jordan's dependency on foreign aid deepened, and it began looking more and more like a "Republic of NGOs."

Poor neighborhoods, like Al Qayseyeh, that stood in the way of new residential and diplomatic buildings were quickly demolished; their inhabitants getting next to no

compensation for their displacement. As West Amman expanded with brand new glass buildings and mansions guarded by security, East Amman gained more dense networks of concrete blocks and metal signs letting passers-by know the rusty playground across the street was, in fact, funded by USAID—a U.S. agency often engaged in soft imperialism—in a collaboration with a local NGO that may not exist anymore. The split between West and East Amman ossified.

By the time I arrived in Amman to study Arabic in 2016, the divide had become so naturalized that local news outlets I read offered different weather forecasts for each wing of the city.

I, like so many others from Europe and the United States who ventured to Amman, thought the best way to make a difference in the region was to gain employment in a non-profit NGO. Surrounded by their offices and immersed in the West Amman world of non-profit workers, it seemed the most intuitive thing to do. It didn't hurt that the only kinds of organizations that paid expatriates to stay in the Middle East were the ones well-connected to powerful donor agencies like USAID, the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union, and Western embassies.

Once I entered the nonprofit world, I noticed terms like democracy, equality, empowerment, and civil society were buzzwords the NGOs used to advertise themselves outwardly. Inside, most are stuffed with labyrinthian mazes of bureaucracy, specialization, and intractable hierarchy. There are project managers operating within proprietary project management software, grant application writers gaining fluency in flowery NGO-speak, separate staff using expensive geographic information systems (GIS) and customer relations management (CRM) interfaces, donor relations specialists, logistics, monitoring, and accountability officers, and flocks of jet-setting consultants who recycle pitches and presentations freely between wildly different organizations. Most of these positions and the senior-level management jobs are quietly reserved for the multiple-degree-having white expat worker, while underpaid local staff are relegated to the field with few opportunities to get promoted.

Far less emphasis is put on striving for “democracy” than quantifying “key performance indicators” and accounting for “deliv-

erables” in glossy reports that nearly always give the impression every project is a towering success—never the dismal failure they often are.

Any semblance of horizontal organizing disappears as massive donor agencies are catered to by large international NGOs who capture much of the money on offer in the international development and humanitarian world. Meanwhile, smaller local NGOs are stuck scavenging for scrap grants to do micro-scale projects. Internal communication breakdowns run rife, staff are constantly rotating between projects and countries, and coordination between different organizations is virtually nonexistent. A dedication to neu-

these activities can build lasting social bonds among the poor, and give them something to look forward to.

Many of these programs are advertised to donors as easy ways to relieve the stress of being a refugee or exploited child laborer. The sources of this stress, such as being a powerless refugee without rights, remain unsolved. The success of these programs is measured in how many refugees they can involve, rather than how effectively they defend those people's rights. Refugees' livelihoods are gamified—the scope of their activities and suffering packaged into statistics and testimonies read by no one.

Development-minded projects that are



trality and an apolitical concept of “human development” informs the process and end-goal of large NGOs' projects, which take the form of short-term programs whose scope is determined by finances.

In Jordan, humanitarian projects aimed at helping refugees and under-served communities sometimes look like direct assistance in helping with food provisions and hygiene. However, there are countless more attempts to alleviate the impacts of being powerless by offering them feel-good ways to fill time. Refugees in Jordan can take classes in Brazilian jiu-jitsu fight-dancing, “trauma-informed” yoga, drama and theater, and painting. Some can even learn how to skate. With any luck,

designed to have a sustainable impact involve integrating vulnerable populations into neo-liberal wage labor regimes in the form of vocational skills training. Refugees and women living in poverty have an endless stream of sewing and cooking workshops to give them a way to sell their labor on the extractive market. Perusing West Amman shops, expats then get the opportunity to buy pottery, purses, jewelry, soaps, mosaics, and jackets made by the vulnerable with the promise that a portion of the funds will go back to those who made the handicrafts.

But even these projects are rarely designed to succeed.

To give an illustrative example, after I

stopped working at NGOs and became a journalist, I investigated economic inequality in southern Jordan. In one small and impoverished Bedouin town, local aid workers tried to train women in culinary skills to make food for markets. The project got a \$5,000 grant from a USAID program aimed at promoting small businesses, but the town didn't have a kitchen to start the training. When the community and aid workers tried to contact USAID about providing technical expertise to build the kitchen, they were ignored, so they resorted to building the kitchen themselves. To get help with training and moving food into markets, the workers again asked USAID for help, and again they were ignored. After a few months, USAID abruptly ended its small-business program in Jordan entirely, and the effort was abandoned.

"USAID just throws money into the hands of these people, and they don't follow-up," an aid worker involved said to me at the time.

Another aid worker agreed, adding "we felt it was really unfair that in some database somewhere, it would be documented that this village had received a grant, where in fact no one really followed up with where the money went."

In the absence of a functioning economy in this town and dozens of others in southern Jordan, a growing number of desperate youth are pushed into smuggling drugs—an extremely dangerous job since border troops in the region shoot smugglers on sight. Even more attempt to numb the pain through drug use. Either way, poor families are left to helplessly watch their prospects dwindle and their children die.

For the few development projects which do get off the ground, when it comes to ensuring equality in worker protections like a living wage or residency status for refugees—things that would require confronting corporate and state power—the NGO world goes silent. The hyper-professionalized experts suddenly have nothing to offer, and market whims determine the fate of those integrated into it. There is never a project proposal to take to the streets, to occupy strategic buildings, to get arrested in front of the international press, to unionize the precarious workers, to agitate for mass politics.

The pro-democracy facade of NGOs is wiped away, and the vulnerable are thrown to the wolves.

THE RADICALS IGNORED BY NGOS

Inside the exclusive realm of West Amman, NGO leaders and elite human rights advocates sometimes get together for fancy meals. Over soufflés, hors d'oeuvres, and the occasional glass of wine, they brainstorm about future projects and take turns congratulating each other on what a great job they're doing. If the NGO I worked for hosted one, I was expected to stand, smile, and hand out gift bags to our esteemed attendees. I tried my best to hide from sight.

In one such gathering of wealthy feminists in 2010 hosted by the Jordanian government, the elite nonprofit sector was forced to temporarily confront one of the people they plaster on their brochures but abandon in the real world.

A middle-aged man, who no one at the meeting recognized, stood up. "Where were you?" he asked the elites in a thick accent that told them he was from the rural areas of Jordan. The man was Mohammed Snayd, and he was the leader of the Day-Waged Labor Movement (DWLM), which was a collection of day-waged laborers who had been protesting for better working conditions since 2006. They staged sit-ins and had developed a decentralized telephone network to coordinate and mobilize. Most who were involved in the movement were women working for the Ministry of Agriculture. Because they were day-waged workers they were paid for daily work as opposed to receiving regular monthly salaries, they weren't protected by the country's minimum wage law and weren't given retirement funds or health insurance.

