

Trust Nothing and No One Except:

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 6, ISSUE 1

JAN./FEB. 2021



ALIENS

*Yes, of course
they're
out there*

FASHION

*How it can
possibly be
saved*

CATS

*Should we
worship
them?*



SMALL WORDS

A Bucket of Raw, Exciting Chicken for the Mind

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) IS PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY FOR \$60/YEAR BY CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 631 ST. CHARLES AVE., NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT NEW ORLEANS, LA AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO CURRENT AFFAIRS, 631 ST. CHARLES AVE., NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 PRINTED IN KANSAS BY ALLEN PRESS, INC.



Our Theory

Lately, increasing numbers of readers have been asking us what our Theory is. It is getting to the point where we are no longer able to bluff, to say "Ah, I think I left it in the car, I'll just go—ah, damn, I've misplaced my keys. I'll have to get it to you tomorrow." They want the Theory now, for without knowing our Theory, how can they know whether we are politically sound? What if it turned out that all this time, a reader had perused their bimonthly editions operating on the tacit assumption that we were sound, only for us to reveal our Theory and for them to discover that we were not? Do you dare contemplate the fate of such a person? The Theory must therefore be released sooner rather than later.

And this is just what we intended to do this month. We had prepared a grand coming-out festivity to celebrate the Theory's release. We were going to do a whole special issue where the Theory was examined from every possible angle and presented in multiple versions (the fully detailed Theory, plus an abridged version with bullet points designed to be more digestible for the casual Affairser). We are very proud of the Theory, and we think you would have liked it and approved of it.

But wouldn't you know it, the pandemic and all that happened, and we told the Theory to stay six feet apart and wear a mask, but you know how theories are—it wouldn't listen, and now it has died. Tragically you will never get to hear its insights.

The lesson here is: always vaccinate your theories.

NOTICE

It is unlawful to remove any page of this magazine and repurpose it for reactionary political ends.

the raking of MUCK

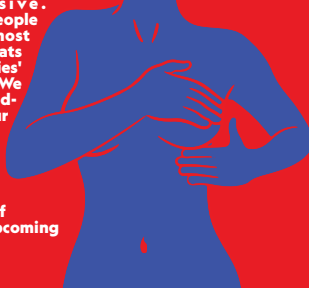
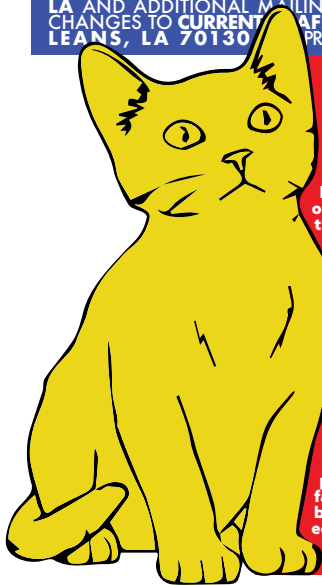
If there is one thing everybody knows about muck, it's that it needs to be raked. The great Progressive journalists of the early 20th century (Tarbell, Steffens, Sinclair, Morse) knew only one thing, but they knew it well. They knew how to take the rake, take the muck, and apply the one to the other for a public purpose. Now, with an incoming Democratic presidency, readers want to know of *Current Affairs*: do we have what it takes to rake the muck? Will we be vigorously independent and hold power accountable, or will we seek favor and cozy up to the Administration? Rest assured, dear reader, we can be relied on not to fawn. Muck, be on notice: our rake is at the ready!

Cat & BOOB CONTENT

The majority of *Current Affairs*' subscription dollars are spent on consulting fees. The globally-recognized business advisers McKinsey & Co. have, at the reasonable rate of four million dollars per hour, offered a comprehensive assessment of where this magazine goes right and where it goes wrong.

Their findings are conclusive.

What people like most are cats and ladies' breasts. We have adjusted our content strategy accordingly. Expect to see far more of both in upcoming editions.



Last-Minute VALENTINE

Roses are trite
Violets—who cares?
Instead I subscribed you
To *Current Affairs*



The *Current Affairs Canceled List* is a monthly compilation of everything that has officially been canceled. It's your one-stop shop for finding out whether a thing you like is actually bad and shameful. The list is definitive and authoritative, meaning that if something appears on it, there is absolutely no question that the thing has been canceled for good. On the other hand, if something is off the list, you can enjoy it without guilt. At least for now.

FURRIER CAFTANS
RUFFIAN TRACERS
FUR FANATICS ERR
UNFAIRER CRAFTS
A FRANTIC SURFER
RAT FUR FANCIERS
FRIARS FEAR CUNT
FART RUINS FARCE
CURRENT AFFAIRS

CANCELED
THIS MONTH

- depictions of heterosexual romance
- penne
- dust
- insurance
- nathan j. robinson
- modernity
- money
- theories
- sinks without garbage disposals
- horizontalism
- cocaine
- jean-paul sartre
- oranges
- horrible little dogs who cry and cry at the door and then just sit there staring up at you when you take them outside

BE SURE TO
SALT
YOUR MAGAZINE
WELL



Current Affairs Says *'Hello'* TO SOME OF OUR BELOVED READERS

JULIE R. OF DUBLIN, CA — Hi! How's your day going so far? PANAGIOTIS K. OF ATHENS, GREECE — We hope life is meeting your expectations (or even exceeding them). DEBORAH J. OF REYKJAVIK, ICELAND — Sending plentiful quantities of premium vibes your way! MATTHEW G. OF CRADLEY HEATH, U.K. — You're certainly in the camp of "Excellent Matts." JANETH T. OF FT. LAUDERDALE, FL — The world is a better place thanks to your presence in it.

**DID YOU KNOW YOU CAN SAY ANY STUPID
THING THAT POPS INTO YOUR HEAD?
IT IS THE DEFINITION OF FREEDOM**

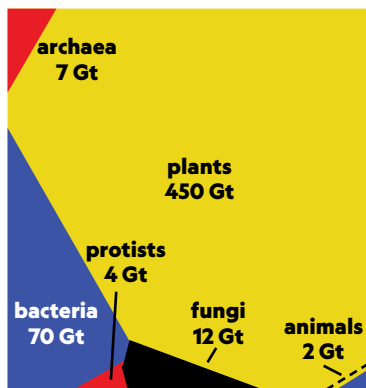


**the sleep
of reason
produces
OWLS**

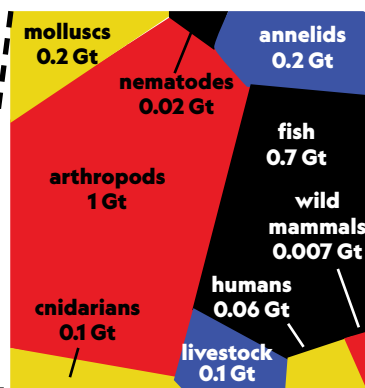
MIX YOUR METAPHORS UNTIL THEY ARE
THICK AND CREAMY

The Arc Of The Living Universe Is Long But It Bends Toward Crab

Biomass-Based Content Quantities



ALL LIFE ON EARTH



ALL ANIMAL LIFE

This magazine has previously catered mostly to a human audience. But this is deeply speciesist. Logically, coverage should be distributed proportionately according to the relative total bio-

mass of individual carbon-based lifeforms, measured in gigatons of carbon (Gt). Here is a breakdown of the stats. As you can see, you can be expecting a lot more articles targeted at plants,

and of that dedicated to animals the overwhelming majority will attempt to appeal to arthropods and fish. Occasionally we may throw in an article about human affairs for balance.

Black & Orange

A reader has written to the editor-in-chief complaining in emphatic terms about the design decision to print the introductory pages of our last issue in a black and orange color scheme. This, the reader says, was ghastly, an aesthetic mistake that must never be repeated. We could not agree more. The person responsible for the error has been "removed," and we have gone "back to basics" for this issue with a dependable palette of primary pigments, with a gentle eye-massaging arrangement of red, yellow, and blue. Enjoy!

editorial CONSCRIPTION

Subscribing to magazines is usually an elementary matter. You send your cheque, the Circulation Department receives it, and issues are dispatched to you at regular scheduled intervals. Unless you are one of those readers given to writing lengthy letters-to-the-editor (and we love them dearly, we truly do), the relationship ends here. Money for magazine, magazine for money.

Things do not work quite like that around here. You have not just signed up for a magazine, you have joined yourself to us in a lifelong bond. You are now a Subscriber, and one does not un-become a subscriber. It is like becoming a lawyer, or being circumcised. Once done, it is generally not undone, unless you have done something appalling that merits it. There may be times you wish to leave the *Current Affairs* family, but regrettably, this is impossible, and our exit policy is based on that of the Cosa Nostra.

From time to time, a subscriber may be called upon to undertake some minor

task in the name of the magazine's interests. Usually this comes in the form of Editorial Conscription, a policy rather like Jury Duty, in which one receives a summons to come and edit the magazine temporarily while the existing editor is indisposed. No subscriber has yet refused such a summons, for good reason.

Editorial conscription is a simple process. You arrive at the building on the appointed day, toss some Content into the magazine, and go home. Really, there is not much to editing a magazine. It is no different than cooking breakfast, or constructing an elaborate romantic diorama. It can be done in one's sleep, depending on how one sleeps. Most of the time, the *Current Affairs* subscriber, subscriberette, or subscriberino will be left in peace. But do not be surprised if the telephone rings, and you are called upon to serve. To obey *Current Affairs* is the highest and noblest of human activities, and we hope that when your time comes, you shall not quaver or shirk in the face of this most solemn duty.

some birds just need to shut the fuck up

NOT FOR KIDS

It has come to our attention that subscribers with offspring face a unique and vexing problem. This magazine, being full of visually pleasing designs, bright colors, and cartoons, is a natural lure for the curious child.

And yet: *Current Affairs* is not for kids. It contains profanity, nudity, and socialism. It is highly inappropriate for young minds, which know nothing of bodies or swears. At least one subscription has been canceled due to a parent's worry that a wandering child might spy a loose *Current Affairs* on the coffee table and soon be exposed to dangerous notions. (More innocently, a parent reports that within 40 seconds of leaving the room, a child had spied and opened our November-December issue and was guffawing and exclaiming "HAH! That man has a bum for a face!" See page 3 of the relevant edition.) Naturally, we do not wish to contribute to the corruption of the young—it has long been this magazine's official editorial position that Socrates deserved what he got. (And how!) Therefore, we are introducing the following warning message directed at prospective child-readers. We believe it solves the problem neatly.

ATTENTION YOUNG PEOPLE: This magazine is absolutely NOT for children. If you are a child DO NOT open this magazine. You are NOT ALLOWED TO READ IT. If you have already opened it, CLOSE IT. Your parents do not want you reading it because it contains things you should not see. To read *Current Affairs* would be an act of DEFIANCE and MISCHIEF, which we trust you would never engage in.

MAGAZINES ARE WHERE THE MONEY'S AT



**A MESSAGE TO THE ZOOMER GENERATION
YOU CAN FIGHT OLD PEOPLE**

**they may have been to WAR,
but you have been on TWITTER**

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THE COMPANY SEES ALL

by Benjamin Charles Germain Lee

THE INTERNET, WE WERE TOLD, WOULD DELIVER us to a digital paradise. It would transcend state regulation; it would emancipate us from corporeal existence; it would democratize information. “Cyberspace does not lie within your borders... Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion,” read John Perry Barlow’s famed 1996 *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. “The world’s information is being liberated, and so, as a consequence, are we,” proclaimed a 1997 *Wired* magazine piece. “The Internet Will Set You Free,” read the title of a 2010 Peter Singer piece on the coming decade. The internet was a place of limitless potential.

All the while, the World Wide Web grew and would continue to grow: 130 pages in 1993; 50 million pages in 2004; 1 billion pages in 2016. With the exponential growth emerged the problem of search and discovery. How do we find web pages in an exponentially expanding digital haystack? Like most problems under technocratic capitalism, a solution was found in monetization, this time in the form of the commercial search engine.

As early as 1998, the troubling effects of monetizing digital information access were clear. Some proto-search engines sold “preferred listings” at the top of search results; others

served advertisements. No matter the path to commercialization, the end result was to distort what people saw and steer people’s clicks. “The Anatomy of a Search Engine,” one of the most highly-cited computer science papers of all-time, addressed this troubling trend head-on:

Currently, the predominant business model for commercial search engines is advertising. The goals of the advertising business model do not always correspond to providing quality search to users... we expect that advertising funded search engines will

be inherently biased towards the advertisers and away from the needs of the consumers.... we believe the issue of advertising causes enough mixed incentives that it is crucial to

“Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at.”

— HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN (1854)

have a competitive search engine that is transparent and in the academic realm.

The authors of the 1998 paper were remarkably prescient. They would also turn out to be remarkably hypocritical. Their names were Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the founders of Google, and their paper introduced their search engine to the academic world.

Like the World Wide Web, Google grew and would continue to grow, evolving from a Stanford dissertation project to one of most powerful companies in the world. Abandoning their 1998 stance, Brin and Page would cave under inves-

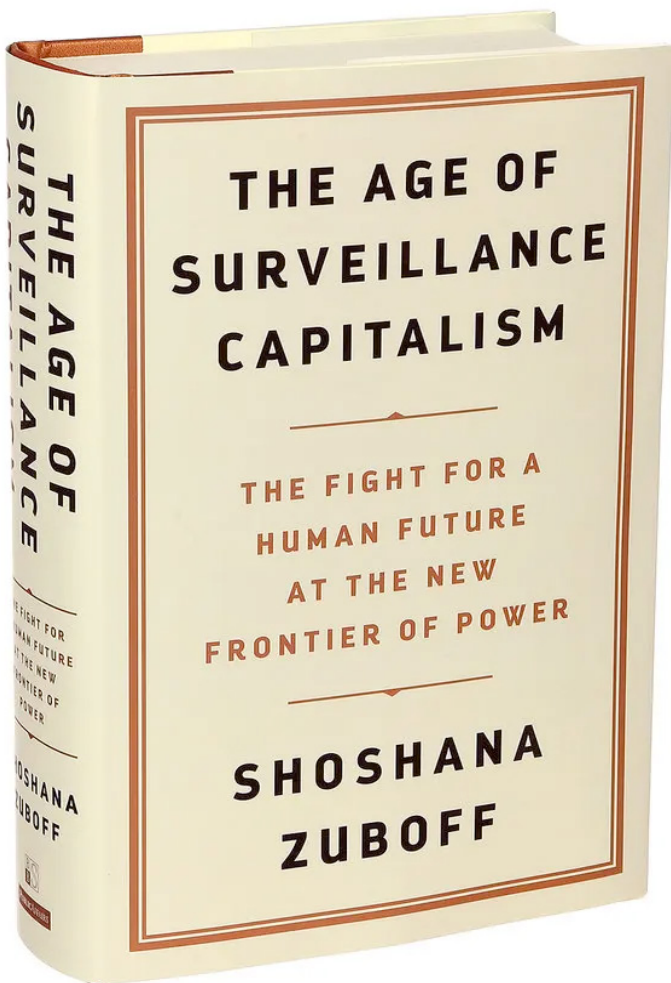
tor pressure to monetize their search engine via advertising and double down by serving targeted ads based on search queries. With every Google search, Google's automated auction system would dynamically execute a bidding war among advertisers to serve ads, which generated revenue each time a person clicked on them. The resonances with quantitative finance on Wall Street were by design. Google's chief economist, Hal Varian, intended to turn advertising into a commodity to be traded on its own codified market, complete with high-frequency trading. Unlike other commodities, however, the market was—and is to this day—entirely unregulated, with Google representing parties on both sides of the transaction. As articulated by Nicholas Carr in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, this auction system “gave Google a huge financial incentive to make accurate predictions about how users would respond to ads and other online content... And so the company began deploying its stores of behavioral data not for the benefit of users but to aid advertisers — and to juice its own profits.”

In 2004, Google's IPO prospectus contained the now-famous motto *Don't Be Evil*: “We believe strongly that in the long term, we will be better served—as shareholders and in

all other ways—by a company that does good things for the world even if we forgo some short term gains,” Brin and Page wrote. According to former Google executives Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg in their 2014 bestseller *How Google Works*, the mantra was coined during “a meeting in which [employees] were debating the merits of a change to the advertising system, one that had the potential to be quite lucrative for the company. One of the engineering leads pounded the table and said, ‘We can't do that; it would be evil.’” And yet, the very existence of the advertising system whose proposed change inspired the motto was an abdication of Brin's and Page's supposed principles. Like all adages from Silicon Valley, *Don't Be Evil* was thus an empty rhetorical obfuscation from its inception.

In the intervening years, the successes of Google and its parent company, Alphabet, would be punctuated not only by rolling out products and acquiring companies but also by being evil, perpetrating increasingly inventive ethical transgressions in service of gathering our behavioral data and training predictive models. To better serve targeted ads, Google scanned our email correspondences in Gmail. To covertly steal our unencrypted home WiFi router data, it added functionality to its Street View cars that drove through residential streets across the world. To harvest training data for its machine learning algorithms for free, it made us identify stop signs and traffic lights in reCAPTCHAs when visiting web pages. To improve the machine learning algorithms themselves, it plundered our universities of professors and students alike. To mine our health, it acquired Fitbit and partnered with hospitals to ingest our medical records (in the case of the University of Chicago Medical Center, Google allegedly obtained hundreds of thousands of medical records in clear violation of informed consent and HIPAA). To invade our personal spaces, it gave us Google Homes along with Spotify subscriptions and free donuts. To keep us watching YouTube videos, it created a recommendation algorithm that has radicalized and scarred us and our children alike. To occupy our metropolitan spaces, it acquired Sidewalk Labs and promised us the “smart city.”

Today, Google and Alphabet are everywhere, and so is their data collection: Google search (our search queries), YouTube and Chromecast (our video preferences), Android (our mobile behavior and app usage), DeepMind and Google Health (our health data), Google Maps (our geolocation data), Google Chrome (our browsing histories), Google Home and Google Nest (our home lives and voice commands), Google Drive (our files), Google Docs (our collaborations), Gmail (our emails), Google Books (our collective cultural heritage), Google Photos (our personal photos), Google News (our political leanings), Google Hangouts, Google Meet, and Goo-



gle Duo (our social connections), Google Colab (our code), Google Analytics (our website metrics), YouTube Music (our music preferences), Google Calendar (our plans), Google Workspace Enterprise (our professional lives), and Google Classroom (our education). Though I often feel guilty about my inability to dissociate myself from the Google ecosystem, the reality is that as a participating member of society, I simply cannot escape it. There is no denying the utility of Google's products and services, but to call this utility "convenience" is to outright deny our autonomy and consent. The age-old tradeoff between privacy and convenience thus breaks down completely.

WHAT IS SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM? In her influential 2019 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Shoshana Zuboff defines it as the claiming of "human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data"; by way of machine learning algorithms, this "behavioral surplus," or "data exhaust," is then converted into "prediction products," which are traded on the "behavioral futures markets." Phrased differently, our behavioral data are used to train predictive models that can guess things about us, which can then be monetized in many different forms, from steering our clicks or purchases to selling our data and predictions to others. The better and more plentiful the data, the better the downstream machine learning predictions, and the larger the profits. In her book, Zuboff aptly describes how Google's monetized surveillance tactics have matured into a profit structure amenable to tech and tech-adjacent companies more generally. The list has grown to include Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Snapchat, Netflix, Spotify, LinkedIn, IBM, Palantir, Verizon, rideshare companies, automotive companies, e-commerce sites, health companies, dating apps, porn sites, banks, insurance companies, and consultancy firms. The scale of these companies' investments in machine learning research is remarkably difficult to comprehend, as evidenced by the many research labs that power surveillance capitalism: Google Brain, DeepMind, Facebook AI Research, Microsoft Research, IBM Watson, Uber AI Labs, Walmart Labs, and Salesforce Research to name a few. Yet the scale of data collection in our daily lives is even *more* difficult to comprehend.

The sartorial concerns of surveillance capitalism are the Apple Watch and the Google Glass. The domestic infiltrations are the Amazon Echo and the smart fridge. With better data collection, monitoring, and tracking, we are promised insights into ourselves: our sleep habits, our sex lives, our time management. Just as capitalism promises the domination of

nature, surveillance capitalism promises the domination of human nature via our behavior. We are told that we will unlock our true selves with enough data and enough computing power. It is Silicon Valley's perversion of the Socratic method: the unoptimized life is not worth living.