Underpaid, overworked, entrapped by debt, and living in poverty, day-waged workers began organizing for better labor protections. Their primary demand was for the abolition of the category of "day-waged labor" entirely, and for all day-waged workers to be treated as permanent employees. They also demanded a living wage.

After years of struggling to be heard by the government, the DWLM had just done the unthinkable in the culturally conservative country of Jordan: they had staged a mixed gender sleep-in demonstration outside Jordan's Royal Court. The move was enthusiastically

supported by the workers' families in spite of the stigma and danger around the protest tactic. It was one of the most ground-breaking forms of protest the region had seen in a century, and the elites of West Amman never knew it happened. "Where were you? Why didn't you support [the women]?" Snayd asked the wealthy activists. They dismissed him and his cause as irrelevant to them.

Awareness of the DWLM spread through word-of-mouth at the time, and the West Amman activist crowd evidently did not have enough contacts within the country's working class to know what it was or what it was accomplishing.

In NGO-speak, the DWLM could be a dream come true for nonprofits. Here was a women-led, horizontal grassroots movement mobilizing in search of empowerment. It was everything local and international NGOs describe their primary missions to be about. But the workers weren't looking for wealthy donors to finance a project, or to be taught how to make rugs. They wanted solidarity in a class struggle. Their empowerment came from confronting the state and the market, and demanding concessions. Their type of feminism wasn't the liberal, representational kind espoused by the NGOs, it was imbued with labor radicalism.

Agricultural workers like Mohammed Snayd had already witnessed the failures of elites and NGOs to help them. In fact, Snayd's activism came in part from suffering through the government taking away his livelihood and replacing it with the false promise of an NGO project. In the central region of Dhiban, where Snayd and many of his fellow DWLM members are from, breeding livestock and working on small-scale farms were the primary economic lifelines. To support them, the Jordanian government heavily subsidized livestock feed. However, facing pressure by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to implement austerity for the public sector, Jordan began cutting back on these livestock feed subsidies. This raised the cost of keeping livestock so much that it became financially untenable. Herds shrank and eventually disappeared.

In a half-hearted attempt to intervene against the steady impoverishment of the region, a government-organized "NGO" run by the Queen at the time, Noor Al Hussein, set up an almond tree farm. Locals derided the

project, and predicted it would fail because the region didn't have enough water to sustain the cultivation of almonds. This is because in 1992, the government began directing the region's water supply to the rapidly growing metropolis of Amman, which dried up the land. The NGO did nothing to get the region's water supply back. Locals pleaded for more investment, but were ignored. Their

campaign was a groundbreaking success in two ways.

First, they were able to secure permanent employment for tens of thousands of workers and day-wage laborers. Second, through their innovative tactics and unflinching demands for workers' rights, they catalyzed a new wave of popular movements centered around economic demands. DWLM organizers in

wage. Named the Jordanian Popular Movement, or Hirak for short, the demonstrations temporarily brought life in Jordan to a near halt. In a rare move, protest leaders bypassed the farcical parliament and called out the monarchy directly.

Inspired by the day-waged workers' success as well, phosphate miners struck several times in 2009 and port workers in



prediction turned out to be correct: the farm could not sustainably grow crops, and was soon shut down.

"All of the development projects are neglecting the core elements of Dhiban's economic history that have always been its strengths," Snayd said. "The government is neglecting agriculture and breeders."

Many of Dhiban's farmers, including Snayd, were pushed into precarious day-waged labor. In this context, the DWLM represented a resounding call from Jordan's agricultural workers to reclaim a sense of dignity and economic self-determination. Their

Dhiban were the first in Jordan to begin protesting in the so-called "Arab Spring," on January 7, 2011. This made them among the first in the region to mobilize after Tunisia began its own revolutionary movement a few weeks earlier.

In Dhiban, which was quickly gaining the reputation for being a bastion of labor activism, Snayd helped to establish the "Dhiban Youth Committee," organizing new youth-led protests around the country. Veterans of the DWLM drew thousands into Jordan's streets to demand an end to austerity and corruption, and for the government to raise the minimum

Aqaba went on strike in December 2011. Protesting school teachers asked DWLM organizers for advice on how to build a formidable movement, and launched a barrage of protests including sit-ins and a strike. By the end of 2011, their union, the Jordan Teachers' Syndicate (JTS), was recognized by the government. It represented nearly every teacher in the country, garnering about 140,000 members. In a country of about 10 million people, the JTS thus spoke for a sizable part of its entire labor force. In total there were over 840 labor actions in 2011, including strikes, walk-outs, and pro-

tests by nurses, doctors, construction workers, water and sanitation workers, and service workers. The labor movement in Jordan had been revitalized.

When the government started a new round of austerity-minded cuts to the public sector a few years later, protests again erupted throughout Jordan. Most prominently, teachers demanded an increase of their wage, which had remained stagnant for years and stood slightly above the country's poverty line. Because the size of the union was so large, such a demand would have effectively raised the living standard of nearly every single Jordanian family in the country, since almost every family has at least one teacher in it.

An obstinate government intent on meeting the recommendations of the IMF rebuffed the teachers. Talks quickly broke down, and the JTS began an indefinite strike in September 2019, closing nearly every school in the country for a month.

Teachers and students held daily rallies where they persevered through beatings and other intimidation tactics by riot police. To end the strike, the government agreed to a series of wage increases. But by the spring of 2020, the government announced it was back-tracking on the deal. The JTS immediately began preparations for a new nationwide pressure campaign, which would culminate in another indefinite strike. The government wouldn't have that.

Before the campaign could get underway, security forces raided every JTS office branch in the country in July, arrested its leadership, and announced the union was now illegal. The move shocked Jordanians, who turned out in nearly every city and town to protest. Marches in solidarity with the union overtook major city highways. Protesters gave passionate speeches from the frontlines of police barricades.

"I am the country, I am the nation. I taught you how to love the nation. I taught you the national anthem! I taught you how to draw the flag. How do you dare to raise an arm at me?!" one teacher was filmed saying.

Videos of police brutality against the teachers spread through social media networks while the government banned reporting on the crackdown. About 1,000 teachers were arrested. Journalists caught covering it

were also targeted by the state.

These were the largest protests in the country since the DWLM-inspired uprising of 2011. The JTS was possibly *the* largest civil society organization in the entire nation: over 100,000 members strong standing together in solidarity, defending themselves and their communities. Its dissolution dealt an irreparable blow to exactly the types of civil power NGOs boast about empowering. And where were the NGOs? Even though their senior staff hadn't heard of the DWLM, they surely noticed the JTS' historic strike, the crackdown, the police riots, and the mass arrests even from their palaces in West Amman.