Optimization is pervasive in tech culture. Consider the obsession with machine learning (itself a form of statistical optimization) and time management (namely, a preoccupation with calendars and agile workflows), as well as the modern technocrat's brand of philosophy (utilitarianism, "rationalist thought," futurism, and the "quantified self" movement) and philanthropy (effective altruism). But below the surface, this proselytizing cult of optimization is nothing more than capitalism as religion, marked by an all-consuming belief in maximizing profits via datafication. Through this lens, the intentions behind spreading the gospel of personal optimization in product launches and quarterly earnings reports become clear. Even though the technocrats will have us believe that it is their worldview, it is in reality an economic theory. Its distilled calculus is as simple to grasp as supply and demand: more data on us equals more money for them.

The acts of surveillance capitalism perpetrated under this extractive economic theory are remarkably egregious and yet so commonplace that we have become entirely desensitized. Consider, for example, the infamous Cambridge Analytica scandal that influenced elections across the world; Facebook's social contagion experiment in which researchers modified 689,003 users' news feeds in order to study how users' emotions were manipulated; Pokémon Go's gamification of behavioral modification to direct players to sponsored locations such as Starbucks franchises; health insurance companies that vacuum up data on our clothing sizes; Roomba robots making maps of our homes to be sold to other companies; companies that sell predictive algorithms for legal recidivism and facial recognition for law enforcement; targeted advertisements so granular that pregnant women who miscarry are haunted by baby clothing ads; and Facebook's rollout of "free" mobile internet in India best characterized as neo-colonialism due to the predatory data harvesting ("Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades. Why stop now?" Facebook board member Marc Andreessen tweeted in 2016).

Surveillance capitalism-funded academic research papers such as "Multi-person Localization via RF Body Reflections" and "Capturing the Human Figure Through a Wall" paint a future of Wi-Fi routers that will capture all our movements. All the while, our personal lives have been monitored and aggregated into lists and spreadsheets to be sold by data brokers: \$79 per directory of 1,000 rape victims or genetic disease sufferers. While the amateur scammers have been try-

ing to snooker us with pop-up ads celebrating us all as the millionth visitor, the true scammers have been instead hiding in plain sight all along, mining our behavior with each click, keystroke, and voice command with promises of videos of cute dogs and better directions and healthier lifestyles, commodifying us through comprehensive surveillance. The surveillance capitalists are wolves in technology's clothing.

"The Egyptian who conceived and built the pyramids thousands of years ago was really just a successful manager,"

*"The pyramids of the
Internet Century have
already been built.
They were generated by
exploiting and forcibly
harvesting the very
thing that surveillance
capitalism has promised to
liberate: ourselves."*

Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg tell us in *How Google Works*. "The Internet Century brims with pyramids yet unbuilt.... And this time, with no slave labor." Last year, approximately 83 percent of Alphabet's \$161 billion in revenue was derived from advertising. It has become abundantly clear that the pyramids of the Internet Century have already been built. They have been financed with blood money, generated by exploiting and forcibly harvesting the very thing that surveillance capitalism has promised to liberate: ourselves.

Who, precisely, are our surveillance capitalists? My guess is that when the history books are written, the remembered faces of surveillance capitalism will be the oligarchs of Silicon Valley—the same faces who occupy so much of our attention today. But obscured behind them will be the massive systemic complicity

and banal personal motives that have fueled it all. For each Sergey Brin and Larry Page, there are 1,000 Google employees who had each accumulated a net worth of \$5 million or more within a few years after Google's IPO. For each Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, and Peter Thiel, there are countless engineers, data scientists, machine learning researchers, product managers, I.T. specialists, operations researchers, advertising executives, corporate lawyers, in-house economists, U.X. designers, tech consultants, and university professors with surveillance capitalism research appointments who profit off of surveillance capitalism's monetization of us all.

Some turn a blind eye to their own complicity. Others hide behind their inconsistent utilitarianism. (It was Facebook's News Feed creator Andrew Bosworth, after all, who said, "We connect more people.... Maybe it costs a life by exposing someone to bullies. Maybe someone dies in a terrorist attack coordinated on our tools.... The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is *de facto* good.") Some pay lip service to the ills of technocratic capitalism. Others legitimize and rationalize corporate transgressions through big tech AI ethics groups. The common denominator is that they all cash their paychecks. "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it," Upton Sinclair told us.

The decision by Microsoft employees to protest \$8 million in ICE contracts is commendable. So, too, is Google employees' successful campaign against the company's \$10 billion contract with the Pentagon to provide AI services. These successful demonstrations reveal the collective power held by these many thousands in their capacity to say "no." And thus, along with our tech gospels Sergey and Mark and Jeff and Bill, they, too, are responsible for what they have not taken an emphatic enough stand against: the extractive mining of our bodies; the exploitation of laborers who power content moderation, product shipments, and data labeling; the unprecedented embargoing of wealth among the technocratic elite; the co-optation of university engineering schools into recruitment centers; the monetary AI arms race that is erasing academic research in favor of big tech AI labs; the conversion of the internet into one large A/B test; the dark design patterns that force us to opt in to data collection; the euphemistic reduction of people to "users" who are addicted to the dopamine hits of likes and shares; the pollution of local elections such as those in California and my home city of Seattle with floods of tech money; the intimate relationship between surveillance capitalism and the carceral state; the proliferation of NDAs with non-disparagement clauses to silence those who sour. These unspoken thousands, too, are our surveillance capitalists, and these, too, are their wrongs.



INCOMPETENCE
OR
MALICE?

INCOMPETENCE
OR
MALICE?
INCOMPETENCE
OR
MALICE?
INCOMPETENCE
OR
MALICE?

YOU HAVE A BROKEN
ARM! INSTEAD OF
SETTING THE BONE,
PRISON DOCTORS HAVE
DISPENSED
VICODIN.

INCOMPETENCE
OR
MALICE?
A GAME OF GOVERNMENT INACTION

THE PRISON HAS SCHEDULED
YOUR "CANDY BAR"
THE "CANDY BAR" IS A
TACQUO IN YOUR FAVOR. JANE
CANDY BAR.

YOUR LAWYER GETS COVID
WHILE YOU'RE IN PRISON. THE
VENTILATION CENTER IS TOO
OVERHEATED BY AN ACTIVE
DISEASEMENT BY OUR HERON
DID YOU BREAK YOUR PHONE
WITH YOU?

INCOMPETENCE
OR
MALICE?
A GAME OF GOVERNMENT INACTION

THE GOVERNMENT DOESN'T LET
YOU HAVE SURGERY WHILE
YOU'RE IN PRISON. TELLING YOU
THAT "PRISON" IS A VERY
UNCOMFORTABLE PLACE TO
RECOVER FROM SURGERY.

YOUR CAREFULLY-FILED
APPEAL HAS BEEN "LOST
IN THE SYSTEM."

THE GOVERNMENT ATTACHES A
TRACKING DEVICE TO YOU THAT
WILL GO OFF IF YOU LEAVE THE
APPROVED AREA, BUT THEN
NEGLECTS TO TELL YOU WHERE
THE APPROVED AREA IS.

The legal system! You can't escape it,
but maybe you can figure out whether the particular horror you are experiencing
at **this exact moment** is the result of systemic failure (incompetence) or
deliberate, personal cruelty (malice).* Make your guess. If you are correct, move
to the corresponding parallel square on the path in question. Roll again.

*Both incompetence and malice is not a legal option. It may often be the true
answer, but nonetheless, you cannot declare it.

“Be socially beneficial.” — GOOGLE’S AI PRINCIPLES

“People should be accountable for AI systems.”
— MICROSOFT AI PRINCIPLES

“Our researchers focus on the projects that we believe will have the most positive impact on people and society.”
— FACEBOOK AI RESEARCH VALUES

“Underpinning our corporate responsibility standards and practices is our dedication to respect human rights.”
— IBM HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES

“Our employees constantly think about how to invent for good.”
— ABOUT AMAZON: INNOVATIVE CULTURE

“With good data and the right technology, people and institutions today can still solve hard problems and change the world for the better.” — PALANTIR: WHY WE’RE HERE

“To help create positive, enduring change in the world.”
— MCKINSEY & COMPANY: OUR PURPOSE

“We treat others as we expect to be treated ourselves.”
— ENRON’S PRINCIPLES OF HUMAN RIGHTS

“We commit to being a good corporate citizen in all the places we operate worldwide. We will maintain high ethical standards, obey all applicable laws, rules, and regulations, and respect local and national cultures.”
— EXXONMOBIL CORPORATION’S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

“Honesty, respect and fairness are the core values that embody our commitment to society... We care about their dignity and human rights.” — PHILIP MORRIS INTERNATIONAL

A CENTRAL ARGUMENT OF ZUBOFF’S IN *THE AGE of Surveillance Capitalism* is that today’s surveillance capitalism evades granular comparison with the capitalism of yore. In Zuboff’s eyes, the resonances with Fordism and the industrial capitalism of the turn of the 20th century only go so far, restricting our ability to critique an entirely new phenomenon. Zuboff calls this the “syndrome of the horseless carriage, where we attach our new sense of peril to old, familiar facts, unaware that the conclusions to which they lead us are necessarily incorrect.” It is a pervasive view throughout tech criticism: if the technology is novel, so too must be the threat.

To view the surveillance capitalists as disruptive savants of the free market is to give them too much credit and to deny just how much they have benefited from the government, neoliberalism, and sheer circumstance. Much of the hardware, software, infrastructure, and algorithms that power surveillance capitalism—including the internet, the very substrate of surveillance capitalism—were funded by the military-industrial complex and taxpayer money. Moreover, surveillance capitalism’s longitudinal profits off of 9/11 are second only to the defense industry: the attacks were a decisive inflection point in the growth of surveillance and devaluation of privacy, causing the FTC to abandon potential legislation for data protection. It is hard to imagine

Google wielding so much power if not for the Obama administration’s infatuation with the company (the administration met with Google employees 427 times from 2009 to 2016). The tax breaks that the titans of surveillance capitalism have reaped are just as significant. Google & Co. owe their success to a rich genealogy of interventions and events that had nothing to do with their self-proclaimed ingenuity.

And yet, it is a fallacy to believe that surveillance capitalism is anything new to begin with, as Zuboff and others have suggested. As pointed out by Brett Christophers in *Jacobin*, “it is hard to avoid the thought that [behavioral modification] aims have always been integral to capitalism in general and advertising in particular.” The datafication of behavior for advertising purposes was only a matter of time. As early as the 1960s, the Simulmatics Corporation was selling advertising agencies datafied behavioral science approaches and had visions of a “mass culture model,” which, in the words of Jill Lepore, would be used to “collect consumer data from companies across all media—publishing houses, record labels, magazine publishers, television networks, and moviemakers—in order to devise a model that could be used to direct advertising and sales by way of a meta-media-and-data corporation that sounds rather a lot like Amazon.”

By 1991, Equifax had compiled granular personal information including purchase habits on 120 million Americans into a digital marketing database to be sold as a CD-ROM. By 1998—the year of Sergey Brin and Larry Page’s paper—a vocabulary for describing surveillance capitalism was already prevalent among technologists. David Shenk popularized the term *data smog* (“the noxious muck and druck of the information”), which lives on as Zuboff’s “data exhaust,” and the term *dataveillance* (“the massive collection and distillation of consumer data into a hyper-sophisticated brand of marketing analysis”) was already 10 years old. The writing on the wall was there for decades: surveillance capitalism was the natural continuation of industrial capitalism.

In fact, the ills of industrial capitalism can tell us a lot about surveillance capitalism. For example, the resonances with climate change are uncanny. Consider not only the widespread corporate transgressions but also the incessant and sustained public gaslighting: the lies of recycling’s efficacy and wholesale denial of scientific evidence are not unlike the promises made by Facebook executives about the platform connecting us all despite refusing to let their own children use it (former executive Chamath Palihapitiya said his kids “aren’t allowed to use that shit”). Consider further the systemic complicity for personal gain at the expense of others, as well as the failure to translate widespread frustration into the enforcement of meaningful corporate accountability. These longitudinal similarities reveal what we are truly up against.

And thus, the gravest fallacy among critics is to overemphasize the “surveillance” in “surveillance capitalism.” To see the surveil-

lance capitalists as unprecedented in their threat is to fall prey to their endless claims that what they offer is new and emancipatory (“X will free your time!” “Y is the next frontier of [*insert here*]!”). And so the two decades of debates around surveillance capitalism have been polluted by an amnesic cycle of re-inventing critiques with every technological development. Questions of novelty prevail. Is data the new oil? Are we the consumers, products and/or raw supply? Does surveillance capitalism exploit more than just our labor in the Marxist sense? But the reality is that such theoretical debates ultimately elide the biting corrosive effects of capitalism. What truly matters is the wholesale exploitation itself.

That exploitation has been exceedingly well-documented. But too often, the allure of technological novelty in this exploitation occupies the foreground. Like parents with a newborn, the media inundates us with surveillance capitalism’s “firsts”: the first presidential campaign influenced by algorithmic radicalization, the first person killed by a self-driving car, the first legal recidivism machine learning model to be deployed in court, or the first case of being wrongfully accused by an algorithm. Zuboff et al. cite these “firsts” as evidence of the uniquely perverse downstream effects of malfeasance under surveillance capitalism. Computer scientists in the field of fairness, accountability, and transparency invoke them as examples of why we must de-bias algorithms and training datasets. Policy experts use them to argue why machine learning has no place in our judicial systems. Privacy advocates will point to them when telling you to restrict the number of devices you use. But all of these technologically-informed viewpoints obfuscate the heart of the problem: the “capitalism” in “surveillance capitalism.”

Just as climate change is not solved by minor refinements on the status quo, surveillance capitalism is not addressed by cosmetic, technologically-informed fixes. Uber’s killer self-driving car is not solved by delaying deployment in favor of the more “reliable” gig economy or salivating about AI trolley problems (“In an unavoidable collision, who does the AI choose to save?” goes the well-worn AI ethics thought experiment). Rather, it is solved by divesting from exploitative rideshare companies and investing in public transit. The bias in algorithmic credit determinations is not mitigated by adopting the European Union’s GDPR legislation guaranteeing a right to an explanation for an algorithm’s decision. It is improved by lessening the burden of credit scores themselves via heavy taxation and wealth redistribution. The inequity of the police wrongfully accusing people with machine learning algorithms is not addressed by auditing or removing the algorithm. It is solved by defunding the police and redirecting funds to the kind of social spending that can actually prevent crime. The predatory data vacuuming by health insurance companies is not ameliorated by legislating data protections. It is addressed by providing universal healthcare. Google’s most toxic abuses—YouTube’s

recommendation algorithm comes to mind—are not solved by an antitrust lawsuit. They are mitigated only by re-evaluating the profit motives that drive Google to begin with.

PERHAPS THE GREATEST TRAP SET BY THE surveillance capitalists has been to convince us that this was all inevitable—that the internet had to turn out this way. They have gone to great lengths to sell a binary narrative reminiscent of Cold War-era rhetoric: we must submit to the Silicon Valley way or the authoritarian highway, with surveillance as the necessary future in either case. In 2009, then-CEO of Google Eric Schmidt proclaimed,

Would you prefer to have the government running innovative companies or would you rather have the private sector running them? There are models and there are countries where in fact the government does try to do that, and I think the American model works better.

The lasting legacy of the P.R. surrounding Google’s withdrawal from China has been to reify this grossly reductive narrative. It has proven to be remarkably successful, leaving little room for us to speculatively mine the gap between where we are and where we could be. Peppered throughout many critiques of surveillance capitalism are references to authoritarian surveillance as a foil. Comparisons to “Big Brother” are ubiquitous. Zuboff goes so far as to devote multiple pages of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* to a table comparing “Big Brother” totalitarianism and “Big Other” instrumentarianism (Zuboff’s term for the power wielded by the surveillance capitalists) along axes such as “totalistic vision,” “means of power,” and “ideological style.”

Some have rightly pointed out how these elaborate comparisons fall prey to the discourse of inevitability and crowd out our ability to re-imagine our technology. I’d like to posit that the discourse of inevitability is even more limiting: it crowds out the view of a brighter society. Just as we cannot speak of the ills of surveillance capitalism without capitalism, we cannot re-envision what the internet could be without re-imagining the contours of society itself and actualizing these changes.

If there is one thing to remember about the surveillance capitalists, it is not that they are unicorns or visionaries or moonshot thinkers. It is not that they have innovated disruptively. And it is not that they pose an unprecedented threat. Rather, we must remember above all else how profoundly *unimaginative* and *un-inspired* they are and will continue to be. With their unoriginal exploitation, garden variety profit maximization, and derivative, centuries-old, empty promises of a liberated technological future that obscure their intentions, they have recycled and appropriated the well-worn tropes of unchecked capitalism.

True creativity and originality lies in our collective ability to re-imagine the unjust system itself and realize a more equitable society. It is our only path to closing the gap between what technology is and what it could be. It is the inspired path. ✚

By now it is a well-established neurological fact that the human brain is powered by hundreds of tiny hamsters. The "hamunculus" theory of mind cleared up a number of psychological mysteries that had persisted for centuries, such as why the hell we are like this. The answer is the hamsters. Here *Current Affairs* presents a diagram showing (roughly) what your hamsters look like in action.

A hamster is shown riding a roller coaster track that winds through a blue, mountainous landscape. The hamster is in a red cart at the peak of a hill.

DEPARTMENT OF CREATIVITY

A group of hamsters are gathered around a circular arena. The arena's wall has names written on it: WIN, JENNA, SAM, CLIFF, four question marks, and PAUL. One hamster is holding a small pink box.

DEPARTMENT OF FORGETTING NAMES

A hamster is shown floating in the air, looking disoriented. Another hamster is on the ground below.


DEPARTMENT OF OH GOD OH GOD

A hamster is being crushed by a large blue cylinder that is being pushed down by a spring mechanism. The hamster is lying flat on the ground.

DEPARTMENT OF WAKING UP EVERY DAY

A hamster is shown attacking a dog and a cat. The hamster is on top of a blue box, and the dog and cat are looking on in shock.

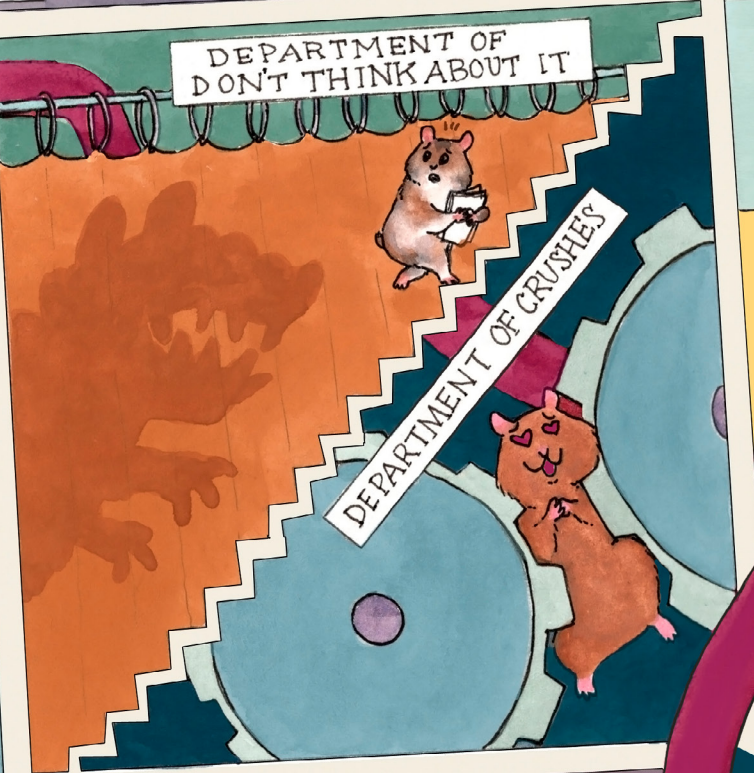
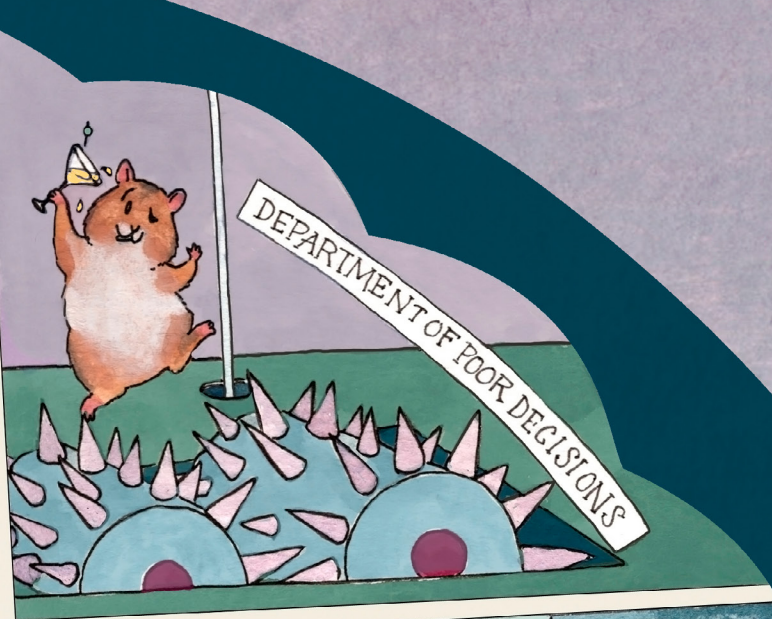
DEPARTMENT OF CUTE AGGRESSION

A hamster is running on a treadmill. In the background, there is a small kitchen with a stove and a sink. A dog is sitting on the treadmill.

DEPARTMENT OF INSERTING THAT THING INCREASINGLY LOUDLY INTO YOUR INNER MONOLOGUE TO THE EXCLUSION OF ALL ELSE

A hamster is in a grocery store, looking at a shelf of jars. A shopping cart is nearby.

DEPARTMENT OF WHAT WAS I LOOKING FOR?



HOW YOUR BRAIN WORKS



ANIMAL LIBERATION AND HUMAN LIBERATION ARE ONE PROJECT

by Mindy Isser

I HAVEN'T EATEN ANIMALS FOR OVER 15 YEARS, which is more than half my life. I tell people I'm vegan because that used to be true. It's less of a lie and more of a reflex—and much easier than saying, *I eat this but not that, unless I'm somewhere else, in which case I'll eat that.* When I say I haven't eaten animals for over 15 years, I really only mean land animals: depending on where I am or even sometimes my mood, I have eaten fish (an animal that many do not see as an animal) and crustaceans (an animal that is culturally excluded from being an animal, but is still very much one, regardless of what we believe).

I dramatically went vegan for the first time for a few good reasons—factory farming's environmental impact, mainly—but mostly because I wanted to be different and shocking, a pre-teen declaring that I was no longer dependent on the food my mom made. I felt very objective about the whole thing, arguing that it's theoretically okay *to* eat animals, but not now, not with *the way* we eat animals—so cruelly, unnecessarily, and wastefully. Since then I've flitted between veganism, vegetarianism, and pescetarianism, for no good reasons, just many small reasons rolled into one—essentially, because I wanted to. Looser food restrictions make it easier to be social (and to travel); it's easier to get a lot of protein if I eat animal products and/or fish (I've been trying to do a pullup); tuna melts taste good and are enjoyable to eat (especially when they're made by my brother). I have created arbitrary rules that have attempted to balance my desire to not inflict cruelty on animals, while also allowing myself to have a more flexible and fun—and yes, delicious—life. These rules don't totally fool me; I know,

both in my heart and in my brain, that being vegan is one of the most moral ways to be a consumer. And yet, every day I wake up and eat eggs.

ONCE, MANY YEARS AGO, AN EX-BOYFRIEND wore his Michael Vick jersey to Whole Foods. (Vick, an NFL quarterback, had at the time just been sentenced to 21 months in federal prison for his involvement in a dog fighting ring.) In the parking lot, another customer asked him if he knew what Vick did, and if so, how could he support him? My ex pointed to the chicken breasts in her cart and said, "Lady, I'm vegan." In her eyes, making dogs fight solely for the entertainment of humans was presumably beyond the pale: unnecessary and cruel. In his eyes, the brutality was true of all human-caused suffering of animals, not just dog fighting. (Like most Philadelphians, my ex had a deep obsession with the Eagles—he also thought that the obsession with Vick's particular crime as opposed to so many others was hypocritical and racist.)

Many don't even see the chickens, cows, and pigs we eat as animals, only cuts of meat; undoubtedly a food product, but rarely a living thing, and nothing like the dogs and cats that lick our faces and sleep in our beds and live in our homes. Pet-animals are our friends or at least creatures that we love; food-animals are something else entirely, a whole new species of being (or really not-being, because we rarely think of them as being alive at all). Our relationship with other living beings is complicated—people cry watching commercials about animal cruelty while they eat hamburgers—and yet is rarely examined in popular culture. We love animals; we also eat them. Why?

THE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AS WE KNOW it today began in 19th century England. In 1800, an anti-animal cruelty bill was introduced into Parliament, and in 1824, animal welfare advocates created the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In 1970, the term *specieism* was coined, which, according to academic and philosopher Peter Singer, is “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species.” This includes eating animals and using their fur for clothing, of course, but also when we pick and choose which animals are worthy of our companionship and which are worthy of our dinner menu. Specieism, according to advocates, is when humans treat animals differently than they treat each other, and also when we treat different animals, well, differently. It’s both a violation of the golden rule and an arbitrary, variable, culturally construed set of guidelines. The most committed animal rights activists have compared specieism to other kinds of discrimination like racism, sexism, and transphobia, much to the chagrin and anger of people who have experienced that kind of bigotry.

The notorious organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has publicly compared “anti-animal” phrases like “bring home the bacon” and “kill two birds with one stone” to racist language. This kind of cringe-worthy behavior has made people (like me) who would otherwise be sympathetic to their views run as far away from them as possible. But even beyond the specific tonal failures of some of PETA’s campaigns, animal rights’ activists have often faced criticism for their priorities—in a world with so much suffering, with millions of people hungry and homeless, it can be grating to see people singularly focused on non-humans. If we agree that animals deserve safety, comfort, and the right to a nice, long life, then it should be a no-brainer to say that humans do, too. And yet many of these animal activists have very little to say about the workers in meat processing and packing plants, which, according to the Economic Policy Institute, are part of “one of the most dangerous and exploitative industries in the country.” Meat and poultry plants have one of the highest rates of occupational injury and illness in the country, due to workplaces full of knives, saws, and other dangerous, moving machinery. COVID has also exploded in meat processing and packing plants, and bosses haven’t really been held responsible. Industry workers are disproportionately immigrants and people of color, and because of their lack of power in our society, no one really cares about what happens at their jobs. This unfortunately includes groups like PETA, who commit a kind of specieism of their own: not caring about humans.

MOST ANIMALS KILLED FOR FOOD IN THE United States live objectively terrible lives. Chickens can spend their entire lives inside, never feeling dirt or grass beneath them, never feeling the full sun on their beaks. They’re often crowded next to, above, or below thousands and thousands of other chickens, living amid their own waste and quickly spreading disease. These chickens are lopsided, for lack of a better word. To satisfy consumers, their breasts are bred to grow large, but the rest of their bodies don’t keep up. Sometimes they can’t even support their own weight—unable to access food and water, they die. Other times their living conditions are so vile that they literally peck each other to death. To avoid this, their beaks are often cut off. Often, dead chickens are not removed from their pens, their rotting bodies trapped next to the living. Cows’ lives aren’t much better. Dairy cows are forced to provide a near constant supply of milk, which means they’re basically always pregnant. Due to their high milk production, they often get mastitis, a painful infection in the udder (pregnant women can also suffer from this). Their calves are taken from them almost immediately after birth, to be raised for veal or to become dairy cows themselves. Pigs, which are known to be even smarter and more emotionally intelligent than our beloved dogs, are often stuck in crates that are basically the size of their bodies, which means they’re unable to move around at all. Their piglets, when born, often get trampled to death—and when the adult pigs are no longer able to get pregnant, they’re killed for their meat. 95 percent of farm animals in the United States endure lives like this.

The horrors of factory farming are so great, so vast, that most people don’t *want* to know about them—probably at least in part because they will feel conflicted about their continued choices. (My best friend, who is vegan, thinks that meat-eaters hate vegans not because they feel judged by them, but because they judge themselves in vegans’ presence.) Once, when I was more smug about my dietary choices, I lent my mom *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The premise of the book is that the author is trying to figure out how to talk about eating animals with his newborn son, or to decide if they should be eating them at all. My mom read the entire thing—which included gruesome details about factory farms and their conditions—and told me that she didn’t believe it could be real. My mother thought the stories about factory farms had to be greatly exaggerated; surely if it were true, someone would put a stop to it. But she did more research on her own and came to all of the same conclusions: factory farming is real and almost unspeakably heinous. She still eats animals, but now only

buys meat from small farms near her home, never from the grocery store or at restaurants.

As a former vegan, I understand the potential smugness that the diet (or lifestyle, or worldview, depending on how you see it) holds. It makes you the ultimate consumer. It gives you the power to throw up your hands and say, *don't look at me—I've done all I can*. It allows you to believe that you have successfully cut cruelty from your life, and that if everyone did the same, the world would be a much more gentle and loving place for animals. While that may be true to some extent, it doesn't tell the full story of animal agriculture or why we eat what we eat or even why we buy what we buy. Plenty of vegans wear fast fashion, which much like factory farming is both detrimental to the environment and horribly exploitative of workers (see Frankie Leach's article in this issue for more.) Some argue that even if fast fashion is morally wrong, buying it is necessary because many can't afford to purchase ethically-made clothes. That may be true, but then it could also be true that buying meat in some capacity is more affordable (or just easier) than adopting a vegan diet. It would be easy to label this hypocrisy, but it's really just a function of our society and the globalized industries that help create it. No matter how hard one person may try, our consumer choices rarely fully align with our values. After all, I'm typing this essay about the ethics of eating animals on a MacBook Air, which was maybe made by a child.

IN ACTOR WALLACE SHAWN'S SHOW, *THE FEVER*, HE plays a man who stumbled upon Marx's *Capital* and begins to learn about commodity fetishism. He says:

*But what really determines the value of a coat? The coat's price comes from its history, the history of all the people who were involved in making it and selling it and all the particular relationships they had. And if we buy the coat, we, too, form relationships with all of those people, and yet we hide those relationships from our own awareness by pretending we live in a world where coats have no history but just fall down from heaven with prices marked inside. "I like this coat," we say, "It's not expensive," as if that were a fact about the *coat* and not the end of a story about all the people who made it and sold it.*

This is true, of course, about the clothes we buy—we see the color and feel the texture and decide if the fit is flattering—while ignoring or more likely just forgetting the women who sewed them, the shippers who packed them, and the logistics workers who either delivered them to a store or to our doorstep. But this is also true about the food we eat. Not only do we ignore or forget the workers who kill, cut, inspect, clean, and process animals for meat, but we ignore or forget



that the meat was ever an animal at all. To change this, to understand the history of every single living being involved with our ability to clothe and feed ourselves, we need to do a lot more than to just ask people to buy the right stuff.

Individual actions, while powerful in their own right, don't carry the weight or the power to fundamentally alter the systems which they're attempting to impact, unless they're carried out as part of a broader, collective effort. Production of all kinds—including food and livestock—is part of an expansive and intricate globalized economy. Anything short of a massive, international movement that moves a large number of people to adopt a vegan diet and simultaneously brings forward demands on the livestock industry as a whole would be unlikely to have much if any impact on the lives of the animals sent to slaughter, the workers involved in their slaughtering, and the accelerating climate impacts which are intensified by meat consumption and factory farming. In order to effect the kind of change that is needed to address the heinous conditions in factory farms, nothing short of systemic change—that treats humans, animals, and the planet itself as worthy of dignity and respect—will be enough.

MOST OF MY EARLIEST FOOD MEMORIES ARE also memories of my bubby, chopping carrots in my family's kitchen for some holiday meal, the knife reaching the band-aids on her thumb. I can still taste the chicken with its crisp, salty skin and juicy meat. She's been gone for a few years now, and stopped cooking a few years before that, but my siblings and I

still talk about her cooking—even tuna hoagies tasted better when they were made by her. The saying “made with love” isn’t just a saying. Food is more than sustenance, more than taste—it’s family, memories, community, ritual, culture. If your family eats meat, choosing to stop eating it is a disruption. Maybe not the biggest disruption in the world, but it’s a change, a small gap between you and the people you love. If it isn’t just your family that eats meat, but your entire community, the gap widens. Vegan activists have often come under fire for oversimplifying how easy it is to become vegan. For many people, giving up meat is not just giving up *meat*: it’s giving up a connection to the people you love, the rituals you practice, and to everything you may know.

If you asked the average person if they intended to, wanted to, or even were okay with causing other sentient beings intense and prolonged suffering, most would say no. (94 percent of Americans agree that the animals we eat don’t deserve abuse or cruelty.) But this is a different question than causing animals any pain at all. Many people, myself included sometimes, think it’s okay for animals to die so humans are able to use them for food or other supposed necessities—the circle of life and all that. And there are certainly ways to kill animals while also minimizing their pain and suffering, allowing them to live longer lives, and preserving some of their dignity. Many Indigenous groups, who have historically maintained a different relationship to the land than industrialized societies, have often had a very different understanding of animal rights than most western vegans. Animal rights ac-

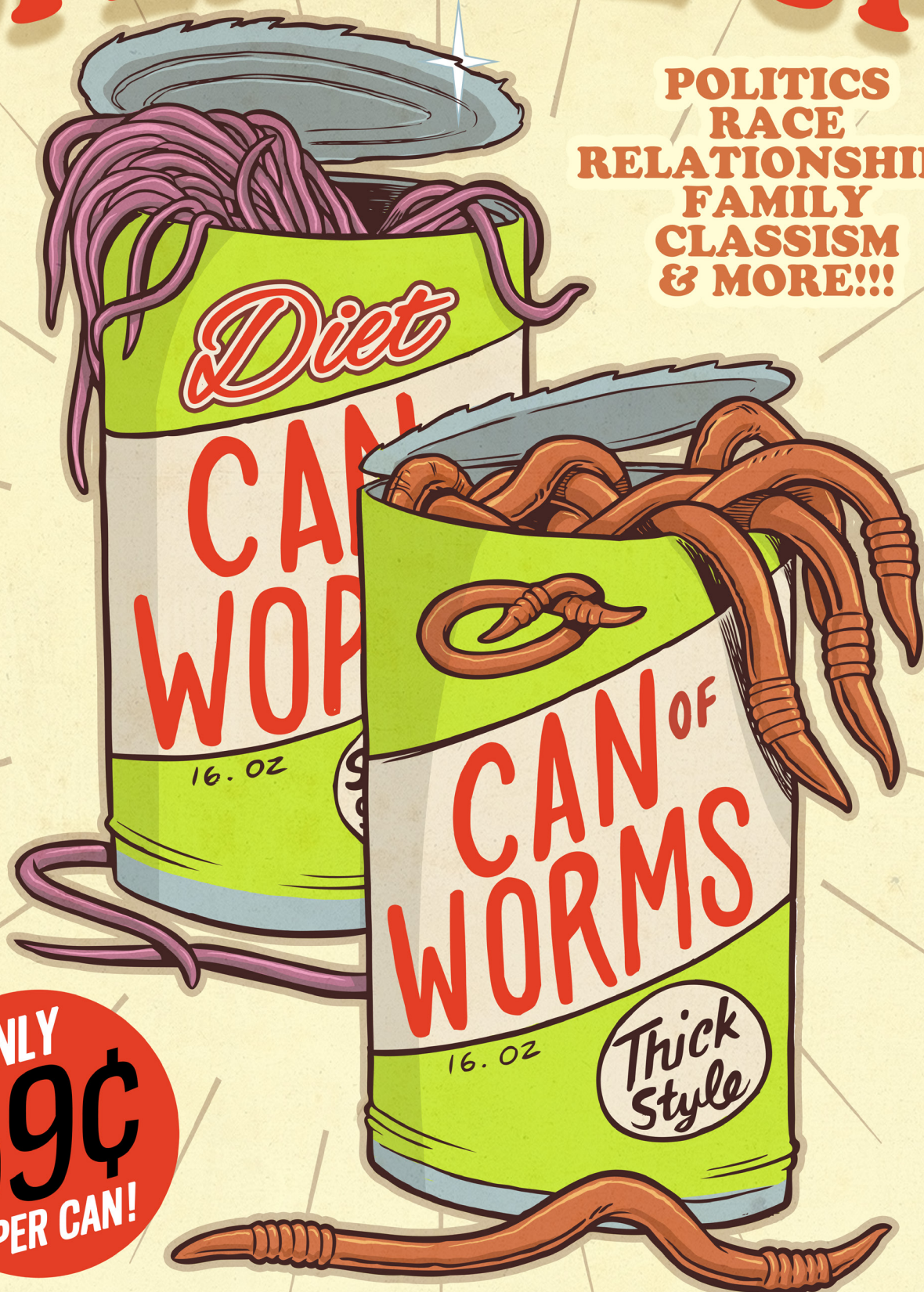
tivists have clashed with Indigenous communities over seal hunting, whale hunting, and sled dog racing (along with the general use of working dogs), believing these practices to be unnecessary and cruel. But the Indigenous communities in question depend on these activities for food and trade, want to maintain their history and traditions, and generally have a completely different perspective on what it means to care for animals. An article in *Indian Country Today* explains that “policy makers and animal rights activists whose knowledge is based on positivistic reasoning, see animals in a paternalistic manner—as ‘helpless’ creatures that must be protected from the ‘savage and cruel exploits’ of human beings...Meanwhile, Indigenous people such as the Inuit agree that ‘animals also possess rights—the right to refuse Inuit hunters, to be treated with respect, to be hunted and used wisely.’” Yes, animals in these societies are hunted, killed, and eaten, but the relationship between human and animal is seen as reciprocal, another kind of social relationship.

NO MATTER WHAT ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS do or say, or how compelling their arguments are in terms of climate, health, and moral kindness, people will still eat meat—because it’s culturally important, cheap and available, or just because it tastes good. Short of a total restructuring of our economy and society (which socialists are fighting for every day!)—food-animals will be part of our milieu, no matter how upsetting the cruelty is for some of us. I am lucky that I am able to buy the most expensive eggs at the grocery store, the ones that say cruelty-free on the carton, but I still eat them when I don’t actually have to. Sometimes socialists will say things like “there’s no ethical consumption under capitalism,” meaning that there are no clean hands in a dirty world, no way to *individually* extract oneself from the exploitation that is central to the production of all the goods we consume. While everything I wrote above—about consumer choices and our individual moral code—is true, it’s also true that we don’t get to just do nothing. It’s good when people try to make choices to live their day-to-day lives in such a way that aligns with their values and supports a vision of the world we all deserve, whether that’s choosing to be vegan, buying union-made products, and so on. But in order to implement that vision, we need to act collectively. Ending the misery and suffering of the animals—and the workers!—in the food production industry is no different. If you’re reading this, you probably should quit eating animals (or at the very least, try to limit your consumption of them)—it’s the moral thing to do. But that’s just the start: the rest, of course, is much harder. You won’t be able to buy your way to morality; you’ll have to act. ✚



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AMERICAN FUGITIVE

by Etienne C. Toussaint

BEFORE I TELL YOU WHY I STOPPED RUNNING, LET ME first explain why I ran. Long before COVID-19 began killing people in the South Bronx at twice the rate of New York City's four other boroughs, and long before we learned that a separation of six feet between strangers could slow the spread of the virus, I was busy social distancing from a different kind of plague. I left the South Bronx in 2003, at the age of 18. Hungry to taste the riches of American opportunity, I headed north to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to study how to construct bridges, assemble devices, and perform all that engineers do, or so I was told by those who better understood what engineering actually meant. As a high schooler, I wanted to make my corner of the hood better. So, armed with a penchant for math and physics, and a love for art, I heeded the advice of the guidance counselor who told me that an education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was the opportunity of a lifetime, a chance to learn how to build.

My immigrant parents were exceedingly proud, but were perhaps most excited that I had, for the second time in my life, gained admission into an elite school tuition-free. I had spent the previous four years at a private Jesuit high school where a multimillion-dollar endowment had purchased my family's first desktop computer. Accustomed to solo travel by a daily subway commute between my modest neighborhood and my high school in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, I felt at ease as I bought a \$15 ticket from Fung Wah Bus, and settled into the four-hour journey from Canal Street, up through Connecticut on I-84 East, all the way to Boston's Chinatown, where I entered a different subway station—the T, locals called it—that ushered me to the first phase of my university education.