Humanitarian-focused NGOs could have handed out water and food to the protesters. They could have organized medical treatment for those beaten in the streets or tortured in Jordan's detention centers. Development-minded NGOs could have backed the beloved union, since its demands related to the financial wellbeing of the entire country and the integrity of its public sector.

Every NGO could have helped organize resistance with the union, sent its senior staff in front of police barricades, raised money for the strike fund, ran international media campaigns for the workers, or pushed donor countries to stand with the union. Wouldn't the donors love to hear about a client NGO taking such initiative to empower "local beneficiaries"? Apparently not. NGOs' conspicuous silence proved they were ultimately beholden to the Jordanian government and their wealthy financiers, who themselves are preoccupied with ensuring Arabs stay out of Europe, and were not concerned with the people's wellbeing. The nonprofit scene mostly ignored the plight of the teachers, save for Human Rights Watch who collected stories of police brutality and condemned the crackdown.

BY SEPTEMBER THE TEACHERS were crushed, and the JTS was obliterated. Both the Day-Waged Labor Movement and the teachers' revolt tried to beat back an inhumane capitalist market enforced by state power. But because NGOs rely on the state and market, they end up functioning as counterrevolutionary obstacles standing in the way of these pop-

ular movements. At best, they soften the blow of being rendered powerless and disposable.

Living in Amman, I got the sense many seasoned NGO workers know this.

Isolating ourselves in fancy, overpriced bars in luxury hotels, a conversation among expats and rich locals inevitably arises around midnight when a few drinks have relaxed the atmosphere. The project is falling through, the dance class isn't helping an impoverished family in any meaningful way, the donors don't look interested in giving another grant. The colorful reports we enthused over in the beginning feel ridiculous now that we're the ones writing them, and we know how much of it mystifies the situation on the ground. A sense of defeat looms over us.

Sometimes this feeling is bitterly projected onto locals in racist tirades declaring them lazy or not yet ready to have the kind of democracy the West enjoys. Other times it comes out as a quiet, resigned sadness that our hopes of transforming lives will never be realized, that projects will never be enough. We glance at a table of young and excited-looking expats practicing Arabic and give them a wry smile. Their dreams will be dashed like ours were, or they'll leave before this realization ever sets in. These moments come and go. More drinks bring conversations back around to the latest office gossip.

For the cynical NGO worker who sees the futility of projects and feels the sense of adventure being replaced by a desire for comfort, the only thing left to do is try to simulate the feeling of being home while knowing at least they're doing *something*, *anything* to help. Muttering "it's better than nothing," the NGO worker lulls himself to sleep.

But as we sulk, gossip, and accept awards on behalf of our organizations at mansions with pools, the real heroes—radical labor activists—are getting arrested, interrogated, and even tortured by the secret police. There will be no ritzy award ceremony for the Mohammed Snayds of the world, at least not until they die and their movements against capitalism cease to be a threat.

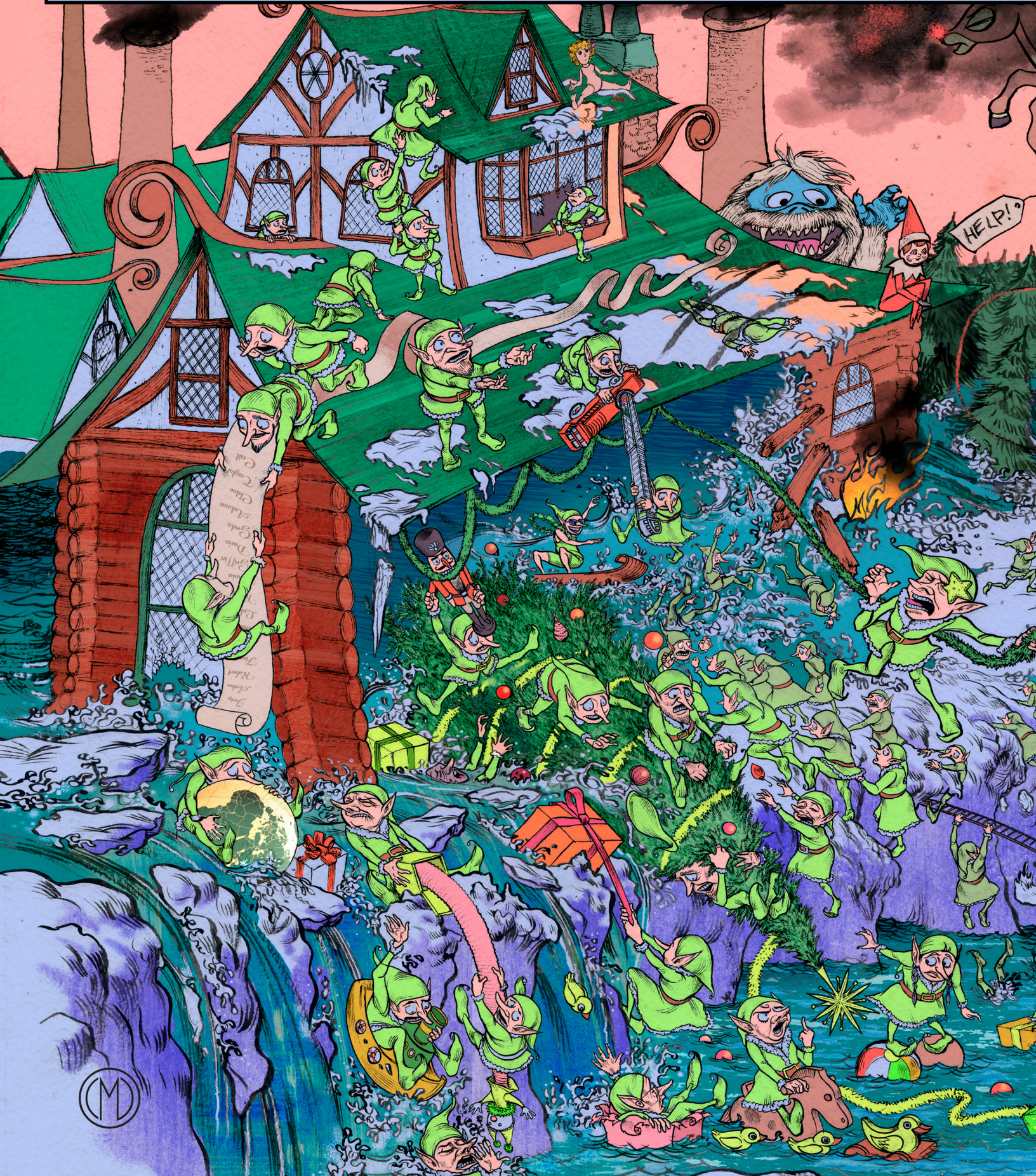
The cause of labor goes on without the backing of the NGOs. ✦

YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PUT IT DOWN



THE NORTH POLE GOES

Santa tempted fate for many years, but climate change has finally caught up with him. *Current Affairs* visited the North Pole to report on the situation, and



SOUTH

present this work of up-to-date photojournalism.