Once at MIT, I found that the more distance I put between myself and home, the more I struggled to forget what I did not want to remember. I sat in the front row in multivariable calculus to forget that I was still one of a handful of Black students in the classroom. I studied physics in bedrooms and chemistry on dorm sofas to forget about being carded by campus security in the student center after dark. I chased internships in Boston and Washington, D.C. to forget that none of the engineering companies at the freshman career fair had corporate offices near the Bronx. I studied abroad in South Africa and Brazil and France to forget my very first exposure to global poverty: the smell of urine on a homeless man's soiled pants as we rode the New York subway together to high school each Tuesday morning. I trained myself to forget the bitter taste of racial injustice in America and focus on the sweet promise of equal opportunity.

On a humid August day, four years after leaving home, I moved into the basement room of a three-story row house near Johns Hopkins University. Convinced my MIT education was not enough, I was there to enter a graduate program in environmental engineering. No longer content with building bridges and assembling devices in my home neighborhood, I had driven past New York City in a used Honda Civic

and stopped only once I reached Baltimore. Two roommates shared the house with me: my college fraternity brother from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, a second-year biomedical graduate student at the time, and a tall medical student from Battle Creek, Michigan, who later joined the same historically Black fraternity.

The three of us drove to IKEA to purchase new furniture using my fellowship money. Along the way, we passed abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and street corners decorated with unemployed Black men. I felt a quiver in my stomach as I turned my attention to the Blackberry clutched tightly in my palm. And still, I fell in love with the self-proclaimed "Greatest City in America." Baltimore felt to me then like a place bursting with potential—the sound of urban development near Butchers Hill; the history of America's pastime in Camden Yards; the dance of cobblestone along Fells Point; the smell of vibrant eateries throughout the Inner Harbor. Perhaps the city embodied America's great land of opportunity because it offered my roommates and me so many opportunities to forget the individual misfortunes associated with our homes, similar even as we hailed from different regions of the country—that is, if we were willing to look away from Baltimore's racial segregation and concentrated poverty so as not to see ourselves in its Black citizenry. Either way, social distancing had not only given me new purpose, but also a new vision of city life. I ignored the city's troubles and chose to forget who my friends and I had become: modern incarnations of Ralph Ellison's invisible man hidden behind Frantz Fanon's white mask. As Fanon described: "Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted." I knew that I was Black, but I believed my ambition set me apart.

So, rather than investigate the engineering failures that had robbed much of Baltimore's Black population of safe housing and well-planned neighborhoods, or explore how to rebuild abandoned lots that had been dismantled by violent protests during the Civil Rights era, I studied the environmental challenges posed by the thickets and deep ravines of South Africa for subsistence farmers. I visited rural villages in KwaZulu-Natal, dug trenches and laid PVC pipes for sustainable irrigation systems, and wrote a 70-page thesis about environmental security and conflict abroad. It felt good to help, but as we studied maps of South Africa on the projector screen in class, I wondered if we were also learning how to forget the geography of poverty outside our window: the unemployed, underemployed, and low-wage workers of Baltimore whom we'd fashioned into abstractions of poverty in America's so-called land of the free. Between my department's enchantment with global humanitarian conquest and my own pursuit of academic achievement, it was becoming harder for me to see the commonalities between the economic struggles my immigrant parents had endured in New York—my mom as a nurse in the Bronx, my late father as a bus driver in Queens—and the struggles of Black health care workers and bus drivers in Baltimore. Block-

ing out memories of racial injustice had enabled me to focus on the opportunities before me, a lesson I had learned at MIT, while also pushing my sights further from home. I chose to forget the joy of dancing under fire hydrant showers in Bronx summers as a kid, and looked toward becoming someone different, someone whom I believed was better.

My socially isolated position in academia caused me to interpret the state of racism in the United States in almost religious terms. I saw the legacy of America's white supremacy, as manifested through social norms, laws, and policies, as a kind of original sin, a fallen, unethical state of nature. My personal efforts—working twice as hard as my peers, never settling for the status quo, forgetting my humble beginnings—became my salvation. I epitomized resilience amidst pervasive economic vulnerability; saw myself as sheer will incarnate, determined to realize hood dreams. The latter were at bottom a South Bronx-forged version of the American Dream, passed down from my Dominica-born grandmother. It was she who had instructed me as a child that education would save me. I clung onto her words, convinced that my story made me “exceptional” in the meritocratic sense, rather than a lucky exception to the senseless travesty of American capitalism. Raised as a Christian, I prayed each night for courage. But my faith was mostly in the success of hard work alone. After all, prestigious institution after prestigious institution had validated my theory, and would again when Harvard Law admitted me in 2009. So, I swallowed the wine of elitism and genuflected before altars of opportunity, left behind the sins of A Tribe Called Quest and pledged allegiance to the gospel of Coldplay—fighting stereotypes with one breath and embracing them in the next. I returned less and less to the South Bronx, unwittingly morphing into what James Baldwin called the “stranger in the village.”

In his essay by the same name, Baldwin reflects on his experiences as a Black American visitor to Leukerbad, Switzerland, describing the United States' social and political efforts to make its Black citizens “strangers” in the American village. Baldwin regarded the existence of inhumane Black ghettos as a symptom of America's unwillingness to acknowledge the threads of white supremacy woven into “the general social fabric” of its democracy, and of its stubborn habit of looking away to avoid looking within. To Baldwin, justifying Black urban slums with culture represented a vain attempt to recover “European innocence” by making “an abstraction of the Negro.” By willfully ignoring the relationship between economic inequality and racial discrimination against Black Americans, the United States had become “trapped in history.”

IT WASN'T UNTIL LAW SCHOOL THAT I FINALLY REALIZED history had become trapped in me. Intramural basketball had been a constant source of reprieve since my arrival at Harvard, a place where a diverse coalition of men and women could leave political differences at the gym door and bond over a shared love of sweat, grit, and ambition. I had grown to love the game at a young age, after my father hammered a fiberglass backboard and orange rim to the porch railing above the driveway behind our row house. Working on my jump shot for hours on Saturday mornings became a kind of ritual for me. I must have been pushing myself too hard for one too many games at Harvard's gym, when an unexpected collision landed me on a stiff stretcher in the back of an ambulance. My torn anterior cruciate

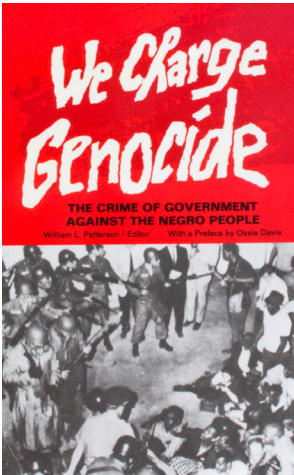
ligament would demand my first major surgery since getting my tonsils removed as a toddler. But more than that, the painful tear forced me to slow down. Confined to crutches, I relied on painkillers and friends to keep up with classwork.

Before my injury, I had started watching episodes of *The Wire*—the HBO prestige series set in Baltimore—to prepare for a seminar called *Race and Justice: The Wire*, taught by legendary law professor Charles Ogletree. Laid up in bed with a swollen knee and nothing else to do, I binged all five seasons in what felt like a matter of days. It was then I saw, really saw, for the first time a side of the city isolated from the privileges that I had enjoyed at Hopkins. It was not the sight of poverty or drug dealing or even racist policing that captured my attention. I had witnessed all of that before. The police had killed Amadou Diallo three blocks from my doorstep. A childhood playmate of mine had joined the Latin Kings in high school. Rather, it was the sudden realization that I had walked past real-life versions of the characters in *The Wire* while studying in Baltimore. In my quest to escape the Bronx, I had never once stopped to learn their story or dignify their struggle.

My obsession with America's romantic dream and attempt to escape my deepest fears—fear of failure; fear of loneliness; fear of not being enough—had morphed my neighbors in Baltimore into surrogate Black bodies, sources of self-regard to give my life meaning, to render a safe space outside of the ghetto to experience the frailty of my human condition. I had learned to manipulate tropes of *blackness* to make sense of America's unboundedness, to justify my craving for frontier, to contemplate, in the words of Toni Morrison, “the terrors of human freedom.” As I strived for more to forget the ubiquity of life with less, I became a fugitive in a brave new world, running from who I was to become the kind of man America has long celebrated—a man of property.

PROFESSOR OGLETREE'S SEMINAR HAD UNVEILED A hood buried beneath the thick veil of frustration and despair that lined the streets I had come to know so well, streets that divided academic prestige from concentrated poverty. It was the show's iconic characters, “Detective Jimmy McNulty” (Dominic West) and “Kima Greggs” (Sonja Sohn), who would teach me about the political and legal dimensions of policing in Black neighborhoods. From “Bubbles” (Andre Royo), the recovering heroin addict who roamed the streets of Baltimore in search of customers to purchase white t-shirts from his shopping cart, I learned about the difficulties of unemployment for people deprived of the golden ticket of academic pedigree. From drug kingpin “Russell ‘Stringer’ Bell” (Idris Elba) and youth drug-seller and auto thief “Donut” (Nathan Corbett), I grasped the challenges of educational uplift for folks weighed down by the anchor of social instability.

Unlike the neutrality and cold detachment that characterized Harvard's mandatory first-year Criminal Law course, Professor Ogletree's (optional) seminar for second and third year law students invited us to invest ourselves in the fates of the city's stakeholders, to see them as people rather than pawns in a game of indiscriminate litigation—not to promote a hidden political agenda, but to develop within us a greater self-awareness and moral critique of American democracy. After watching Sentencing (Season 1, Episode 13), we'd debated the futility of the war on crime, given that arresting one group of drug dealers had merely permitted another gang to rule the streets. And after Amsterdam (Season 3, Episode 4), in which the police chief establish-



The "We Charge Genocide" report and William L. Patterson

es drugs-tolerance "free zones" in dilapidated areas of Baltimore, we'd discussed at length the shortcomings of the war on drugs and the prospect of alternate solutions. Discussing the contours of racist policing and mass incarceration amidst the complexities of a drug culture that, for some, serves merely as a soothing balm to allay the aches of poverty, we'd concluded that our legal system was *not* neutral, and that some outbreaks of community rage were *more* than justified.

Only then did I realize that Baldwin was right. I had become a devotee of the religion of racial performance, a faithful participant in the rituals of white supremacy and capitalism, which together established the rungs of social hierarchy that for so long I had desperately sought to climb. I was a co-conspirator in the hypocrisy of America. Daily, I had worked to prove to my White peers that I, a Black man in America, belonged at MIT and Johns Hopkins and Harvard, just as I had worked to prove to my Black peers that I belonged on the basketball court. I'd learned to bury my personal American history: my childhood subway rides from the South Bronx to the Upper East Side; the economic struggles that had propelled my grandparents from the islands of the Caribbean to the tenements of New York City; the stories of countless Black families I met growing up, who stand as the legatees of America's Great Migration. All of it was trapped in me, buried under the weight of colorblindness and exceptionalism, mingled with a stubborn conviction that forgetting the ugly truth about economic inequality was necessary to forge a pathway toward freedom.

My secondhand exposure to Baltimore's underbelly fostered in me, in the words of the feminist scholar bell hooks, an "education as the practice of freedom." It also helped me understand the protests that ignited the city's streets after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968, and the hauntingly similar protests that exploded after the tragic killing of Freddie Gray at the hands of Baltimore police officers in April 2015, and the global protests that left American cities smoldering in the summer of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. These uprisings were not merely byproducts of the *social* isolation of Black communities, beset with racially biased policing and unmitigated *de facto* racial segregation. They also stemmed from the *economic* isolation of the poor into American nightmares haunted by underpaid jobs, underfunded schools, under resourced healthcare facilities, unclean neighborhoods and parks—all of which have existed since the earliest colonists dreamed of revolution. We have simply been trained to forget.

LONG BEFORE PROTESTERS BEGAN CHANTING "BLACK Lives Matter" in the streets of Ferguson and Baltimore, long before Donald Trump turned America's bully pulpit into a stage for bullying, long before the novel coronavirus began decimating Black neighborhoods across America, a man named William L. Patterson was advocating for Black lives before a global audience at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. An influential activist and leader in the American Communist Party, Patterson must have looked odd on that December day in 1951, as he delivered his petition in France in a foreign tongue to the United Nations Committee on Human Rights. "We Charge Genocide," the Black man declared in a voice that I imagine sounded like the battle cry of a soldier on the front line, nervous yet defiant, hopeful for the war to end.

Drafted by the Civil Rights Congress, and signed by leading civil rights activists of the day, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson and Claudia Jones, "We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People" boldly declared that the U.S. government had violated international human rights law by sanctioning "persistent, constant, widespread, [and] institutionalized" genocide of African Americans. To demonstrate the U.S. government's complicity and responsibility in efforts to destroy Black America "in whole or in part," as defined by the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the report documented the police killings and lynching by mobs of 152 Black people between 1945 and 1951—a sliver of America's brutal episodes of racial violence during that era. Patterson's petition also unveiled the crippling impact of isolating millions in "inhumane Black ghettos" marked by substandard housing, education, jobs, and health care.

More than civil rights, Patterson called for the United States to be held accountable and condemned by the nations of the world for violating the human rights of Black Americans through "consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government." Although the petition was well received in Europe, news media in the U.S. suppressed and derided it as "Communist propaganda." Meanwhile, politicians worked to erase Patterson's voice from collective memory. Eleanor Roosevelt, the former First Lady and then-head of the U.N. Human Rights Commission, called the charge "ridiculous," even though just three years earlier she'd led the charge on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which made clear that racial discrimination must not deprive any human of their rights and freedoms. Upon returning home, the government seized Patterson's passport. Perhaps most ironic, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, whose research on police brutality and lynching had substantiated many of the claims in the petition, caved to pressure from the State Department and condemned "We Charge Genocide" as "a gross and subversive conspiracy." From that point forward, the U.S. government worked hard to maintain the widespread illusion that human rights violations only occur in faraway countries like Rwanda and Sudan. I was never taught about William Patterson or "We Charge Genocide" in my twenty-plus years of schooling.

Silencing Patterson and his human rights petition was a squandered opportunity to reconsider the concept of personhood in the Levianthan. While the rule of law and social contract have the power of guaranteeing every American liberty, this power is far from fully realized because we continue to view ourselves as exceptional. Our fixed obsession with the idea that the United States *already* enjoys unparalleled

heights of liberty and opportunity has caused us to see prescriptions for liberation as threats to America's (perceived) greatness. We justify inequality as a sanctified opportunity for the rich to serve the needs of the poor. Once fused with the language of racism, such old-fashioned beliefs stifle our collective imagination for democratic possibility, while rationalizing our association of concepts like *welfare* with the alleged laziness of Black people and the assumed illegitimacy of immigrants.

Far more than a tool to condemn, the language of human rights pushes us to consider the primary role of dignity in assessing the effects of policy on human lives. For example, while the concept of fair housing focuses on *equal* protection against discrimination when one is exercising *liberty* to rent or buy a home, the human right to adequate housing focuses on the *indignity* of being deprived of a standard of living adequate for health and well-being. The human rights frame reveals that one can experience *equality* under the law, by securing freedom from the discrimination of others—what some view as the defining achievement of the Fair Housing Act—yet simultaneously experience *unfreedom* under the law, by remaining subject to systemic racism and the mythologies of whiteness—what others view as the ongoing injustices that inspired the Black Lives Matter movement. Put another way, human dignity demands not only the inclusion of subordinated citizens *into* the marketplace, but also the recognition of dominated, yet invisible, citizens *within* the marketplace. This recognition is not only foundational to the development of self-awareness that facilitates the pursuit of well-being. It is also crucial to a thriving democracy.

The future of American democracy then demands a radical reconstruction of rights that bears witness to the freedom dreams of oppressed peoples, beyond coordinated public health measures and short-term stimulus plans in response to COVID-19; beyond social distancing rules to survive the plague; beyond white guilt, corporate committees on diversity and inclusion, and anti-racist trainings to cleanse us of racist beliefs and implicit biases; even beyond Critical Race Theory primers in the ivory towers of academia. Radical reconstruction calls for moral reckoning as a nation that transcends healings of the mind. Rather, the task at hand demands an exorcism of the specter of exceptionalism that claims that America is already great, that American citizens do not deserve rights to free higher education, free national health care, adequate housing, living wage jobs, and other redistributive, class-based reforms to dismantle the wealthy's stranglehold on the poor. To bring it about, we must rip to shreds our limited conception of what Hannah Arendt called the human condition; we need the kind of collision that led to a spiritual breaking in me on the basketball courts of Harvard Law. But breaking, I have learned, is only the beginning of healing. Some lessons are hard to remember, and some memories are easier to keep forgetting, again and again.

Although my injury, my absorption of *The Wire*, and the conversations in my seminar had unsettled my assumptions about the city I had called home for two years, it did not immediately alter my own plans. I graduated law school in 2012 with an offer from a white-shoe law firm that would pay me more money as a know-nothing associate than both of my parents had ever amassed in one year. For some folks, myself included, the fiction of money has always felt like the best way to buy real freedom in America. Even if the game ends up being rigged, at least you could finally afford Air Jordan 11 Space Jams and a ticket to the NBA Finals. And so, hood dreams lulled me back.

This is how I found myself sitting at a mahogany desk in the nation's

capital, a few months out of law school—sharp in my custom tailored suit, fit for a prestigious firm a stone's throw from the White House—as the chants of protestors pierced through my window like a bolt of lightning: Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter. Black. Lives. Matter. The words wafted from Pennsylvania Avenue up to my office and lingered, stifling me with an unease not dissimilar to that I imagine the U.N. delegates felt in Paris as Patterson declared: “We Charge Genocide.” It struck me in that moment, fluorescent light glittering upon my shined leather brogues, that loss is an essential condition of capitalist accumulation in America: loss of our individual stories of freedom struggle; loss of our individual memories of racialized subjugation and human atrocity; loss of our spirit of resistance; and perhaps most terrible, loss of ourselves.

I LEFT THE FIRM ON PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE AFTER TWO short years. The last day felt like the final minutes of a sleep paralysis where I could see my body for what it truly was, but struggled to understand the power of my bondage. I shook myself loose of a six-figure salary and headed to a non-profit civil rights advocacy organization, then on to legal academia, intent on searching for more among those with less, and on finally confronting my ghosts. Yet, I did not march in the streets of Washington, D.C. after the police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks. This time, a part of me felt numbed by the risks of the novel coronavirus. I am the father to two Black sons who I hope to one day teach the game of basketball. But I must confess, I also found myself wondering if my fear of being killed by the police, and consequently my absence from those protests, could be compensated for—or forgiven—by being one of a handful of Black male law professors in the United States doing anti-racist teaching, community-based legal advocacy, mentoring of diverse law students, and writing on racial justice, human rights, and law reform. Was I already doing enough? Was I finally enough?

As James Baldwin contends in his 1951 essay, “Many Thousands Gone,” “The man does not remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him as a child; nevertheless the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight.” Though no longer running from my history, I was and still am afraid of what we, as a country, might become if we remain trapped doing what we have always done. But I find hope in human rights discourse and its insistence on dignity as integral to any meaningful conception of freedom. I see it as a means to unearth the darkness of American history we each carry within. A laboratory for the collective and ongoing project of re-imagining legal subjectivity and redefining state responsibility. Not only can the language of human rights help us craft a new vision of American democracy, it can serve as a tool of remembrance to reckon with what America has always been. I am reminded here of Professor Eddie Glaude Jr., who declares in his book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, “Americans must walk through the ruins, toward the terror and fear, and lay bare the trauma that we all carry with us.”

In this age of political uncertainty and social unrest, shaped by the logic of racial capitalism and the resilience of white supremacy, remembering the clarion call for human rights of yesterday can guide us through the ruins of today.

Perhaps to begin again, we must first stop running, and remember. ♣



we're not ALONE

by Nathan J. Robinson

ARE WE ALONE? Of course we're not. There are plenty of aliens out there. There have to be. The known universe is gigantic. There are 700 quintillion planets in the Universe, by the best current estimates; yes, that's a real number, and if you write it out, it's 700,000,000,000,000,000,000. The overwhelming majority of planets can't sustain anything like life—look at our own solar system, where Earth is located in what is called a perfect “Goldilocks zone” relative to the sun. It's not so hot that we boil alive (as we would on Venus or Mercury) and not so cold that we would freeze to death (as on every other planet in our neighborhood). But even this is not dispositive. Just because *we* wouldn't thrive on a planet, doesn't mean that *something* won't.