INSIDE THE

INCEL

BY LYTA GOLD



"I am human and I need to be loved Just like everybody else does."

—THE SMITHS, "HOW SOON IS NOW?"

SHOULD WE HAVE SYMPATHY FOR INCELS? I hate to ask the question, but I have to get it out of the way. It's the first—and often the only—concern people have when discussing the incel subculture. "Pity the poor young white man," begins the scathing *Rolling Stone* review of *TFW No GF*, a lopsided documentary about incels which tilts hard to the side of sympathy. Certainly, incels—or "involuntary celibates"—began life on the internet in a very sympathetic way, as members of a support group for lonely people who had trouble finding love. It was only later that the word exclusively came to indicate a group of angry, solitary, sexless young men who enjoy bad memes and once in a while commit mass murder. In an interview with Alana, the queer woman who started the first incel forum, *Reply All* host PJ Vogt clarified that "because the [incels] who are angry and violent take up so much space, it feels like it's now hard...to talk about the problem of loneliness, because what I think some people hear is 'Oh, you're asking me to feel bad for a bunch of violent misogynists.'" Vogt's anxiety is understandable: the initial reaction to any conversation about incels is always to clarify if we are supposed to feel *bad* for them, or to neatly separate out the evil (violent misogynist) ones from the good (merely sad) ones. In this, discussions of incels tend to be very like discussions about Trump voters: are they a basket of deplorables, lost to decent society forever, or Forgotten Men who can be saved?

This framing is really the result of a larger cultural pathology around the concepts of "pity," "understanding," and "forgiveness." Human beings are complex, and any attempt to sort people into the twin categories of pitiable victims or permanent villains is inherently doomed. Yet this question—"how should we *feel* about incels"—suggests another—"what should we *do* about incels?"—which, though it sounds very practical and helpful, also has had a tendency to lead to some foolish and doomed places. If, for example, it could be fairly argued that incels are the inevitable result of the economic and cultural misery of capitalism, then would socialism be able to hand out girlfriends? Are there some problems that socialism can't solve? Or are we still asking the wrong set of questions?

IN A NON-PLAGUE YEAR, *TFW No GF* WOULD HAVE premiered at SXSW, the exciting debut of a talented young director. Alex Lee Moyer's film is beautiful and expressionistic, relying on mashups of memes and long text scrolls to illustrate the feeling of being a lonely person with only the internet for company. Josh Gabert-Doyon's review in *Jacobin* praised the film's "ten-

der" and "compassionate" portrait of its subjects, five young white male dropouts who are suffering from depression, boredom, loneliness, isolation, suicidal ideation, and all the other miseries that descend on those who fail out of the school-to-college-to-good capitalist job pipeline. "What makes Moyer's documentary stand out," says Gabert-Doyon, "is her effort to situate her subjects within a broader socioeconomic context. Incels, in *TFW No GF*, are not just woman-hating "shitposters," they are also complex subjects born out of a post-economic crash United States, steeped in a culture of resentment. While this contextualization doesn't explain away the worst of incel culture, it contributes to a much richer portrait, and Moyer's interviewees are shown to have some self-reflexivity on this account as well, analyzing their own cultural and socioeconomic identities."

The only trouble with *TFW No GF* is that it's a big fucking lie. For one, as *Rolling Stone* points out, the film was produced by Cody Wilson, a 3D-printed gun manufacturer with ties to white supremacists who "[pled] guilty to injury to a child after having sex with an underage girl, a plea that required him to register as a sex offender." The film generally downplays the raging misogyny of inceldom, explaining it away as edgy jokes for attention, and describes the few incel murderers as the sort of people who "forget that they're playing a character. The next thing you know they end up at a place like Charlottesville." The racism endemic to incel communities is even more suspiciously erased; beyond that passing reference to Charlottesville, you have to peer closely at the rapidly scrolling 4chan text to pick up phrases like "muscular colored kids." One of the subjects, a denim-clad Texan named Kyle, wears a bejeweled confederate flag ring and claims that he felt alienated as a child because half his classes (in El Paso) were taught in Spanish. This usage of Spanish, he implies, drove him into the arms of video games and unsuccessful homeschooling. As an adult, jobless and depressed, he reports getting into fights in El Paso (which is, he tells us "a Mexican town" and they're "all about the fucking machismo.") Is Kyle a white supremacist? Moyer never appears to ask, and Kyle never says. The complete lack of follow-up here raises significant suspicion about the filmmakers' intentions—and, given Wilson's history, suggests that he may have had an ulterior motive in producing a documentary about incels that downplays their bigotry.

But the biggest issue with *TFW No GF* has to do with a little game I like to play called "who pays the fucking rent." One of the subjects mentions that he has two jobs, and lives with his mother who has cancer; the others allude to possibly having been employed

in underwhelming jobs at some point, but, as they regularly use the term NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) it's unclear if they have jobs at the time the documentary was filmed. Initially, Kyle is unemployed and on food stamps; after moving back in with his family, it seems that they pay his bills, though this is never stated directly. None of the subjects live in particularly nice locations, but they have apartments, and internet, and desktop computers upon which they spend most of their time. Two have an impressive collection of guns, which can't be cheap. Money is coming from somewhere, but its source isn't really explored. It seems very likely that some relatives are taking care of or connected to these young men, but they're completely invisible. Refusing to include the family members is more than a simple aesthetic choice, and once again casts doubt on the filmmakers' intentions. Are these young men actually as isolated as they seem? Are they as impoverished as the narrative implies? The answer to both questions may very well be "yes," but if so, leaving the families out makes little sense. If the intent of the documentary is to provide a full portrait of why these young men are so lonely, and to connect it to economic immiseration, surely it makes sense to simply explain who pays the rent.

And Moyer definitely spoke to the families. The documentary is littered with footage of the subjects as children: lots of photographs, and even home videos. Where did Moyer source this material? Not, I think, from the subjects themselves—what young person keeps an extensive trove of their own baby pictures, school photos, and videos of themselves at age seven looking sad? The documentary does not interview anyone besides the five young men; according to *Rolling Stone*, this was "per the subjects' request." But Moyer must have talked to their mothers, or asked the subjects to reach out themselves for the photographs and the home video footage. The absence of the mother or any other relative weighs heavily, as in a fairy tale.

Ultimately, *TFW No GF*, much like inceldom itself, is a fairy tale, or can be understood best in those terms. An incel that goes by "Egg White" laments "the happy family, the white picket fence—that's on its way out, I'm afraid...women, they're out there and they're taking the good stuff..." He doesn't elaborate on how exactly women have contrived to steal away an American dream that never actually existed; instead, he laments the sexual freedom of women on Tinder, hopping from hot guy to hot guy, saying that guys like him can't "catch up." Ultimately, the incels' problem isn't loneliness or economic hardship, or to be more specific it isn't *only* loneliness and economic hardship. They're sad that they're not successful or talented, not better than other people. They feel "unnoticed" and "abandoned," "raised with complete anonymity their whole lives." As one who goes by "Kantbot" puts it: "People used to like, graduate from high school and go get a job or whatever, and things worked out pretty well for them. But now that's fucking impossible. You have no experience in anything, and you're from like a small-town background and you don't have any connections. So you just end up back at home, and your parents are telling you to go apply at McDonald's or something."

Now, in the white picket fence fantasy, *someone* works at McDonald's, just not these guys. McDonald's of course, is beneath

them. They were supposed to have had the good jobs. In that ideal world they would still sometimes visit McDonald's, as they breeze in on a road trip in the nice car purchased thanks to the good company job, accompanied by the economically dependent wife and 2.5 worshipful kids. That's the life they're mourning.

"Aha!" you might say. "Incels are, however misguided, still affected by market forces, by the crushing immiseration of capitalism. Ergo, we should feel sorry for them; ergo, socialism would fix their problems." I am again uninterested in the question of sympathy. I am, however, interested in what we mean when we say that someone has been *affected* by capitalism and market forces. Wouldn't it be stranger if incels *weren't* alienated by modernity? As Gabert-Doyon puts it in *Jacobin*: "In part, then, the men in *TFW No GF* point toward the failures of a market-based logic of individual freedoms and responsibility." Well yes, but what *doesn't* point at that? Noticing that humans react to capitalism and the failures of market-based logic is a bit like saying "trees react to sunlight." All trees do; it would be bizarre if they didn't. These particular trees react differently though, and that's interesting. They grow twisted branches and attempt to block out the sunlight of every other tree in a grasping, jealous rage. The differences, and those reasons, become important.

INCELS HAVE THEIR OWN "MARKET LOGIC;" THAT is, they have their own economic explanation for the world and their behavior within it. The world is a cut-throat place of alphas and betas, and if you are born a beta male that's too bad. This categorization of human beings into alphas and betas is unscientifically borrowed from the way wolves purportedly behave (and, as wolf-based imagery goes, is infinitely less creative and interesting than the wolf-based Omegaverse fanfiction community, with its knotting dicks and self-lubricating assholes). Much of what passes for theory among incels rests on pseudoscience recast as economic reality, or vice versa; in her book *Culture Warlords*, Talia Lavin gives an explanation of "hypergamy" as per a lonely white supremacist she was catfishing:

[Hypergamy is the] instinctual desire of humans of the female sex to discard a current mate when the opportunity arises to latch onto a subsequent mate of higher status due to the hindbrain impetus to find a male with the best ability to provide for her OWN offspring (already spawned or yet-to-be-spawned) regardless of investments and commitments made to a current mate.

If this all sounds scientifically questionable, that's because it is. "Hypergamy" and "the hindbrain impetus" descend from the pseudoscience of evolutionary psychology, whose conclusions regularly validate the presumptions of capitalism, despite the fact that *homo sapiens* is hundreds of thousands of years old and capitalism is a 500 year old baby. Within the framework of capitalist realism, it makes sense to imagine that women are simply reproductive machines seeking to maximize their ROI: a gender of mechanical harpies whose primal instincts gear them toward perfect efficiency. But when you realize this atavistic, machine-precise image is just that—an image, an assumption, and a really nonsensical one at that—then

it vanishes like a nightmare, and what you see instead are humans: you and her, and billions of others just like you, just the same mix of striving and mess and jokes and needs.

What's in fact bitterly, brutally ironic about inceldom is that it relies on the same "sexual marketplace" logic that women have long been forced to accept—that men are hunting for the most beautiful available woman, meaning you won't land a good one unless you're thin but not too thin, pale but not too pale, and you better not develop dishpan hands or he'll leave you. These days, young incels obsess over their jawlines, worrying that if they don't hit some arbitrary beauty standard, they won't ever be loved by shallow women on the prowl for the sexiest available man. As Lavin describes young men in the incel community who have sought out plastic surgery:

"They were working toward an idealized masculinity warped by misogyny so complete it isolated them from reality. A millimeter of bone, for them, was the way to punch a particular button in the inhuman, alien female psyche that would break down sexual resistance."

Again, this is not really different from the way women have long been told they need to trick men into loving them. Until about five minutes ago in cultural terms, *men* were the ones who were considered animalistic and guided by their "hindbrains," *men* who only cared about "one thing." Whether it's men or women (or both) who are re-imagined as mindless, ROI-seeking animals, the perception comes from the same set of capitalistic assumptions: that sex, like everything else, is a market, and you are in competition, and someone can only love you for your waist, or your jaw, so it had better be maximally optimized—"looksmaxed," in incel terms.

The idea that sex is a "marketplace" is quietly agreed on in a remarkable number of places. Jia Tolentino, in an otherwise terrific *New Yorker* piece about incels, says that in America, "sex has become a hyper-efficient and deregulated marketplace, and, like any hyper-efficient and deregulated marketplace, it often makes people feel very bad. Our newest sex technologies, such as Tinder and Grindr, are built to carefully match people by looks above all else. Sexual value continues to accrue to abled over disabled, cis over trans, thin over fat, tall over short, white over nonwhite, rich over poor." In the *New York Times*, Ross Douthat locates the origin of this "hyper-efficient and deregulated marketplace" in everyone's favorite foe, neoliberalism. He writes that "like other forms of neoliberal deregulation the sexual revolution created new winners and losers, new hierarchies to replace the old ones, privileging the beautiful and rich and socially adept in new ways and relegating others to new forms of loneliness and frustration."

Of course, rich and beautiful and socially adept and straight and able-bodied and ethnically privileged people have always been pretty good at getting laid in societies that have favored those qualities (aka most of them); what's changed isn't "market deregulation" but something quite different. The sexual revolution of the 1960s predates the formal advent of neoliberal deregulation in the United States, and bears no relation to it whatsoever. Thanks to the sexual revolution, American women became *less economically dependent on men*, and therefore more free to choose sexual partners. It's true that our culture still favors straight,

"Sex is transactional because much of human life has been made transactional"

white, cissexual bodies, but gay and queer and trans people are able to love now more openly than ever before. This doesn't indicate "a deregulated market," but a somewhat fairer one, in which everybody is closer to participating on equal terms.