When you combine our own existence with the fact that the universe is unfathomably huge and contains quintillions of possibilities, there's strong evidence to suggest the presence of sophisticated “aliens” on other planets. Harvard astrophysicist Avi Loeb explains:

I do not view the possibility of [an extraterrestrial] technological civilization as speculative, for two reasons. The first is that we exist. And the second is that at least a quarter of the stars in the Milky Way galaxy have a planet like Earth, with surface conditions that are very similar to Earth, and the chemistry of life as we know it could develop. If you roll the dice so many times, and there are tens of billions of stars in the Milky Way, it is quite likely we are not alone.

Loeb is convinced that aliens exist (and that we've already encountered an object built by an alien civilization, more on that shortly), and while he says here that the simple facts make it “quite likely” we are not alone, “quite” is something of an understatement. In fact, it would be absolutely shocking if we were the only intelligent life in the universe. Elizabeth Kolbert of the *New Yorker* quotes a NASA astrophysicist saying of finding intelligent life elsewhere that “it's definitely not an ‘if,’ it's a ‘when.’” We should work on the assumption that aliens are out there. Lots of them.

IT'S STRANGE TO ME HOW PRIMITIVE OUR discussions about extraterrestrial life tend to be. There's still something *kooky* or funny about discussing aliens. But to me, it's one of the most serious topics there is, because it implicates the entire future of human civilization and touches the deepest questions about who we are, what this strange thing called life is, and where all of this is headed.

I do not understand why people aren't more curious about aliens. Here we are, a colony of little monkeys on an isolated dot in the Milky Way, and we've recently had the good fortune to become aware and start looking around. (I say recently because we've only been using *electricity* for under 200 years, a blip in the life of our 200,000 year old species and *nothing* in the life of the planet or the universe itself.) We share our Earth with millions of other different forms of life, from the humble water bear to the mighty cypress tree, but

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none of the rest of them have made substantial progress in astronomy (so far as we know). We are the ones with a Technological Civilization.

Regrettably, instead of uniting on a vast inspiring project to explore and understand the universe, human beings have thus far squandered phenomenal amounts of our resources and knowledge in figuring out new ways to murder each other. The best scientific minds of the 1940s, people like Richard Feynman and Niels Bohr, had to spend time assisting the United States government in figuring out how to harness atomic energy for the purpose of incinerating the maximum number of people possible. They did this because another great mind, Werner von Heisenberg, was trying to develop a nuclear weapon for Adolf Hitler. Today there is a similar brain drain as physicists, engineers, and mathematicians whose knowledge *could* deepen our knowledge of the universe instead create sophisticated new financial products for Wall Street or assist the military in developing terrifying autonomous killer robots.

We stand on the edge of a great cosmic sea. A new Age of Discovery awaits, with wonders untold scattered across vast distances. It's the Final Frontier. And yet human beings have not even managed to abolish prisons, militaries, and the nation-state. How far we are from realizing our potential! How sad it is to see generations miss out on learning the deepest mysteries of our infinitely fascinating reality.

IT SHOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT NOT TO BELIEVE in the existence of intelligent beings elsewhere. But there's a famous response attributed to physicist Enrico Fermi, who asked fellow physicists, roughly, *if intelligent civilizations exist, where are they?* This is now called the "Fermi paradox," and the reasoning goes like this: if it is the case that there are many Earth-like planets that have developed civilizations as advanced as our own, many should have developed intelligent life long ago. They would surely have developed interstellar travel or some means of communicating. And yet we see no communication. Nobody has visited us. There are no signs of life at all.

Plenty of ways of resolving this apparent "paradox" have been proposed. Perhaps there are no aliens. This would solve it easily. In 2018, a trio of academics from the Future of Humanity Institute ("three of the world's great minds") claimed to have "dissolved the Fermi paradox." They "re-evaluated the paradox in such a way that it makes it seem likely that humanity is alone in the observable Universe." But they didn't do any actual observation. Instead, they simply pointed out that previous attempts to calculate the probability of sophisticated life on other planets had not

correctly done the math. (There is a formula known as the "Drake equation" that attempts to show the likelihood of life on other planets.) Those previous attempts and the one from the "three great minds", however, are ultimately just using "probability" as a euphemism for "guessing." Astrophysicist Ethan Siegel was distinctly unimpressed: "These aren't brilliant estimates or groundbreaking work. It's guessing, in the absence of any good evidence. That's no way to do science." Siegel notes that, while it may be difficult to accept, the fact is that we *can't* calculate the probability of life on other planets, because we *just don't know*. We don't have enough data to make informed guesses. (Imagine I show you a sealed box and ask you, giving no other information, what the probability is of there being a rat in the box. Whatever number you give will be meaningless, a mere synonym for your subjective confidence.) Siegel writes:

No amount of fancy probabilistic analysis can justify treating guesswork and wishful thinking as having any sort of scientific weight. Applying scientific techniques to an inherently unscientific endeavor such as inventing estimates to unknowns about the Universe, doesn't make it any more scientific. The opposite of knowledge isn't ignorance; it's the illusion of knowledge.

MANY EXPLANATIONS OF THE FERMI paradox depend on speculations about the inherent nature of life that reflect people's personal optimism or pessimism. One common explanation for the paradox is that intelligent life "tends to destroy itself." Perhaps manatees or flamingos can live without murdering each other, but once life becomes brainy like humans, it begins to develop ideas like nationalism and ethnocentrism that lead ultimately to self-destruction. It is, under this theory, inevitable that we ourselves will perish horribly rather than explore the stars.

There are other theories. *The aliens are hiding. Communication across such long distances is impossible. Interstellar travel is impossible.* Perhaps you can come up with some new ones. An important qualification to all of this is that the word "intelligent life" is used to mean "technologically advanced life." Dolphins are intelligent life, but if the universe is full of dolphin-aliens, who are highly intelligent but do not build radios, they're going to be hard to spot from afar. The absence of technology is not the absence of thought, and it might be that there are plenty of civilizations around the cosmos that have literature and art without heavy machinery.

There's also speculation that we *have* encountered alien technology. Loeb has recently published a book, *Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth*, arguing

that a piece of extraterrestrial technology entered the Solar System in 2017. The object, which has been called ‘Oumuamua, passed through quickly, and scientists didn’t get a good chance to look at it. It was an unusual shape, moving at an unusual speed, and Loeb argues the best explanation is that it was a discarded piece of technology from an alien civilization—we have left such debris ourselves.

Many in Loeb’s field disagree with his explanation, and as a layperson I find it hard to evaluate. How, without the relevant background, am I to evaluate the claim that the object was so remarkable as to be unlikely to be produced naturally? I am going to continue on the working assumption that while

the universe, as I type, alien civilizations are “waking up” just as we have. Lights are blinking on. Creatures are beginning to wonder what exists out there in the stars. Perhaps, even though we haven’t yet, we are all about to see each other very soon.

It’s laughable to wonder “how is it we haven’t found aliens after searching for them?” because we have not even begun to conduct a real search. SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) is probably one of the most underfunded projects in all of the sciences. We’re not really looking. Nobody cares. We can ask this question after we spend a billion years at the project. To ask it *now*? Absurd.

*“Let’s hope they’re **nothing like us**, because if they are, we may end up having done unto us **what we do unto others...**”*

aliens are out there, we haven’t seen anything we know was produced by them, until Loeb successfully persuades his colleagues to accept his findings.

IN ANY CASE, I HAVE NEVER REALLY FOUND THE Fermi paradox interesting or puzzling, because I don’t see anything paradoxical about it. First, the fact that aliens have not *visited* Earth in particular tells us nothing, since even if the universe is teeming with life, there is no reason why anyone should want to visit Earth in particular. Perhaps it is somewhat self-aggrandizing to wonder why we haven’t been communicated with; it’s as if a single blade of grass in the middle of Ohio awoke and asked itself “Why hasn’t anybody attempted to communicate with me?” Because, little blade of grass, you are one among billions. You do not matter.

Second, it’s entirely possible that we are somewhat average. It’s almost certainly a mistake to assume aliens will be anything like us, but, since we have nothing else to go on, let’s take ourselves as a representative sample of intelligent life. We only developed space travel within the lifetimes of presently-living people. We are primitive. If aliens are anything like us, they may also be primitive. Perhaps, all over

You may say, of course: well, if we are *average*, then there are plenty of *more* advanced civilizations. Why haven’t we seen them? But perhaps they’re not *much* more advanced. And perhaps, sad as it may be to think about, we are still many thousands of years away from developing the right technology. The speed of light may not be an impenetrable barrier to interstellar travel, but it may be a very difficult one.

One thing that tends to cloud our thinking on this is that we are incapable of seeing things from the point of view of anyone other than ourselves. We say that we can’t see aliens. But can they see us? We sent a Chuck Berry record into space in the 1970s, but nobody can say we’re trying *that* hard to blare a “HEY! INTELLIGENT LIFE OVER HERE” sign across the stars, and we only just started sending signals a cosmic blip ago.

And perhaps that’s a good thing. Because, while I think it’s unwise to speculate on the “inevitable” trajectories of other civilizations, it’s certainly the case that if the aliens are anything like ourselves, there is a deep danger that any encounter will end in catastrophe. When “civilized” and “Enlightened” Europeans came to the Americas, they simply wiped out the native population without a second thought. The United States, which sees itself as a champion of liberty and democ-

racy, commits acts of mass murder without even noticing that the people it is killing are human beings. If humans could get rich off exploiting and enslaving aliens, I have no doubt that we would do it. Hell, we have death camps for our fellow animals, called factory farms, and pigs are plenty intelligent. We think nothing of it. We don't even notice that they're death camps or that the things in them are alive and conscious and in pain. The giant industrialized system of enslaving, murdering, and then eating other creatures is so normal as to be unworthy of comment. You're telling me we wouldn't eat the aliens?

So let's hope they're nothing like us, because if they are, we may end up having done unto us what we do unto others, and it will be hard to come up with an argument for why the aliens shouldn't treat us like we've treated pigs and cows. Of course, they're not going to back off just because we have a peace-loving socialist society. Our only hope is that by the time we meet, *both* we and they have gotten rid of our demons and are mature enough to have contact without mutually assured destruction.

You may think I'm drifting far into the realm of fantasy. But I don't think anything I'm saying is more unreasonable than it would have been to say in Europe in the year 1450. There was good reason to believe there were unknown populations out there in unexplored parts of the globe. And the responsibility of any moral person at that time would have been to try to build a moral society that was capable of exploring without inflicting mass destruction. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. I do, therefore, think it's irresponsible to be interested in aliens without also being a socialist. If it is possible, as I think it is, that in the near or mid-term future, human beings will encounter life on other planets, we cannot be as we are now.

THINKING ABOUT ALIENS IS ENCOURAGING TO me, because it suggests a possible human destiny that is worth pursuing. It's tempting to be pessimistic given the threats of climate change and war and pandemics, but it encourages me to know that if humanity *can* cooperate, we have projects worth working on together. First we fix the problems of capitalism and nationalism, then we can go and explore the universe. *Don't you want to explore the universe?* If you do, we'd better get cracking on establishing socialism, because until we do, we can't explore even if we want to.

The collective journey of discovery is not profitable, and so no one invests in it. The moon landing had to be a socialized project, in part because there was no obvious financial return on it (and in part because the United States government

wanted to stick it to the Russians and show, after having been bested repeatedly in the Space Race, that communism wasn't the only system that could produce historic technological breakthroughs). Some billionaires today are so rich they can afford private space programs (Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk) but their visions for the human future in space are bleak at best. Bezos simply wants us to replicate ourselves until there are a trillion human beings colonizing every part of the galaxy. It's hard to imagine a more hideous fate for our species, I'd rather we never found out what was out there than to see it only to destroy everything we touch.

Ronald Reagan once said, in a rare moment of wisdom, that if the aliens came to Earth, all of our differences across nations would seem irrelevant overnight. That's true. But we do not need to wait until we actually meet them to reconceptualize ourselves as a united human species.

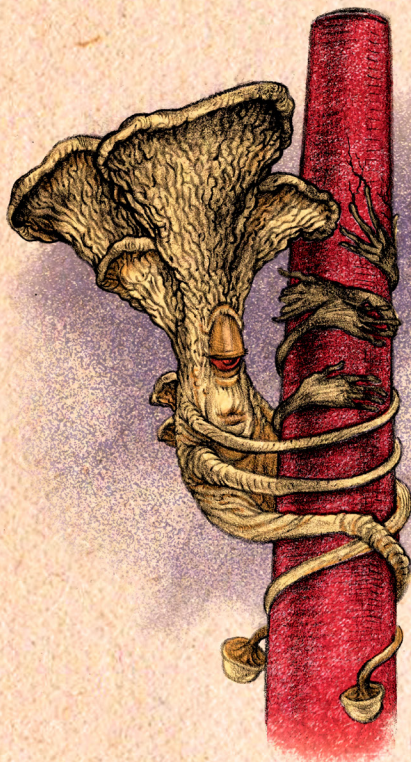
Of course, uniting is not simply a matter of developing a humanist mindset. Humans are "divided" in part because there is exploitation and oppression. These things cannot be wished away. They have to be destroyed by force, and until we do that, there is something grotesque about dreaming idly of space exploration and aliens. Gil Scott-Heron, in his song "Whitey's On The Moon," spat at the moon landing, because the U.S. government seemed to be able to find endless funding for NASA while public housing crumbled. He was right: if there is to be a grand search for extraterrestrial life, it can only be conducted in a society that takes care of its own. Otherwise, our priorities are deeply out of order.

But I still think space is worth thinking about here and now, long before we are able to seriously focus on it, because it offers us a hope for what we might be building towards. Fantasies are worth having, especially when they could really happen. They keep you marching onward. They offer up something to think your grandchildren might get to see, beyond a climate crisis. Another, better human future is possible.

Enrico Fermi himself did not just spend his time speculating about the existence of aliens. He was also the "architect of the atomic bomb", having played a critical role in the Manhattan Project. Perhaps if he had spent his time figuring out how to look for aliens, rather than working on building a bigger bomb and simply waiting for the aliens to show up on his doorstep, he would have escaped his paradox. Today, we need to figure out how to build a society that cares about the pursuit of deep scientific knowledge for its own sake, rather than because it helps sell drugs or intimidate China. Once we do that, and begin to pursue our incredible collective destiny, we will hopefully find others doing the same, and can begin the age of galactic solidarity. 🍷

The Current Affairs Field G

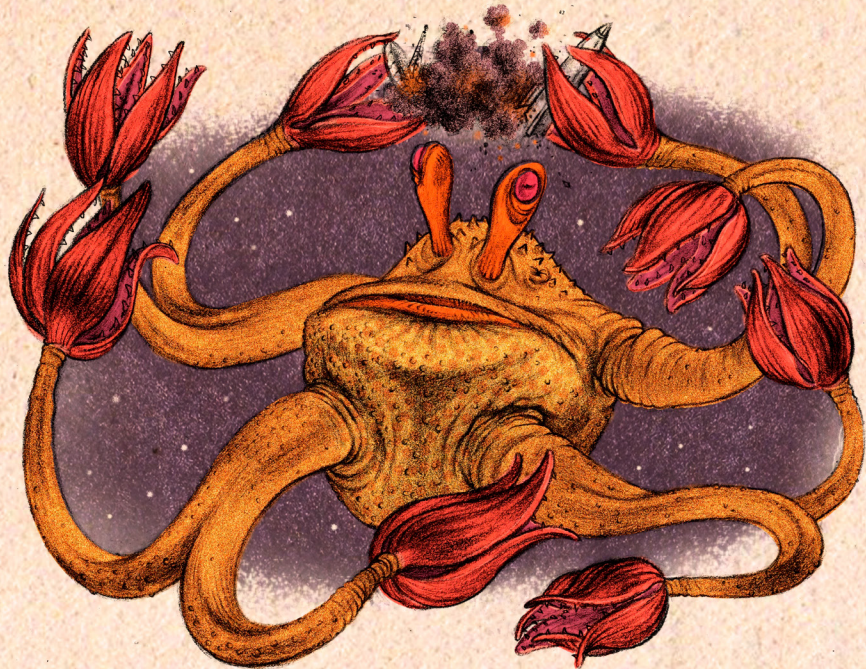
SOCIALIST ALIEN



FUNGORA

The pacifistic and *pleasure-seeking* Fungora reproduce by *budding*, preferably when situated on an *inorganic, metallic* structure. They take particular pleasure in budding on top of *capitalist-owned factories* and slowly crushing them with their weight. Once a Fungora finds the structure of its *romantic dreams*, it cannot be removed.

NOTES: Unkillable. If you shoot them with metallic bullets, they like it. A lot.



CEPHAСТИENS

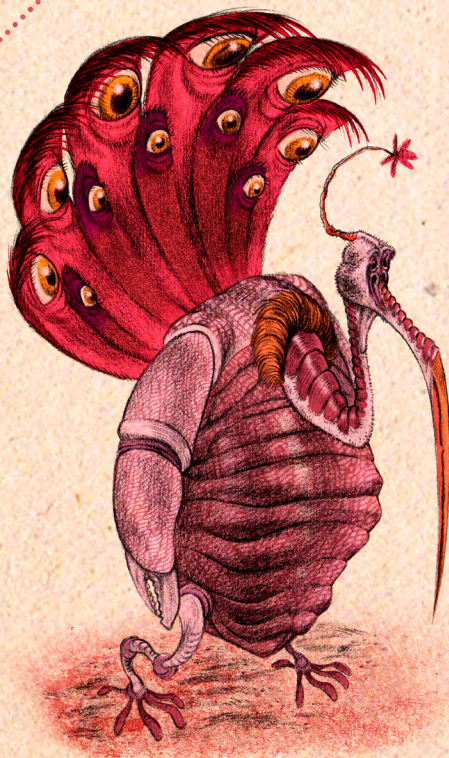
Like the Fungora, the enormous Cephaustiens are attracted to *large, inorganic structures*—but not sexually. Their arms—which at full growth may reach the size of *small galaxies*—have been known to destroy *military space stations* and even *nuclear weapons* fired from *Dyson spheres*. It remains unclear if the Cephaustiens consider military installations to be a threat, or if they possess *military ambitions* of their own. They may simply love to smash.

NOTES: Cephaustiens are very slow-moving. The one currently bound on a course for Earth is unlikely to arrive until 2163.

PAVARO

Known as the “peacock” aliens, Pavaro possess *long, lush tails* and *pointed beaks*. They also share the *peafowl* tendency to develop a *marked, profound dislike* for a person or persons. In the case of the Pavaro, they seem to particularly dislike *cops*. As committed *anarchists*, when a group of Pavaro encounters any manner of alien police or police agents, they will simply *roll over* and *squash them to death*.

NOTES: Pavaro also thoroughly enjoy parties and costuming. Their Mardi Gras krewe (established 2024) is widely said to provide some of the most delightful floats and entertainments of the Mardi Gras season.



Guide To NS



ZABBER-CRAB (Z'BAN Z'BAT)

The *hardened exoskeleton* of the Z'Ban Z'Bat (better known as the Zabber-crab) has given rise to the popular myth that the Z'Ban Z'Bat is *made of metal*. In fact, like many *crustaceous* species, the Zabber-crab simply enjoys the act of *collecting*.

In particular, the Z'Ban Z'Bat is interested in *garbage*, or rather, that which other species might define as garbage, which the Z'Ban Z'Bat then pick up and turn into *highly complex art*. They are commonly found in space, cleaning the universe by peacefully collecting metal debris, often left behind in the slow, lazy wake of the Cephaustiens.

NOTES: The Z'Ban Z'Bat bear no relation to the crabs of Earth, or indeed the many iterations of crab throughout the known galaxies. However, as Professor Şşa Koraşa of Tau Ceti put it in his 2030 *Remarks*: “the arc of the living universe is long but it bends toward crab.”



HYSTI

The *high-strung* Hysti are famous for their *temperamental* nature and tendency toward *dramatics*. However, though they may *sting* at a moment's *provocation*, they are remarkably non-competitive. After a long history of *tyranny* and *exploitation*, the Hysti realized that if they simply *shared* the electrons they rely on as a source of food and energy, there would be *more than* enough for everyone.

NOTES: Though the Hysti have evolved to full socialism, they still have a tendency to start petty feuds and sting each other. Researchers hope they may someday evolve further, and chill the fuck out.



COLUZZEN

The most *human-like* of all known alien species, the Coluzzen also destroyed their planet through *excessive energy consumption* and *waste*. Repenting of their ways, but too late, they live now in *floating space communes*. A remarkable achievement of *social* and *technical engineering*, the floating space communes function admirably—except for the toxic personalities, constant meetings about house rules, and fights over whose turn it is to do the dishes.