BUT IS SEX EVEN A MARKET AT ALL? THE TRUEST expression of neoliberalism is the belief that the entire sphere of human relations is naturally governed by market forces, the god that interpenetrates all. In this understanding, everything belongs to and can be explained by the market, and competition is zero-sum. This is what incels think is happening along every spectrum; that women are not only withholding sex in favor of a better market option, but also out-competing them in the workplace. A similar mindset can be found in racial anxieties, as Lavin discovered in her research. "The distance from the anti-feminist 'red pill' [conviction that you have discovered some secret underlying unwoke truth about reality] to the racist 'red pill' was not so far," she writes. "Each, in its own way, represented conspiratorial worldviews, in which the rights of women or minorities were a zero-sum game, promoted by sinister actors to deprive men and whites of their due." The most common expressions of racism are a doubled fear of brown people taking away 1) white women and 2) white men's jobs. It's winner-take-all anxiety, the fear that if you (or the collective you, however imagined) can't compete you will be replaced; in other words, the logic of the market distilled.

Market logic is part of why incels get so confused about sex—are women providing a good or a service, and if they are, then are they allowed to refuse sex, or is that like a restaurant refusing to seat someone? Again, this is the wrong set of questions. Sex is trans-

actional because much of human life has been made transactional, thanks to capitalism and other oppressive systems before it. But sex—much like friendship, or family relations—does not, by any means, *have to be* transactional. The existence of sex work might seem to complicate the issue, but it really doesn't, no more than the existence of restaurants complicates home-cooked meals. It's quite probable that the inequities that we see in both uncompensated domestic relationships and compensated sex work do not arise from some kind of "natural" transactional quality innate to human relationships, but from a lack of economic freedom, fairness, and respect.

What if human relationships ceased to be economic relationships? "I think a big part of the dream that many socialists have is to be released from having a life that is ruled by money," writes my colleague Nathan J. Robinson. "The first priority, of course, is the abolition of class and making sure every person is free. But there is a certain dislike for exchange relationships generally. We want a world where you give someone something because you would like them to have it, not because you are looking to get something out of them." As it stands, far too many people get into and stay in relationships for economic reasons. Thanks to the pandemic and concomitant recession, a staggering number of women have dropped out of the workforce due to layoffs or to take care of children; this, in turn, increases their dependence on their male partners, and makes it harder for them to leave or to have an equal say in their relationships. This is the 1950s, pre-sexual revolution model: sex as a condition of housing, marriage as a job. The dream is to liberate sex and relationships so that they are no longer fundamentally economic, to strip away the economic assumptions about reality that have fenced in our choices. This, incidentally, wouldn't mean that sex work would disappear, any more than art or music. It simply means that none of those practices would be tied to the pursuit of making enough money in order to eat.

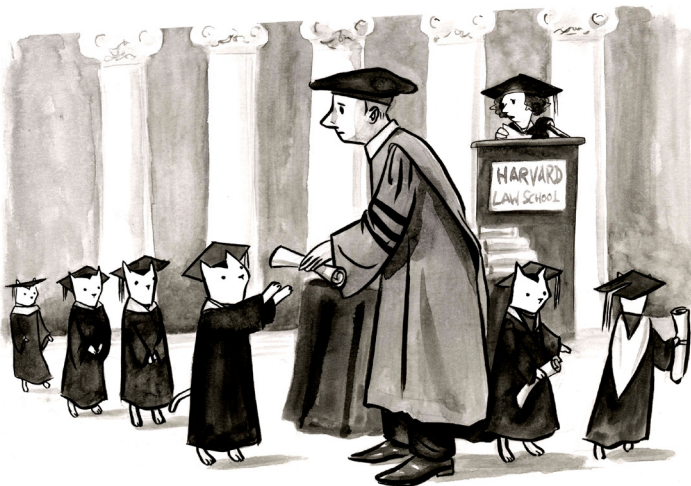
Is this dream the future that incels want? Based on their own words, I don't think so. The phrase "TFW No GF" means "that feel when

no girlfriend," and the documentary explains it as a phrase "used to describe one's greater fragile emotional state as a result of loneliness and alienation." This is true to an extent—it *is* about loneliness and alienation—but again, it's not *just* about loneliness and alienation. The phrase is still *no gf* after all. A girlfriend is an *acquisition*, a demonstration of status. In the pseudoscientific/economic sensibility of incelism, a girlfriend is proof that one has successfully outcompeted other men. As Tolentino explains, "Incels aren't really looking for sex; they're looking for absolute male supremacy. Sex, defined to them as dominion over female bodies, is just their preferred sort of proof." Possession of a girlfriend is understood as a solution and an end; loneliness mixed up in the acquisition of objects, in which women are the highest prize. But "a girlfriend" is more than that, too; a woman in your life who loves you and will listen to you is the closest that many men will get to actual social support. As sociologist Jessica Calarco recently said in an interview with Anne Helen Petersen, "other countries have social safety nets. The U.S. has women."

It would be unfair to hold incels solely responsible for their perception of women as prize objects or as ministering angels of sympathy. Capitalist realism, advertising, and centuries of patriarchy have insisted on these images, after all. "It is men, not women, who have shaped the contours of the incel predicament," Tolentino writes. "It is male power, not female power, that has chained all of human society to the idea that women are decorative sexual objects, and that male worth is measured by how good-looking a woman they acquire." This message is deeply cruel to men as well as women—if you're unable to acquire a beautiful woman, if you're *not* the protagonist of all reality, then does that mean you're a failure? Are you genetically unacceptable and doomed to loneliness forever? What if you're *not* talented, *not* special? What if you're just...kind of a guy? What's wrong with being kind of a guy, not better than anybody else, not superior, not inferior? Do you need to be superior to other people in order to matter?

If you can't be the hero, you might as well be the villain. The villain is at least important and gets *noticed*; and if you can layer that up in Joker imagery, then it might even look like you appreciate this ironically and are in on the joke. In *TFW No GF*, the subjects are quick to explain that their frequent misogynist jokes are solely for attention. Charles, who has tweeted "I will shoot any woman at any time for any reason," and "I'm not a misogynist I just hate women," was questioned by local police for a gun-toting Joker meme. He insists he really doesn't hate women at all; it's just that misogynist or depressing statements simply do better and get more likes. Kyle says that "fucking misogyny on Twitter, it's like anything else on twitter, fucking saying the n-word or anything else, it's just funny because it *is*, it makes people mad. The people that get mad about tweets are fuckin r*tards, so it's funny to make them mad."