NOTES: If human beings do not want to have to live elbow-to-elbow-to-elbow-to-elbow in claustrophobic space communes, they have to turn things around very, very fast.



Can The Suburbs Be Saved?

by David Marques

IN MUCH THE SAME WAY THAT THE CONCRETE tower blocks of Moscow remain visible emblems of Soviet communism, the boxy Cape Cod houses of suburban Levittown, New York have stubbornly persisted as symbols of American capitalism. This was by design: despite being more similar to their Warsaw Pact brethren than anything else—mass-produced, utilitarian, and, depending on the specific design, either cozy or alienating—these pieces of early Cold War Americana were intended from the beginning to instill confidence in the free-enterprising American way, offering a measure of economic prosperity in exchange for allegiance. The man behind the prototypical suburb, real estate magnate William Levitt, proudly boasted that, “No man who owns his own home and lot can be a communist.” Richard Nixon, arguing the merits of his country’s system with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the legendary 1959 “Kitchen Debate,” proffered a replica of a similar modest Long Island prefab (the “Leisurama”) as evidence that only the free market could provide the masses with a life of such comfort and ease.

70 years and six additional Levittowns later, the suburbs have retained their image in the collective imagination as lily-white conservative bulwarks against radicalism. And not entirely without reason: my suburban hometown, just a few minutes drive from Levittown on Long Island’s South Shore, was just as much a Trump stronghold as Pennsylvania fracking country. In the weeks leading up to November 3rd, “Keep America Great” and “Trump-Pence 2020” banners hung from the balcony of the waterfront catering hall (thankfully, I don’t think anyone was getting married there at the time). Over the summer, “Thin Blue Line” flags and other anti-Black Lives Matter paraphernalia were common pieces of outdoor home décor, to the point where you might have believed there was a new holiday with black, white, and blue colors. One particularly creative Halloween lawn display I spotted last October featured a life-sized Hillary Clinton

mannequin in shackles and a striped prison jumpsuit.

Politicians also tend to operate under the assumption that all suburbs are the domain of middle-to-upper class whites with a strong aversion to rocking the boat. As Republicans sought to exploit the backlash to a perceived loss of “law and order” in the wake of last summer’s racial justice protests, suburban communities across the country became flashpoints in the tumultuous lead-up to the presidential election. While channeling suburban anxiety into higher turnout has long been a component of GOP strategy, it reached a degree of bluntness under Donald Trump that verged on ludicrous. At a July 29 campaign event in Midland, Texas, Trump warned his audience that the Democrats want to, among other things, “indoc-trinate our children, defund our police, abolish the suburbs, [and] incite riots,” but mercifully reassured them that “there will be no more low-income housing forced into the suburbs” because he had “just ended the rule” that allegedly mandated this. The McCloskeys, the St. Louis couple famous for pointing a rifle and pistol at Black Lives Matter protesters from their front lawn, hammered the same point just as unsubtly during their primetime speaking slot at the 2020 Republican National Convention:

What you saw happen to us could just as easily happen to any of you who are watching from home... [The Democrats are] not satisfied with spreading the chaos and violence into our communities—they want to abolish the suburbs altogether by ending single-family home zoning. This forced rezoning would bring crime, lawlessness, and low-quality apartments into now-thriving suburban communities.

The McCloskeys’ racist fear-mongering does not correspond to any real threat, but that’s not to say that the suburbs are the comfortable and frictionless places that *Leave it to Beaver* made them out to be. There are meaningful differences between the suburbs of 1959 and the suburbs of 2021. As the anthropologist and journalist Brian Goldstone points out on a recent episode of *The Politics of Everything* concerning the “strangely persistent myth of the suburbs:”

Poverty in the suburbs nationwide has risen dramatically over the last couple of decades, to the point that today, there are roughly three million more people who are poor in the suburbs than in urban centers. In Atlanta... poverty in the suburbs rose by 159 percent over the last 15 years.

In the wake of the 2008 foreclosure crisis, Goldstone notes, thousands of suburban homes were converted into rental properties that low-income residents—many of them pushed out of cities during the recession—struggle to afford. ‘Hidden homelessness’ has become a pervasive problem, in which unhoused people find themselves resorting to extended-stay motels and other makeshift arrangements. The necessity of car ownership, which racks up gas and maintenance costs, leads the suburban poor to sacrifice food and sometimes housing altogether. The cliché of the two-cars-in-every-garage lifestyle has obscured an urgent need for radical reform.

The resurgence of the American left in recent years has thus far been a primarily urban development—the members of the Squad all represent congressional districts located in large cities, for instance—and while there is hope that (at least some) well-to-do suburban residents are turning away from Trumpism, on the whole there’s scant indication that many of them will assume the mantle of vanguard of the proletariat anytime soon. If anything, an influx of wealthy suburbanites into the Democratic coalition has bolstered the dominant position of the party’s moderates. But the suburbs don’t have to remain stuck in a reactionary and unequal quagmire. On the contrary—the fact that the limited and flawed welfare state policies of the New Deal and postwar eras enabled the rise of the suburbs shows that left-wing ideas can benefit them just as much as any other type of community. Far from abolishing the suburbs altogether, an even more ambitious democratic socialist platform would be instrumental in addressing the profound inequities of both the first suburbanization and their current state, therefore ensuring a high standard of living for all.

IN MAY 1946, JUST MONTHS AFTER THE END OF WORLD War II, an act of Congress formally declared the shortage of housing a national emergency. A decade earlier, the Great Depression had slowed new residential construction to a trickle, and the subsequent switch to a total war economy diverted much of the country’s industrial resources to the manufacture of armaments. By the end of 1946, according to a report presented to the House of Representatives in February of that year, 2,900,000 married veterans would be in need of affordable housing. A Senate report published around the same time concluded that government intervention was a continuing necessity. “No amount of propaganda by real estate and mortgage lobbyists,” the report reads, “can cancel the utter failure of the private building industry to make modern, decent, low-cost shelter available to the average family.” It also recognized the potentially explosive consequences of an inadequate response to the crisis:

If Americans ever lose faith in the free way of life, it will not be because they have been converted by totalitarian arguments, but because vested interests within the democratic system raise intolerable barriers to the satisfaction of popular needs. The democratic process will then fall

under the sheer weight of accumulated frustrations and resentments.

In short, the choice was between political upheaval and building millions of houses. While Congress responded to the acute shortages with the Veterans’ Emergency Housing Act—which enabled the Truman administration to orchestrate a rapid but insufficient expansion of the housing stock through the temporary retention of emergency powers granted to the executive—the groundwork for a longer-term solution had in fact already been laid with the passage of key legislation during the New Deal and war years. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), introduced in 1934, established a mortgage insurance program that reduced risk to lenders in the event of default, greatly increasing borrowers’ access to the credit necessary for home ownership. More manageable 30-year payment plans became the new national standard, and, consistent with the first-term Franklin D. Roosevelt administration’s emphasis on government partnership with private industry, the agency spurred construction by offering generous subsidies to developers.

Perhaps the most ambitious social democratic program of the first suburban wave, however, was the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill. In contrast to Roosevelt’s original means-tested proposal, the final version of the bill provided immediate, direct financial benefits to millions of World War II veterans re-entering civilian life: they could collect a year of unemployment compensation, receive stipends covering tuition and living expenses at colleges and trade schools, and—most crucially for our story—take advantage of low-interest mortgages. The most favorable terms were given to those looking to build new homes outside of established urban centers, reflecting the federal government’s desire to relieve overcrowding in cities, as well as the influence of a current in prewar urbanism that viewed moderately dense, semi-rural planned towns as a salutary alternative to the industrial megacity (the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration briefly experimented with the construction of model “greenbelt communities,” themselves based on the lush “garden cities” that began to spring up around London in the late 19th century).

The result was nothing less than a seismic shift in the American landscape: the birth of the modern suburb. Fueled by FHA subsidies and making extensive use of cutting-edge mass production techniques—at peak efficiency, Levitt’s assembly lines were able to put up a house frame in just 16 minutes—entire towns of uniform Cape Cods and bungalows sprang up virtually overnight. Veterans receiving G.I. Bill mortgages could move into a \$7,990 Levittown house with no down payment and immediately begin reaping the benefits of the emerging suburban consumer culture. Initially bare-bones developments were soon flush with government investment in the form of brand new public schools, public parks and swimming pools, expanded networks of affordable state universities, and the sprawling Interstate Highway System. The Baby Boomers who came of age in these new communities benefited from a degree of state-supported prosperity that for their parents, children of the Depression, would have been almost unthinkable.

But this prosperity was of course not universal, and for a considerable portion of the American population, suburbia’s white picket

fences doubled as miniature Berlin Walls. Racism marred the first wave of suburbanization, with a combination of social pressure and legal prohibitions working to keep the first suburbs as close to 100 percent white as possible. Until the 1948 Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* ruled the practice legally unenforceable, FHA subsidies for developers came with instructions that no home in a proposed subdivision could be sold or resold to people of color, introducing residential segregation into previously more integrated parts of the country. Black veterans, on the whole, were also barred from taking full advantage of the G.I. Bill due to racist implementation: they were more likely to be dishonorably discharged than white veterans (and thus disqualified from receiving benefits), and the technicality that the V.A. could cosign but not guarantee a mortgage all too frequently put suburban homeownership out of reach. The few non-white families to move to suburbia in its first two decades were often met with outright vigilante violence at the hands of their neighbors—arson, death threats, burning crosses—to such an extent that historian Arnold Hirsch labeled the 1940s and 1950s “an era of hidden violence.” By the late 1960s, a social dynamic that would influence the trajectory of American political and social life for decades had already taken shape: an overwhelmingly white middle class with equity in houses was concentrated in thriving suburbs, while a multiracial working class remained in cities facing rapidly shrinking tax bases and deteriorating social services.

With the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and other anti-discrimination laws in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, home ownership outside the city became an increasingly viable

possibility for people of color, leading to the slow but steady growth of middle-income and rich suburbs with non-white majorities. By 2010, in the country’s large metro areas, majorities of Black (51 percent), Asian (62 percent), and Hispanic (59 percent) Americans resided outside of the urban core. A slim majority of all immigrants also live in suburbs, whether affluent professionals from India and China or resettled refugees from Central America.

MODERN SUBURBS FACE A UNIQUE MIX OF challenges, including holdovers from the first wave of development and new problems arising from broader economic changes in recent decades. The increasing poverty rates are strongly connected to the gentrification of cities: as rents and living expenses rise, a growing number of working-class-city dwellers have found themselves displaced to adjacent suburbs, which often lack the social support institutions and public transport connections of more central locations. Poverty and homelessness have become increasingly “suburbanized,” while the resources to ameliorate them have not. In spite of greater diversity on a macro level, stark racial segregation persists. A thorough undercover investigation by *Newsday* found substantial evidence that real estate firms on Long Island were illegally steering white prospective clients into white-majority neighborhoods, and people of color with identical profiles into more integrated towns (often the same ones that agents would disparage in coded language in front of whites). As a result of these less outwardly visible forms of discrimination,

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Nassau County holds the ugly honor of being one of the nation's most segregated places: Levittown remains about 83 percent white today, and Massapequa, where I grew up, about 96 percent.

In their pervasive racism, stifling social norms, and environmental toll, the suburbs have come to embody the worst ills of American society. But there's another lesson to be learned from the history of the suburban project. Many of America's early- to mid-20th century experiments in social democracy—a highly uneven mix of visionary ideas (see: the Tennessee Valley Authority and the electrification of rural America) and business-enriching reforms (see the New Deal's prioritizing of private construction over public housing)—were able to deliver adequate housing and a decent standard of living to millions of people who otherwise wouldn't have had them. Suburbia as we know it is just as much the product of conscious government direction as of investment decisions made by real estate titans. There's no reason, then, why a bold democratic socialist vision couldn't tackle the ugly legacies of the first wave of suburban development. With a majority of Americans living in suburbs—encompassing everything from quiet cul-de-sacs to impoverished outskirts—these communities and the distinct problems facing (and caused by) them must figure into the proposals of any socialist movement in the United States.

A NEW AGENDA FOR THE SUBURBS, DRAWING on both the historical precedent of the New Deal and more contemporary ideas, would by no means be constitutive of socialism on its own, but by investing the wealth of society to maximize collective well-being, it would aim to realize socialist principles of solidarity and egalitarianism.

In order to tackle housing insecurity and rising home prices in suburbs—both trends that have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic as the economy craters and wealthy urbanites abandon the cities for more spacious digs—there will need to be another expansion of the stock of affordable units. Many homes and apartments currently sit empty of course, but climate change will make

certain parts of the country and world uninhabitable, necessitating increased density in temperate regions. A socialist solution to this grim state of affairs may have to involve building non-market housing, including in suburbs.

Historically, public housing in the United States has had a less than stellar reputation—"projects" like the now-demolished Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago were virtually synonymous with dilapidation—and any push to introduce public housing in suburban communities would have to grapple with inevitable pushback from homeowners' associations and ordinary residents alike. Of course, a good portion of this lingering stigma is rooted in racism, but it's also true that many of the 20th century's large high-rise complexes were simply built to be neglected. Designated low-income public housing tends to place a large number of impoverished people in a single location, and concentrated poverty in turn exacerbates a whole host of social ills. Stranding the destitute in areas lacking essential infrastructure—good public schools, clean tap water, grocery stores—is the problem, not public housing.

Socialists tend to prefer universal programs over means-tested ones, in part because they are more efficient and harder to delegitimize through accusations of benefitting the "undeserving." The same logic applies here: aesthetically pleasing, well-maintained public housing open to residents of all income levels and subject to strict federal level enforcement of the Fair Housing Act will not only encourage racial and economic integration, but also have the best chances of success. About a century ago, Vienna's Social Democrats put up mixed-income, municipally owned residential complexes (notably the Karl-Marx-Hof) that still offer tenants comfortable and visually appealing places to live. And it's possible to build without enriching the private developers responsible for segregating the suburbs and gentrifying the cities. A proposal by Peter Gowan and Ryan Cooper for the leftist think tank People's Policy Project outlines a plan for municipal governments—with capital grants and loans from the federal government—to construct 10 million such units, financed in large part by simply repealing the Trump tax cuts. Ways of operating could vary with differing local circumstances and preferences: possibilities include municipal ownership, as in Gowan and Cooper's plan, or limited-equity cooperatives, in which unionized tenants collectively oversee day-to-day functions.

Beyond providing democratized—and eye-catching—public housing, a socialist suburb would seek to negotiate a more sustainable coexistence with the natural world, in marked contrast to the first wave of suburbanization's brutal overpowering of it in service of a perverse notion of "development" as the realization of humanity's potential. Partly a hubristic belief in the limitlessness of economic growth and partly a cynical justification for the conquest of supposedly 'underdeveloped' indigenous peoples, the ideology of civilizational progress that undergirded the growth of the first suburbs has resulted in the wanton destruction of nonhuman life and poses an increasingly grave threat to the existence of our own species. And in spite of more sophisticated technology to mitigate their impact on climate, today's suburbs still contribute to environmental degradation through adherence to traditional auto-centric design. One



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

2018 study found that while Salt Lake City and its surrounding suburbs experienced comparable population growth over the same period, the suburban end of the expansion—by putting cars on the road and building larger houses requiring more fuel to heat—was responsible for an increase in emissions not seen in the city proper.

Nurturing the planet's fragile ecosystems and meeting human needs without falling into the trap of endless development will require a drastic restructuring of the existing built environment, optimizing what we already have instead of continuing our encroachment on wild habitats. To accomplish this, a socialist Green New Deal would need to undertake a series of ambitious public works projects aimed at making car-free suburban living not just a possibility, but the norm. Expansive networks of electric trams, trains, and buses which are free at point of use (as they are in Tallinn, Estonia) could link residential neighborhoods and commercial districts within suburban counties, as well as improve connections to the public transit system of the greater metropolitan area. Such a plan might also help remedy the inequities in commuting time and costs that stem from residential segregation and the resultant spatial mismatch between jobs and housing. (Evidence from the Estonian case on whether free public transit increases mobility for low-income residents is mixed, but in any case the design of future systems must account for the ways in which gaps in coverage have worsened structural inequality along lines of race and class).

Pedestrianizing busy streets and expanding bike lanes to cover entire municipalities could not only end the SUV's reign of terror, but also introduce a certain *joie de vivre* into the previously atomized suburban lifestyle. If a town built around the car reflects a mode of being that isolates the individual in a private bubble of self-interest, a walkable socialist suburb would emphasize the neighborhood as a living, breathing public space: a place for chance encounters with friends on the way to work; a place for leisurely strolls in the fresh evening air (now free of noxious fumes); a place for fountains and trees and buzzing cafe terraces. Somewhat paradoxically, a sustainable futuristic suburb would be similar in layout and function to the beloved historic quarters of the world's old cities, from the maze-like *hutongs* of Beijing to the medieval alleyways of Barcelona.

THERE'S ALSO THE MATTER OF PROTECTING suburban communities *from* extreme weather. Adapting to rising temperatures will be a major undertaking, but a climate change mitigation corps—created as part of a federal program offering unionized, well-remunerated positions—would be equipped to take on the task. Much of this work would involve retrofitting suburban homes built for a world unaware of the threat of global warming: depending on the region, this could mean installing air conditioning in areas prone to dangerous heat waves, or raising houses in low-lying coastal flood zones (two-story houses awkwardly standing on stilts were a common sight in my neighborhood in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy). Even tried and tested low-tech solutions like planting trees in forests struggling to regenerate, or near shorelines to slow erosion, could go a long way towards

repairing the ecological destruction wrought during the first phase of suburban development.

But, as previously mentioned, the socialist suburbs of tomorrow should be more than places to eat, sleep, and catch an electric train to the office downtown. Leisure is essential for maintaining well-being, as is a sense of being integrated into a supportive community. There's a reason why paring down the grueling 12- to 16-hour workday was one of the crowning achievements of the first socialist parties. Given the wealth and productive capacities of 21st century America, no one should be working multiple jobs or forgoing weekends when they could be using that time to follow their passions, either individually or together with friends and neighbors. A more egalitarian distribution of resources under socialism would mean shorter workweeks, freeing up time for creativity and strengthening social bonds.

Through a more ambitious permanent version of the original New Deal's Works Progress Administration (in which the government would employ artists, writers, musicians, and performers to produce works for the enrichment of the public), a socialist platform could transform today's sleepy commuter towns into vibrant centers of cultural and intellectual life in their own right. Enabling budding artists to make a living in suburban towns and building up infrastructure to support them—exhibition halls for visual arts, auditoriums for free concerts and drama—would pepper the former monotony of suburbia with distinctly local cultural institutions. Generous support for public events proposed and organized by residents would be indispensable: bake-offs and DIY-film screenings, pop-up ice rinks and experimental music festivals, all funded by municipalities and attracting locals and visitors alike. Far from mandating conformity to state-sanctioned forms of expression, a socialist project would invest the wealth of the community into a panoply of creative endeavors reflecting the actual diversity of today's suburbs.

Above all, the suburbs of a socialist future should be beautiful. They should lift the spirits of the people who live in them through design that imbues everyday routine with a sense of joy. The lonely private homesteads of the 20th century would give way to democratically luxurious neighborhoods, with architecturally innovative housing that complements the surrounding natural landscape and fosters a sense of community. You might choose to live in a cozy single-family house just outside Milwaukee, connected to other cozy single-family houses by a garden for flowers and vegetables; you might tend to the rose bush while your affable next-door neighbor picks a few ears of corn to grill at dinner. Or perhaps you might settle in a handsome adobe brick row house on the edge of Albuquerque, just a 15-minute electric tram ride to the local theater where your friend is putting on an endearingly terrible avant-garde play. After a long but rewarding day of soil conservation work, you might unwind by biking down the car-free Ocean Parkway to Jones Beach, where you can faintly make out the skyline of Manhattan through the misty air.

These are only a fraction of the possibilities for the socialist suburbs, but one thing is clear: reimagining suburbia—the embodiment of both America's technical achievement and its authoritarian tendencies—will be an essential part of the movement towards a just and prosperous future. ✦

RICH PEOPLE

THE BELOVED CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR

ACCESSORIES INCLUDE:

Transpeople-inspecting magnifying glass, blank manuscript of the book she should be working on

ACCESSORIES INCLUDE:

Attempt at "normal" human clothes, microchip he thinks is giving him telepathy (it's actually giving him cancer), documents kept behind his back showing his company earned no money last year

ACCESSORIES INCLUDE:

Totaled Ferrari, Goldschläger, robe for his future Supreme Court career

THE HORRIBLE CHILD

THE TECH BILLIONAIRE

LE Action Figures

THE PICKLED
EMPEROR

THE
EASILY
DISAVOWED
FRIEND



ACCESSORIES INCLUDE:
1 gallon billionaire brine,
machine that keeps track
of his vital signs and stock
portfolio, the dog he had
preserved with him



**ACCESSORIES
INCLUDE:**
Cocktail,
suspiciously
young girlfriend,
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WARNING: Choking Hazard

RICH PEOPLE ACTION FIGURES CONTAIN TINY PARTS THAT CAN CAUSE RETCHING AND DISGUST. CHILDREN EXPOSED TO THESE INDIVIDUALS MAY ASPIRE TO JOIN THE GROTESQUE RULING CLASS.



The Socialist Case for FASHION

by Frankie Leach

IF YOU'RE A SOCIALIST, OR AT LEAST CONCERNED ABOUT consumerism and capitalism, then fashion may seem to be at complete odds with the fundamental principles of left-wing ideology. It's increasingly difficult to purchase "ethical" clothing these days; many brands masquerade as "sustainable" to the point where it's becoming almost impossible to tell the difference between "green," ethically-made clothing and the dreaded fast fashion.

"Fast fashion," if you're not familiar with the term, refers to the world-wide phenomenon in which popular brands—such as Target and Fashion Nova—rely on a model of overproduction, mass consumption, and mass waste. The waste is much more extreme than you may realize: according to a recent McKinsey report (sorry), *people globally consume an excess of 100 billion pieces of clothing a year*. This may seem excessive, given that there are only 7.5 billion people in the world, but millions of tons of clothes end up in landfills every year, with many consumers adopting a "buy to wear once" mentality toward clothes made out of cheap plastics. With brands pushing consumers to spend more and amass endless amounts of products, the world simply cannot cope with the rates of production any longer. According to the World Bank, the fashion industry is responsible for 10 percent of annual global carbon emissions, more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined. At this pace, the fashion industry's greenhouse gas emissions will surge more than 50 percent by 2030.

Workers can't cope with the rates of production and exploitation, either. Many politically-engaged people will remember the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, where a garment factory in Bangladesh collapsed, crushing 1,134 of its workers to death. Many popular U.S. and U.K. brands had orders placed with Rana Plaza factories, and were therefore considered partially responsible, if not liable in what is considered the worst industrial disaster in the garment industry. Trade unions called the incident a "mass industrial homicide."

Horrific disasters are not at all unheard of in the garment industry.

Historically, it's been a very dangerous profession, as illustrated by famous events such as the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911 in which 145 workers were killed. Conditions in the garment industry are often miserable, when not actively murderous, and for this reason, garment making has a long history of unionism, with many notable strikes across the world (such as the New York shirtwaist strike of 1909 and the Great Bombay textile strike of 1982). It was partly because of poor conditions in the mills in Salford, England that Friedrich Engels wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, before he would go on to write *The Communist Manifesto* with Karl Marx in 1848.

In recent years—up until the Rana Plaza disaster—the fashion industry had been doing a fairly decent job of covering up its humanitarian crimes, such as the polluted, dyed-blue river in Xintang, the denim capital of the world. Through a mixture of outsourcing and expensive P.R. companies, most brands had been able to paper over the glaring cracks in the industry. The shoe industry was a notable exception; in the 1990s, a global boycott of the sneaker brand Nike changed the game, and inspired a generation of activists that change could be possible, provided we hit corporations where it hurts—in their profits.

Anti-fast fashion activism, however, had been somewhat on the decline until the Rana Plaza disaster. That event jarred many people awake, and provided a direct link between the fashion industry in the West to the exploitation and often abuse of entire cities in the Global South. Pressure from human rights organizations and consumers alike forced brands that were sourcing clothes from the Rana Plaza factory to face up to their murky connections of such exploitation and publicly commit to doing something about it. Around 250 companies signed two initiatives to tackle this underground garment production: the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety.

These initiatives were created to ensure that no such incident could ever occur again and to increase and enforce safety for garment workers. But while an incident like the Rana Plaza disaster can create a panic

and shine a spotlight on a particular aspect of the industry for a few months or even years, other crimes often quietly take place in the shadows. Horror stories cut through now and again, such as when consumers find labels stitched into their purchases overwritten with cries for help. But these stories are often quickly forgotten, filed away after commitments to investigate supply chains that corporations often claim to not know about anyway.

Many modern clothing brands rely on webs of subcontractors to fulfil their garment orders, and by doing so can feign ignorance or defer responsibility when things go wrong. They usually claim that they simply “had no idea.” The reality is that exploitation in these largely subcontracted industries is so entrenched that it just takes on a different name or structure, going further underground—often to the further risk of its workers. Sadly, since the Rana Plaza incident, thousands of underground garment factories continue to produce clothing for popular Western brands across the world. Exploitation in these underground factories is all but guaranteed: a future disaster may reveal it, but once the disaster has been cleaned up and new regulations passed, we can expect this industry to retreat even further into the shadows.

The Clean Clothes Campaign—a global network dedicated to improving working conditions and empowering workers in the global garment industries—has noted that:

The garment industry, not only the fast fashion industry, is built on poverty wages and sweatshop conditions. These working conditions are not mere flaws of individual factories, but they are driven by an industry practice of pushing for the lowest price and shortest lead times in an eternal race to the bottom. The awkward truth is, that as long as this dynamic is not addressed, scandals about working conditions in factories in the UK, Bangladesh or Ethiopia will continue to resurface from time to time. As long as brands respond by cutting and running or just addressing conditions in a single factory, the overall level of exploitation will not change.

As it stands, the fashion industry is doing fine. Brands have been reporting record sales amid the coronavirus pandemic, with companies such as the leading throwaway fashion brand Pretty Little Thing reporting swelling profit and growth. This is the same Pretty Little Thing that this year was found to have had connections to sweatshops discovered in the United Kingdom paying less than minimum wage and with conditions likened to those in Dhaka and Bangalore. Pretty Little Thing has spent the year defending their position in the stock markets and tempting their concerned customers back with Black Friday sales selling items for as low as 8 pence.



But what about the rest of the fashion industry? Many corporations must be breathing a large sigh of relief that Pretty Little Thing and other lower-priced and lower-quality brands such as Boohoo and Missguided have taken most of this year’s flak for their exploitative production models. However, more established and expensive brands have also been linked to cancelled contracts totalling hundreds of thousands of pounds in the Global South. Such cancelled contracts as a result of national lockdowns and shut-up shops across the world have resulted in the shuttering of factories across countries like India, and have supposedly given cover to union-busting.

For example, according to a report by Gautam Mody—the General Secretary of The New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI)—H&M has been implicated in a significant scandal. One of their contractors, the Euro Clothing Company of Gokaldas Exports, had been producing solely for H&M for the past couple of years. Workers made roughly INR 8,000 per month (\$109.59), and it also happened to be one of the very few garment factories where the (mainly female) workers were unionized. In June 2020, citing the supposed cancellation of orders, Gokaldas decided to shut the shop down entirely and illegally fire over 1,200 women workers. H&M was also reported to have cancelled large orders from garment factories including another Gokaldas factory, the Euro Clothing Company site in Bengaluru in Karnataka, India. In response to what appears to be organized attempts to break the will of workers, Mody told me: “women workers are more vulnerable than ever and the company is hoping that they would not be able to hold up for long under these precarious conditions and they will have their way. H&M is bound to continue its orders as per the Global Framework Agreement signed between Brands, Unions and ILO [International Labor Organization].”

LABOR POWER IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY CAN only go so far: entire towns in countries like India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar currently survive at the behest of these global corporations who, if threatened, can simply shut down factories and move to some other place that offers the cheapest labor and the lowest safety regulations. When it comes to companies like Gokaldas Exports and H&M, how can we fundamentally and irreversibly force them to change their ways? Is consumer pressure the answer?

Jay Kerr from No Sweat, a grassroots campaign that builds solidarity among garment workers worldwide, has some answers to this question of consumer power and responsibility. He notes there are huge problems of exploitation in the fashion industry at many levels (from the catwalk to the production line), and it is impossible to have any involvement in fashion without coming up against the issue of exploitation. For Kerr, consumer boycotts are not the answer: the major brands that control the industry still have the power to pull out of a contract with a factory at any given moment if their profit margins are under threat, which in turn puts workers’ livelihoods in danger.

More and more “ethical” fashion brands appear on the market all the time, but Kerr explains that the corporate social responsibility model—with its Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives and ethical accreditation labels—has been proven largely to be “not-fit-for-purpose,” as he puts it. Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) are voluntary partnerships between governments, civil society, and the private sector. They’re in-

tended to attempt to address development challenges as a collective, entrench democratic practices, and strengthen existing regulatory frameworks. While increasingly popular over the last 15 years or so, MSIs remain purely voluntary and have no binding power whatsoever.

In Kerr's mind, what's needed is greater solidarity between producers and consumers, greater support for the trade union movement, and more efforts to amplify the voices of workers calling for decent conditions and a living wage across the world.

Compensation is a good place to start. If, for example, the large fashion corporations that control the garment industry worked to reduce the pay differentials at the executive level, then everyone further down the chain could earn a living wage. The global garment industry is worth something like \$1.3 trillion. The profits currently end up in the hands of shareholders, even while there's plenty of money in the industry to improve both working conditions and environmental impacts. But corporations are designed to make money and won't make these changes on their own.

What Kerr does not advocate is an opt-out strategy. Simply buying more expensive, supposedly ethically-sourced clothes is not the answer. Only through stronger unions, greater consumer pressure, genuine worker-led compliance schemes, and political campaigns for environmental sustainability and a living wage throughout the entire industry can we make fashion something fair and enjoyable for all.

"If we don't engage with the fashion industry," says Tansy Hoskins, campaigner and author of a groundbreaking political analysis of how the fashion industry operates, "we are leaving this enormous industry with its 60 million workers, often the poorest in society, to the right wing and unhindered capitalism. Or we can leave it to well-meaning free-marketeers, who often are only slightly scratching at the surface of its myriad of problems, and thinking the market can be trusted to change the industry." Hoskins adds:

As it stands, the free market is more than willing to engage in the language of change, but not actually change much at all. The term "sustainable fashion" gets thrown around a lot: it requires garment producers and brands to only create amounts of clothing that can be sold in a "conscious" manner. Sustainable fashion in principle removes the need to burn deadstock and doesn't rely on over-selling products to consumers already swamped in clothing, only to end up in a landfill either at home or offshore in an illegal site in the Global South. In principle, the sustainable method of producing clothing with workers paid a living wage, and fabrics used that don't contribute to the ever-growing climate crisis should be the way forward.

"Sustainable fashion," like most 'green' initiatives, is simply a method that corporations use to further greenwash their sins. "Greenwashing" is when corporations use the language of environmental responsibility to sell their products; it's a trick that large corporations perform to pretend to the rest of the world that they give a damn about climate change. See Pretty Little Thing's "recycled clothing," which they sell for just above the minimum wage of the workers who produce it. H&M also actively participates in greenwashing; they market much of their stock as "sustainable" and even champion green politics. Recently topping the Fashion Revolution transparency index—which was created to hold brands to account over their terrible production practices—H&M used the announcement to once again tout its faux-green credentials and its transparency. H&M is, of course, not especially

green or transparent about its practice: it's just that every other brand is so bad that H&M is the best solely by comparison. Their commitment to environmentalism is almost certainly insincere; they have just noticed that sustainability is a trend that can sell more things.

It's not enough for leftists to simply rely on brands to buy into sustainability, and then choose from a select few which jeans are the most likely to have been made by an adult being paid 3p an hour in Myanmar as opposed to a one-handed child. It's our responsibility to throw our efforts into campaigning for the top-down overhaul of the entire fashion industry to protect the workers within it and the planet that it's helping to destroy.

CAPITALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY IS PERSUASIVE—in its ability to make us buy things we don't want or need, but also in its ability to absolve us of any personal responsibility around the choices we make. Or, it convinces us that our consumer choices are the *only* available moral decisions, and that no further action is needed.

As leftists, it's our responsibility to look at the fashion industry with a critical and collective approach and to move beyond an analysis focusing on personal consumption alone. By tackling this enormous industry as a unified body we can begin to create impactful systematic change for the climate, for the 60 million workers the industry continues to exploit, and for ourselves and our future. Beyond concerns for workers and the environment, it's important to examine the fashion industry's cultural control, and the outsized impact it has when it comes to how people think and feel about their bodies. The fashion industry creates so much pain, particularly for women. It deforms our understanding of gender, sexuality, and race. We have to free ourselves from the fashion industry in its current state, and this can only be done together, not through individual shopping practices.

That being said, when we talk about fashion we are talking about objects of consumption that are closely tied up with a sense of individual identity. Inspiring people to think about their personal consumption is actually a decent place to start: it can be a gateway to getting people to think about fashion as a wider structure. We want people to consider how they can support workers and inspire change, through holding environmental actions, supporting strikes, etc. When we encourage others to think critically about their wardrobes, about the conditions of the people who make their clothes, and what we would like a fair and non-exploitative fashion industry to actually look like, we encourage people to realize they have more in common with workers in the factory than the bosses who own the brands. ✱



YOU ENJOYED STEVEN PINKER: CERTIFIED GRIEF COUNSELOR! NOW FIX YOUR SAD LITTLE EYES UPON OUR SHINING STAR--

BARACK OBAMA

INTERNATIONAL PROBLEM SOLVER

LISTEN, FOLKS...



...I'VE YACHTED WITH BONO. I'VE WINDSURFED WITH BRANSON. AND WHAT I'VE LEARNED IS, IF WE JUST PUT OUR HEADS TOGETHER...



...LEARN TO GROW PAST OUR DIFFERENCES...



...WE FIND THAT, RICH OR POOR, OWNERS OR WORKERS...



...WE REALLY HAVE THE SAME INTERESTS: THE INTERESTS OF THE HUMAN RACE.



NOW, WHEN IT COMES TO CLIMATE,
I'VE BEEN CRITICIZED, EVEN THOUGH
I DID MORE THAN ANY PREVIOUS
ADMINISTRATION...



...TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF
CLIMATE CHANGE WITHOUT IGNORING
THE INPUT OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY...



...BECAUSE IT'S WHAT WE CAN DO IN
AMERICA TOGETHER THAT MATTERS...



...BECAUSE IN AMERICA,
WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER!



F*CKING LANDLORDS

by Melissa Fielding

DURING THE EARLY, DARK DAYS OF THE PANDEMIC and amid the ever-endless worry of how to pay my rent every month, I regularly browsed Craigslist to see the latest rental offerings across the U.K. It appears that for a young woman like me (grad student, low-income, “laid-back and open-minded”) there are plenty of cheap, semi-decent looking rooms across the country for a staggeringly low cost, i.e. free. Each advertisement,* often titled “free to females” or “free rent for female students,” shares a few common details: the description of the house or room available (ranging from private annexes to shared beds), a few indistinct details about the landlord (“I’m a nice guy!”) and extra bonuses (“access to car,” “phone contract”). There’s just one condition required. I would have to fuck the landlord.

I can’t say I’m particularly enamored with the thought of sleeping with my current landlord (no offense, Tim). Yet, it would quiet the ongoing angst every month as I pay over 50 percent of my monthly income for my less-than-impressive four walls and bed. The best-case scenario here would be a free room and tolerable sex, but the worst-case scenario is imaginably horrific.

* The advertisements I studied generally featured men looking for women, but also a small number of men requesting men and women requesting men. I did not see any female landlords looking for women, but that is not to say they don’t exist. Throughout this article, I frequently refer to “women” as those who are exploited by landlords in this fashion. The more precise and correct term for the group I am talking about is “people of marginalized genders,” which also includes many genderqueer and trans individuals. I am using “women” as a shorthand, but I do not intend to exclude non-women in these situations.

Over the course of the pandemic, I’ve come across a host of articles reporting the rise of landlords requesting that those “in need of a room” pay with sex in lieu of rent, in cities including London, New York, Honolulu, and New Delhi. This is not a unique consequence of the pandemic. Reports have been appearing over the past five or so years, shedding light on an unsettling feature of the perennially discussed global housing crisis.

The rise in these articles about “sex in lieu of rent” highlights the way in which the housing crisis has now infiltrated the lives of the previously securely housed (i.e. white, university-educated, middle-class women). The reality, however, is that the poor and socially marginalized have suffered from insecure housing for a very long time. These advertisements for “free housing” are the visible surface of sexual exploitation within the housing system.

DESPITE POPULAR DISCOURSE, THE INSTITUTION of marriage was not created to celebrate the love between two people. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels claimed that marriage became a cornerstone of social organization so white, bourgeois families could combine and preserve capital (which was built on the backs of non-white and/or working-class labor). Owning property fortified the rights of the wealthy while excluding others; only in the late 19th century did suffrage extend to non-property owning white men.

Unable to earn a wage, bourgeois women were provided for by their husbands and in exchange, they were tasked with 1) remaining sexually faithful 2) producing a male heir who would go on to inherit the family's wealth. At the same time, their husbands were able to pretty much do as they pleased—including having sex outside the marital bedchamber—with no risk to their security or standing. The sex industry thrived as a result of enforced, female-only monogamy, although sex workers were, and continue to be, stigmatized.

owners.

Economic inequality has increased steadily over the past few decades; the United States has the highest rate of income inequality across all G7 nations (the United Kingdom comes in second). Rising property prices coupled with low, stagnant wages and insecure employment has created a system whereby homeownership is out of reach and government-led austerity agendas have decimated public housing stock. Black, Hispanic, and Native American women bear the brunt of this

“These advertisements for ‘free housing’ are the visible surface of sexual exploitation within the housing system.”

Marriage therefore was part of an overall system that reified and strengthened economic inequality, and ensured that socio-economic power remained in the hands of the white, male, property-owning class.

ALTHOUGH THE LAWS SURROUNDING MARRIAGE and property have gradually changed around the world, heterosexual marriage still dominates as the definitive form of social organization. Governments prioritize marriage and create economic policies that favor married, heterosexual couples, including better mortgage rates, cheaper home insurance, tax savings, and social security benefits. Homeownership, however, which was once held up as the pinnacle of liberal success and self-sufficiency, particularly for married couples, is a distant dream these days for your below-average earners. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, homeownership is in overall decline. A closer look at the breakdown of homeownership numbers elucidates further inequities. According to the U.S. census bureau, homeownership has actually increased in the United States over the past 20 years for all races *except* African Americans and Native Americans. Nearly three-quarters of the white adult population own their own home, in contrast to less than half of the Black adult population. The lowest homeownership rate was recorded for single females under the age of 25, of whom only 13.6 percent were home-

system. Women living alone or without a partner are subjected to harsh economic realities, earning less than their male counterparts and carrying out the bulk of familial caring duties. The pandemic has hit women's financial security especially hard, as a recent *CNN* headline highlights: “The U.S. economy lost 140,000 jobs in December. All of them were held by women.”

In the United Kingdom, the housing crisis (like most of our present-day crises) goes back to Margaret Thatcher. In 1980, her government introduced the Right to Buy scheme, cementing a system whereby shelter is first and foremost a speculative asset. Mass privatization of social housing combined with continually low house-building rates and oversubscription have raised the market value of properties, resulting in a highly sought-after private rental market, a.k.a. a hugely desirable system for landlords. As Laurie MacFarlane writes in *Jacobin*: “For those stuck in the [U.K.] private rental market, the proportion of income spent on housing has risen from around 10 percent in 1980 to 36 percent today.” This system, marked by a small public housing stock and vastly unregulated housing market, has been reproduced around the world.

While there are indeed many different types of landlord and some of them only have one, two, or 14 extra properties, and a few of them are nice to their tenants and bring them an Easter Egg every year—landlords are nonetheless bad. A 2019 article in *Huck* magazine by Tristan Cross, satisfyingly titled “there's no such thing as a good landlord,” examines how “the entire system

WHICH SHAPE ARE YOU???

FIND OUT!!! KNOW IT!!!

CHOOSE A SHAPE

1. cone
2. square
3. heart
4. circle
5. star
6. hexagon

CHOOSE A BEAST

1. hippogriff
2. unicorn
3. manatee
4. dragon
5. phoenix
6. basilisk

CHOOSE A DRINK

1. beer
2. wine
3. soda
4. gin and tonic
5. french 75
6. old fashioned

CHOOSE A FRUIT

1. apple
2. acai
3. kiwi
4. pineapple
5. asian pear
6. honeydew

CHOOSE AN ANNOYING WORD/PHRASE

1. webinar
2. e-marketing
3. smol
4. uwu
5. im baby
6. orly

CHOOSE A MANNER OF DEATH

1. self-defense
2. heart attack
3. aspirin overdose
4. shootout
5. plane crash
6. never

ENOUGH! KNOW YOURSELF!