Posting a sexist or racist tweet "as a joke" and laughing when people "take it seriously" isn't really *funny*, of course. But it's not meant to be. As the guys admit, it's solely about and for attention. It's the equivalent of a preteen boy running up and hitting a girl with his backpack and running away again: HERE I AM, I EXIST. NOTICE ME. It's a cry for help, and an assertion of power; getting to be the perpetrator rather than the victim, the one who hurts and



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

upsets and confuses people rather than the one who is hurt, upset, confused. And while it may be born out of legitimate pain, it also rests on the presumption that the world is made up of perpetrators and victims, and some *should be* while others *should not be*, and you, who were promised everything by a society that was lying to you, are owed everything. You *should be* one of the somebodies; you should be *seen*.

Incel mass murderers aren't, as the documentary suggests, an aberration, doofuses who take the joke too seriously. They're the ultimate expression of the desire to exert power over others, to be famous, to frighten, to be *noticed*. The incel community may pretend to only ironically revere the mass-murdering Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian as "saints," but that's because they're too cowardly to admit they're serious.

If, of course, you were indeed a lonely person, and you wanted love, you might not spend your whole day online trying to get a reaction out of people by upsetting them and then simultaneously bemoaning how lonely and depressed you are. Moyer's incels may want to explain their behavior as simple causation—they are alienated by society, therefore mean jokes. But it's a feedback loop—alienated, therefore mean jokes intended to display superiority and detachment, therefore more alienation from everyone else. Tfw no gf, and it's partly your own fault, because you're kind of an asshole.

Here we begin to get into difficult territory as leftists; to what extent do we consider unhappy, unsupported, underemployed people responsible for their own actions? Can we neatly slice apart "alienated because capitalism" from "acts like a jerk"? This is an old debate; as Robinson calls it "the ancient sociological question of 'structure versus agency.' Are our outcomes," he asks, "determined by the social structure in which we find ourselves or by the choices made by us as free individual agents? This question can become extremely contentious, because the 'all agency' perspective (anyone can pick themselves up by their bootstraps) seems a cruel lie that blames people for a failure to overcome impossibly unfair barriers, while the 'all structure' perspective seems to treat people as pure victims with no agency."

A

T THE RISK OF SOUNDING LIKE A CENTRIST, surely there is some middle ground here. Surely people are simultaneously deeply affected by the cruelties of capitalism, yet not helpless victims before it. The fact that incels might want to be perceived as social victims bereft of personal responsibility is really an abdication of agency. In one of the great ironies of all this, it's a desire to be *feminine* in its

most stereotyped sense; to give up the heroic protagonist role; be helpless, to be pitied and cosseted and cared for: to be treated like a woman. As Andrea Long Chu says in her wonderful book *Females*: "Everyone does their best to want power, because deep down, no one wants it at all," and "to be female is, in every case, to become what someone else wants. At bottom, everyone is a sissy."

This is another source of incels' vaunted irony; they're afraid to

reveal their vulnerability. They want to be treated sympathetically, as they believe women are treated. ("I'm not implying that girls can't be disaffected, obviously," says Charles, "but it's so much more prevalent in nerdy young boys to just be cast to the wayside, their feelings aren't really that [considered].") But of course these guys would be terrified to be *actually* treated like women, because they know how they would like to treat women.

In some ways, inceldom is a reaction to a certain oversimplified social justice discourse, the kind which foolishly imagines that basically every white man is handed a job and a car the minute they graduate high school. There are indeed sectors of the internet where pity is doled out based on suffering and identity categories; where you might get more automatic sympathy and cosetting if you are a woman and not a nerdy young cis white man. This attitude may be partly responsible for the recent wave of white academics who have faked being POC; there can be a kind of currency in suffering, if you have the means and shamelessness to leverage it. But the popular idea that Tumblr "created" the GamerGate and alt-right reaction—as if being irritated by stupid comments about identity written by teenagers is a reasonable motivation for sending death threats to women writers—is an example of the push-pull of victimhood and responsibility. "Social justice warriors are mean/annoying, therefore I was forced to double down on misogynist cruelty" doesn't sit well with "it's just a bit of harmless meanness, people shouldn't take it so seriously." Are you a helpless victim of capitalism, simply reacting naturally to other people's bad ideas, or are you a person with agency, who is hurting people on purpose because you enjoy their pain? Are you the only one who is allowed to respond to terrible pressures in unjust ways?

Who is a "victim" and who is a "villain;" who is to be pitied and who is to be shamed forever—these are all political decisions, and moreover they're also zero-sum decisions. It's probably time to retire them entirely. But for that to work, we have to be willing to accept some basic realities: namely, that we are alienated but we still have agency; we are responsible for how we treat other people no matter how sad we are; and we are all in this together. In the documentary, Kantbot proudly claims, "You have to make the space you want in the world, it's not going to be given to you." This is of course, not news to many different types of people, and the mature reaction to finding out that this is true for *you also*, despite what you may initially have believed you had been promised, should probably *not* be to lash out in anger at the people who have always struggled to make the space they want in the world. You are not more deserving than others, and you never were. But you are also no *less* deserving. Incels are indeed victims of economic anxiety, they are lonely and they deserve love—just like everybody else.

In the truly fair marketplace of human desire (that is to say, not a marketplace at all), there's always the chance that you might lose. Someone might not want to sleep with you for any number of reasons; someone you fall in love with might not love you back. The question for incels is whether they're willing to accept this risk, or whether they're still invested in the old model of capitalist immiseration as long as they end up on top. The limited peek provided by *TFW No GF* is not promising. Gabert-Doyon enthuses about a

scene toward the end of the movie where Kyle describes an unpleasant overnight bus trip and, as Gabert-Doyon describes it, “[finds] communion with the passenger sitting next to him over how bad the bus trip is.” But that’s not quite what Kyle actually says. According to him, his seatmate said, “fuck, man, this fucking sucks, huh?” and Kyle replied, “Yeah man, but shit, we’re in it together. It’s like, fuck it, we’re all living it, *try and enjoy it*.” Meanwhile, Kantbot—banned from certain online mediums for his inflammatory posts—tells us that he’s decided to focus on his Patreon and his podcast. “Each tweet,” he tells us inane, “is a moment of consciousness, and they’re all connected by your brand.” Sean, another of the documentary’s subjects, has started working out and getting attention from girls, but he says he doesn’t really want to date. He decries “grind culture” where you’re expected to “grind in your 20s and grind in your 30s and grind in your 40s and grind yourself to the bone, but it’s like there’s no character-building happening anywhere.” And yet, Sean’s solution is to *embrace* grind culture, keep lifting, and not seek out a girlfriend just yet, because “I don’t want to settle for something because I’m not even settling for myself, I feel like I’m always pushing myself. It’s like a full-time job to fight the effects of modernity and all the atrophy and stuff like that.” He’s aware that capitalist modernity is destroying him, and that the world is unfair, but he doesn’t think there’s much to be done about it. “It’s precisely because life isn’t a meritocracy,” he says, “that it just doesn’t faze me when someone has something that’s better than me. It doesn’t matter, it’s like, you can’t change it.”

The incels in *TFW No GF* don’t seem at all interested in trying to build a better world. Their conclusions are to find ways to enjoy the misery of capitalism, form friendships with like-minded dudes, focus on their careers and their workouts, and try to enjoy the physical world around them. “Normal, every-day stuff,” as one of them puts it. They don’t question the *existence* of capitalist hierarchy: initially, they’re mad that they don’t have a prime place in it, but by the end of the film they’ve accepted their diminished status. I can see how Gabert-Doyon came away impressed by the five subjects’ ability to “[analyze] their own cultural and socioeconomic identities”—all five of them do express a number of thoughtful, cogent insights. But just because someone is aware of the cruelty and inequity of capitalism *doesn’t mean they’re opposed to it*. This is one of the dangers of trying to find common ground with incels, and reactionaries in general: yes, they too have identified the problem, but they have their own answer, which is not the same as ours. Reactionaries may agree with us that capitalism is bad—Lavin notes in her book that “a persistent low-grade resentment of capitalism... pervaded the [white supremacist] chats” she was monitoring—but her subjects mostly blamed it on the Jews. The future that reactionaries long for (aka a nostalgic mostly imaginary past where men were men and lesser people knew their place) is not even close to what egalitarian socialists have in mind.

We do know that there’s a connection between material conditions and reactionary ideology; white supremacists thrive at times of massive economic anxiety, and it seems their incel cousins do as well. Would socialism save them? I think it’s unlikely that we’ll ever be rid of people like this entirely—that young men will stop dreaming into their adulthoods of being heroes, the coolest, the best, or that people

will stop finding an elemental joy in hurting other people. Ultimately, socialism will not give anybody a girlfriend; it can’t hand women out as a nationalized good, because women are human beings and not a public utility. Socialism can’t make anybody likeable, or kind, or loved; socialism can’t get you laid. It’s not a shortcut. It may make certain things easier, by providing a milieu in which being kind and nurturing is socially rewarded rather than mocked and despised. In fact, it may bring about a sort of sexual revolution for men: in which, rather than having to regard every element of existence as a move in a zero-sum game for domination, it would become acceptable to simply have feelings, enjoy things, and pursue whatever makes you happy. But it will be impossible for socialism to ever free your life of all loneliness, romantic conflict, alienation, and unhappiness. You’ll still have to do all the hard work of being a person.

FOR WHAT IT’S WORTH, I THINK WE *SHOULD* have sympathy for incels, as we should have sympathy for everyone who’s struggling, and try to provide them with warmth and community. But it’s actually quite cruel to tell people that nothing is within the scope of their responsibilities or their capabilities. It renders it impossible for them to build their character and commits them to a permanent adolescence, in which they are children who must be pitied, not adults who are responsible for how they treat other people. I’m sure Moyer has sincere compassion for her subjects in *TFW No GF*, but there’s a sly brutality in not being honest, in not telling the full story, in treating these guys as mere victims who can’t help lashing out because they’re sad. They’re smart and self-reflexive; they can be kind, if they want to. No one’s irredeemable, but they have to be willing to do the work, and people who are concerned about the fate of incels have to stop apologizing for them in advance, or demand for them a sympathy they refuse to extend to others.

These guys *are* unhappy, and their loneliness is pitiable. They have few options; this is a bleak and brutal country. But this is a bleak and brutal country *for everyone*, including the women that incels think they are owed sexual access to, and if they just tried to see those women as human beings like themselves, struggling like themselves, who are not a cure or a prize but just more lost and confused people, they might actually find the happiness they’re looking for. But to do that, they would have to give up their childish dreams of superiority once and for all.

There’s no socialism without solidarity, and *TFW No GF* shows that incels *have* solidarity—with guys like themselves, and no one else. They believe they’re owed something, something in particular, something more than other people, something that the universal solidarity of socialism won’t ever be able to give them. But it’s always possible for them to change their minds, and admit responsibility, and decide they’re ready for real solidarity and community instead. Right now they’re standing outside in the snow, looking on bitterly through the window at the light and life inside—but they can enter any time. The door is open. They just have to choose to come in. ♣

ABSOLUTELY IMPOSSIBLE...

Cognitive Ability Test!

Completely maddening!



cake.



daffodil.



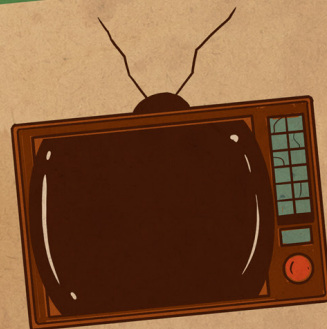
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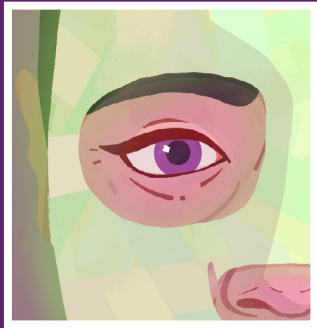


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Literally Don't Even Try.

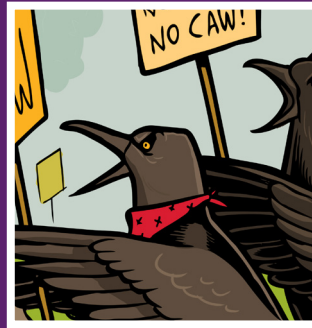
THE ILLUSTRATORS



Kyle Brian Prior



Mort Todd



Nick Sirotich



Tiffany Pai



Mike Freiheit



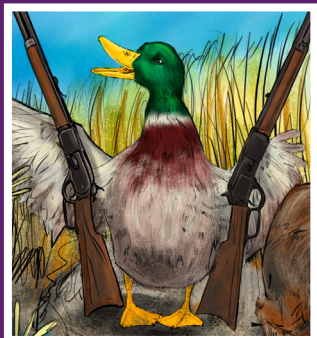
Kyle Brian Prior



Skutch



Mike Freiheit



Jesse Rubinfeld



Matt Lubchansky



C.M. Duffy



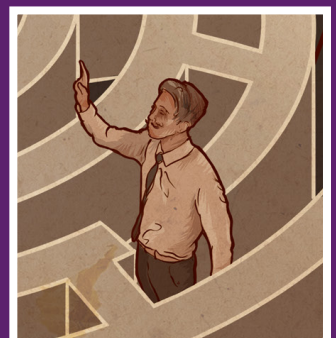
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