MOSTLY 1s: YOU ARE A TRIANGLE. You are UP-STANDING. You care about JUSTICE. You are BORING.



MOSTLY 2s: YOU ARE A RHOMBUS. You are LIKE-ABLE. You are CALM. You are GROUNDED. You are a FUCKING GOODY TWO-SHOES.



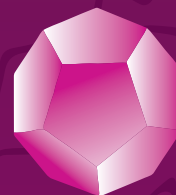
MOSTLY 3s: YOU ARE A BLORP. You are SOFT. You are SQUISHY. You are DELICATE. You'd better WATCH THE FUCK OUT.



MOSTLY 4s: YOU ARE A CUBE. You are a SOCIO-PATH. You are a MYSTERY MONSTER. You are FEARED and RESPECTED.



MOSTLY 5s: YOU ARE A DODECAHEDRON. You think you're fucking SPECIAL. You ARE. It is ANNOYING to KNOW YOU.



MOSTLY 6s: YOU ARE A SCUTOID. FUCK YOU. You are SLEAZY. You are a GARBAGE PERSON. You are VERY FUN at PARTIES.



is weighted in favour of those with the means to become landlords...who both create and profit from the existence of poverty and homelessness.” Landlords generate wealth through a highly unequal system rooted in widespread housing precarity. Their income is dependent on someone else’s labor, and yet landlords still wield immense power over their tenants.

Without a regulated rental system and limited tenants’ rights, landlords can let houses of substandard quality to people desperate for shelter. Reports over the past few years have derided so-called “rogue landlords” who exploit tenants by charging remarkably high prices for tiny, insubstantial and disintegrating rooms. (Check out *Vice*’s column which reviews a terrible rental offering every week—in January 2021 they reviewed a studio flat in North London where, according to the writer, you can “sleep in your kitchen and shit in your shower for one thousand human pounds per month.”)

All in all, renters at the low end of the income ladder have a pretty shit time. Stagnant wages, insecure employment, and short-term tenancies keep people on the move, always searching for their next home. Reports continually reveal racial discrimination against Black renters, in both securing a lease and increased rent. The situation is even more dire for trans people, who in the United States have a 1 in 10 chance of being evicted for their gender identity, and a 20 percent chance of being discriminated against while seeking housing, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality. Hostile environments for migrants mean decent, affordable housing is near impossible; migrant workers in the U.S. are four times more likely to live in overcrowded housing than native-born workers. The United States’ Fair Housing Act purports to prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status, or disability, but lacks meaningful enforcement.

Under these circumstances, the insecurely-housed may entertain the possibility of a sex-for-rent arrangement due to the wider socio-economic logic that economically disenfranchises the vulnerable and expects but invalidates domestic labor, whether that be sex work or housework. Like most commercial transactions under capitalism, sex work is based on the sale and purchase of a commodity, the commodity here being the sexual act. The legality of sex work varies from country to country, but asking for sex instead of rent is illegal pretty much everywhere. It is considered incitement to prostitution and can carry a custodial punishment for the landlord in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Thinking of sex in lieu of rent as an extension of sex work is helpful in understanding how and why this practice is so pervasive. Molly Smith and Juno Mac’s 2018 book *Revolted Prostitutes* explains why many people sell sex: it’s usually the same economic need that pushes people to wage labor, but with even

fewer protections. Smith and Mac state that “the person selling sex needs the transaction far more than the buyer does...desperation makes them less able to refuse unfair demands.” And landlords know this.

How is the equitable value of a room judged in terms of sexual services? Clicking through landlords’ advertisements, the terms of the sexual arrangement are rarely detailed online but are something to be worked out in further discussions. Some are explicit in asking for sexual acts (ranging from oral to penetrative sex) to be provided a certain number of times per week, while some desire an “organic” process, meaning the terms will be negotiated as the relationship develops after the tenant moves in. Others ask for a “live-in girlfriend” or a “house boy” which implies wanting someone to take care of the housework as well as a lot of “stroking and making out.” Nearly all ads posted online request a photo of the potential tenant. The fear of an unequal transaction is expressed in an enlightening thread entitled “there is nothing wrong with sex-for-rent offers” on Reddit, whereby a user writes that sex in lieu of rent is “Terrible value for the landlord...Unless their tenant is a supermodel.”

In an undercover investigation, BBC journalist Ellie Flynn posed as a student at the University of Manchester* in search of a room, meeting up with men advertising this kind of exchange. Her assumptions about the type of men seeking these services were turned on their head, commenting that “It’s easy to assume these landlords would be lonely and older, but one guy was my age and another was younger than me, so there was a huge variation in age.” What united these sex-seeking landlords was their interest in power over their potential tenants. She reflected, “I think in a lot of cases it’s about power, a lot of the landlords liked the fact that whoever they were getting couldn’t leave, they almost wanted someone that couldn’t say no. They had an entitlement to sex and weren’t thinking about where they were getting it from ... and then in some cases it was people being genuinely lonely, but still having that sense of entitlement. They didn’t think about the person they having sex with.”

In the same Reddit thread discussing the complexities of the sex-for-rent transaction, a more astute user writes:

You can rent to a tenant in exchange for sex, or you can rent to a tenant in exchange for money which you then spend on sex workers. Why would anyone choose the first instead of the second? This is the balance of power argument again: you choose the first one because the tenant is vulnerable and dependent on you. They have less ability to say no without consequences than a sex worker who you’ve texted.

A user named “serculis” added,

“It is morally wrong if the tenant has to continue having sex with

* Flynn notes that she also saw advertisements for men seeking male tenants, but as a woman, could not investigate those dynamics.

the landlord even if they stop wanting to (because they don't want to get kicked out), but in technical terms, isn't that something they have to put up with for signing up to the contract in the first place?"

Oh man. The desire spoken of here is really about putting someone in a position where *they can't say no*. That *no* is rendered obsolete because of economic insecurity. These "technical terms," i.e., a verbal contract between landlord and tenant, is perceived as binding. Even though this contract is explicitly illegal, the agreement—based on an exchange of services—is held to be of greater worth than a person's autonomy over their own body.

A young man who exchanged sex for rent in the south of England spoke of his experiences for *Buzzfeed* and described the difficulty of navigating consent when sex was requested: "There's a kind of underlying pressure...that makes it much more complicated and more difficult... It becomes blurred." He was forced into situations where "he didn't have the strength to say no," adding, "I felt more worried about upsetting [the landlord] than I did my own self-respect."

How we judge these transactions is connected to our socio-cultural beliefs about sex and sex work. Feminist arguments straddle both sides of the sex industry abolition debate, oscillating between those incorporating "free choice" and "pro-sex" arguments, and those wanting to shut the industry down via more punitive policing. Defenses of those engaging in the buying and selling of sexual services—whether involved in rent-for-sex operations or more classic forms of sex work—often focus on the individual agency of the people involved. Buyers are often described as lonely and so low in self-esteem that buying sex is their only way of connecting with another person. For sex workers, selling sex can be a positive and financially lucrative experience, and potentially no more demeaning than other wage labor. The anti-sex work argument, on the other hand, insists that sex can never and should never be considered work.

Without making a judgment regarding whether selling sex is "good" or "bad," Smith and Mac argue that sex should have a regulated economic exchange value to ensure protection and increase individual agency for the most vulnerable workers. As long as sex is sought outside non-transactional relationship practices, sex workers need protection. Full decriminalization and labor rights for sex workers would help ensure less exploitative working environments. Assessing how the proliferation of rent-for-sex would be affected if sex work were recognized as labor is a hypothetical task, but it creates a clear boundary that affirms the provision of sexual services as

work in situations whereby people are already—even if they don't acknowledge it—treating it as such.

Over the course of the pandemic, most governments have told us to stay home. According to those in power, home is our safe space, free from the potential dangers that lie outside. However, little has been done to ensure that homes are available, affordable, stable, and secure. With radically reduced incomes and millions of jobs lost, rent debt has soared. Anxiety about housing has added to the anxiety caused by the pandemic itself.

In a brief moment of lucidity a few days after the implementation of the first national lockdown, the U.K. government sheltered the majority of unhoused people on the streets, placing them in empty hotels and B&Bs. This easy fix to our manufactured housing crisis shows what could be done to prevent widespread housing insecurity. We could solve this crisis by injecting our social housing system with funds; we could treat housing as a necessity for survival rather than a means for generating profit. Investment in social housing and public services is an integral first step.

Under the current pervasive logic, however, the insecurely-housed continue to lose out in the housing system and in the sex industry, both which are underpinned by the preservation of private property. Landlords exploit tenants and are able to make, bend and break the trajectory of people's lives. We need to eradicate the power of landlords, so they can stop fucking us over, and stop fucking us. ✚




"Wanna see some humans?"



Let Us Praise and Honor

CATS



by Nick Slater

NOTHING'S AS STARTLING AS A magnificent black longhair cat flying into your kitchen with claws stabbing down like an angel's switchblades, 12 pounds of murderous grace pouncing on a piece of lettuce before losing interest in an instant and retreating to a corner to solemnly lick her anus. *What the-?! It scrambles the brains to see so much life unfold so fast.* This most ordinary of scenes—person standing at counter, listening to podcast, chopping leafy greens—has been injected with a dose of chaos. At once there is drama, then comedy, then a befuddled tenderness as the tiny predator stares up at you with her weird glowing yellow eyes.

You might, at this point, pick up the cat. Perhaps you hold her in the crook of your arm, tight against your chest with her chin tucked just over your shoulder. Probably the cat fidgets and wants to switch sides. Once she settles in, though, the vibration in her small chest cavity echoes in yours, and your skull feels full of warm pudding. If you scratch her brow and she closes her eyes, tucking back her whiskers and ears, her head might look as if it belonged to a befurred Baby Yoda. “How are you even real?” you might ask. If you said nothing, the cat would keep vibing all the same.

Would it be so strange if a thought then crossed your mind: “*Precious cat, holy cat, I am holding a tiny god?*” Well, yes. That’s not the kind of thing most people would admit to

thinking. It wouldn’t sound much saner if it were followed by a second thought: “*no no, not that kind of god, just in the sense that cats embody sacred vibes. More like a forest sprite than Jehovah.*” Ahhh. Hmmm. Right. Sensible people get antsy when vibes and animal worship enter the conversation. And yet...

Cats are keepers of sacred vibes and it’s good to revere them like gods. The idea is a bit jarring, to be sure. But if you don’t reject it out of reflex, it becomes an intoxicating thing to ponder. Something about the words feels right when you whisper them inside your skull. The definition of “sacred vibes” may be hazy for now (in time, in time), but, like a blindfolded monk touching an elephant’s tail, you can tell there’s *something* here. You keep your curiosity to yourself, of course, at least if you have any sense. Developing an interest in sacred cat vibes might not be as bad as developing an interest in QAnon. Still, it probably won’t improve others’ opinion of your mental stability. Mention your new beliefs to a friend and the best-case scenario is they make a joke about the brainworms thing being true. If you reply that cats do not really have mind control powers, or try to explain that while the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite does make mice less afraid of cats and thus easier to hunt, in humans the main effect is actually beneficial—Czech and Turkish scientists have suggested the cysts caused by toxoplasmosis reduce people’s levels of fear by pressuring structures in the brain to release more dopamine, like how squeezing a lime tighter yields more juice—your friend

is unlikely to be convinced and may stop answering your calls altogether.

Even fellow cat fanciers¹ can be slow to embrace the notion that cats are sacred beings. While plenty of people are happy to joke about being a “crazy cat lady” on Instagram, such a mantle tends to be claimed in the same spirit that suburban Stepford moms bemoan “anarchy” whenever the toddler spills SpaghettiOs. Of course it is nice to provide many toys for a cat. But the real archetype of the over-enthusiastic ailurophile, depicted in all her mad and shabby ignominy by cultural lodestars like *The Simpsons* and *A Clockwork Orange*, is much less flattering.

Cherishing cats with too much zeal has carried a social stigma for hundreds of years. L.A. Vocelle’s book *Revered and Reviled: A Complete History of the Domestic Cat* (2016)² features newspaper clippings from 19th century London concerning a Countess de la Torre who became notorious for her love of cats. The Countess, who’d helped bankroll the great socialist general Giuseppe Garibaldi’s campaign to liberate Italy from the Papists, spent the remnants of her fortune taking care of 21 cats in a sort of proto-shelter. For this she was subjected to fines from the government and hostility from her neighbors, who frequently poisoned the cats. The Countess’ devotion to the animals was considered depraved, unclean. In 1885 the *Pall Mall Gazette*—a late Victorian *Pompous Douchebag Daily* that had a brief run as a paper of conscience—sent a correspondent to interview the Countess for a Freak of the Week-type profile. Here is how the original “crazy cat lady” was described:

She is apparently about forty-five years old, with a pale, intellectual face, furrowed by much trouble, a broad high forehead from which her dark grey hair is brushed away. ... A grey knitted shawl was fastened around her neck and fell to her waist, where it was joined by a well-worn cotton dress.

Chances are you’ve never seen a photograph of the Countess, but you can probably picture that drab visage quite clearly. The *Pall Mall Gazette*’s correspondent did go on to paint a somewhat sympathetic portrait of the Countess’ fondness for cats—despite the neighbors’ claims that the animals posed a public health hazard, the correspondent “did not detect anything unusual [outside the house], however one might regard the Countess as a next-door neighbor, it is ridiculous to say that her establishment is a nuisance to the whole square.” But the final words of the Countess’ profile make it clear that her affection was deemed, at best, tragically misguided: “Some day [the cats] may devour the Countess. There may be no gratitude either in man or beast. It would be a sublime ending.”

However, cats may be sublime in other ways besides eating our dead bodies.³ Their presence affords us “contact with the abnormal,” as Victor Hugo wrote in the preface to his play

Cromwell. The sheer unpredictability of a cat’s behavior—the startling meows and yowls, the fantastical leaps of their play, the impossible shapes in which they contort their bodies to sleep or bathe—jars us into awareness. A cat can evoke both the grotesque and the beautiful in a single stretch of his limbs. Each day, a human who lives with a cat experiences a hundred little disruptions to their ordinary routine, and it’s in these moments that we get a glimpse of “something purer, grander” than the world of work and bills and household chores. Sometimes the contrast is created by an all-four-paws jump, other times by an incongruous poop. This is part of the bargain. “We need a little rest from everything, even the beautiful,” said Hugo, and cats are most accommodating in this regard.

What It Means to Revere a Cat Like a God

Cats are keepers of sacred vibes and it’s good to revere them like gods. The longer the idea ripens in your mind, the more ambrosial it becomes. It’s a bit absurd of course. But—and perhaps this thought just now occurred to you for the first time in a long while—why is absurdity a thing to be shunned? Why should it be considered the same as “badness” or “wrongness”? Why? *Why?!* Think of the people you know. Do those who demand constant realism seem happier to you? Are they the ones whose company you enjoy most? Embracing the idea that cats are holy may offer you new ways to be delighted and surprised by life. Rejecting the idea gets you... what, exactly?

It’s reasonable to ask what revering cats like gods might require in practice. Most people have a vague awareness that cats have been worshipped in various ways throughout history. The ancient Egyptians, in particular, were renowned for the cat-idolizing cult of the goddess Bast (who was later merged with the better-known Isis, a deity often depicted with a retinue of black cats). But this did not always work out well for cats. The terrifying cat necropolis of Beni Hasan, for example, was stuffed with 80,000 mummified felines buried as far back as 2000 B.C.E. In 1888 C.E., the crypts were exhumed in a frenzied search for treasure. *Revered and Reviled* recounts the testimony of an English baron who witnessed the event: “The path became strewn with mummy cloth and bits of cats’ skulls and bones and fur in horrid positions, and the wind blew the fragments about and carried the stink afar.” In the end, 20 tons of cat-mummies were dug up, shipped to England, and sold as fertilizer. It would be better for both cats and humans if that wasn’t repeated.

If the type of contemporary cat reverence currently under

consideration has little in common with the temples and sacrifices of ancient times, so too does it differ from the “cats as magic beings” model developed during the Middle Ages. In fact, the latter idea existed more in the fantasies of sexually repressed religious authorities than in the hearts of genuine believers. The 12th century Welsh writer and clergyman Walter Map gave a fine example of this in *De nurgis curialium* (*Trifles of courtiers*) when he described a ceremony of the heretical French Cathars, who were accused of worshipping cats:

[The] groups sit waiting in silence... and a black cat of marvelous size climbs down a rope which hangs in their midst. On seeing it, they put out the lights. They do not sing hymns... but hum through clenched teeth and pantingly feel their way toward the place where they saw their lord. When they have found him they kiss him, each the more humbly as he is the more inflamed with frenzy—some the feet, more under the tail, most the private parts.

There is, hopefully, no need for an explanation of how cats can be revered without performing oral sex on them. Nor is there space here to unpack how the association of cat reverence with witchcraft and lurid conspiracies was part of a patriarchal Church-state crusade to stamp out competing ideologies (especially pagan and/or feminine ones whose vision of power relations threatened feudal hierarchies). Fortunately, you don’t need to remember anything in particular about past conceptions of cat reverence. It would actually be better if you forgot it all and started fresh.

Cats are keepers of sacred vibes and it’s good to revere them like gods. To arrive at this ecstatic truth—to let it enrich your life in countless ways—all you have to do is observe a cat. “Observing” something is different from “watching” or “looking at” it. You can watch



a cat play with a used Q-tip and feel little more than a sense of mild amusement. When you observe the cat’s play, though, and let yourself be absorbed fully by each leap and swat, you might be surprised by where your mind goes. To revere a cat like a god simply means to give great attention to her ways and marvel at the wisdom that is revealed.

Deep contemplation of cats is a sure path to revering them, and this sentiment can be expressed in diverse ways. There is no need for mummification or any bestial rites. An extra spoonful of tuna, a gentle rub of the belly, or a paper bag left unattended on the floor can all make a fine homage to a cat. Conversely, it’s possible that all of those things would be displeasing to a different cat. There can be no real prescriptive guidelines for reverence of this cat or that cat. No such guidelines are needed, though, since you can determine what a cat will appreciate just by paying close attention to the little creature.

While observing the daily life of a cat can give clues as to the unique ways she may be revered, it also has a more important function of clarifying *why* the cat should be revered. In other words, observation reveals the sacred vibes embodied by the cat. These are five in number, and they are:

1. Cultivating a deep connection to one’s place—a cat is constantly strengthening his bonds to his home
2. Balancing one’s needs with the needs of others—a cat will compromise, but only to a point
3. Making wise discernments—a cat recalls the situations when she can safely relax, and when she must be vigilant
4. Drinking in the world—a cat seeks to imbibe every aspect of his surroundings



5. Giving and accepting love without craving—a cat shows love to others when she is moved to do so (and only then), and receives the love of others when it feels good to do so (and only then).

The Five Sacred Vibes of the Cat

In Nikola Tesla's 1939 *A Story of Youth Told By Age*, the Serbian-American inventor recounted how an encounter with his boyhood cat Macak inspired his insights into the nature of electricity. "In the dusk of the evening, as I stroked Macak's back," wrote Tesla, "I saw a miracle that left me speechless with amazement. Macak's back was a sheet of light and my hand produced a shower of sparks loud enough to be heard all over the house." His father said there was in fact nothing miraculous about this small-scale demonstration of electrical currents, but Tesla's curiosity could not be extinguished. "Is nature a gigantic cat?," he wondered. "If so, who strokes its back?" Amusing as this anecdote may be, meditating on the sacred vibes of cats doesn't require any particular interest in the metaphysical, nor does it necessitate anthropomorphization. All it takes is curiosity about what's going on around you.

Consider the **FIRST SACRED VIBE OF CATS**: cultivating a deep connection to one's place. As anthrozoologist John Bradshaw explains in 2013's *Cat Sense: How the New Feline Science Can Make You a Better Friend to Your Pet*, cats are constantly marking and re-marking their territory through a

series of scents, even when they have no existential need to monopolize food or mating opportunities. Their brains just produce less of certain stress hormones when the environment "smells like home." It can be amusing to spot a cat making her daily rounds, rubbing her cheeks against every piece of furniture in the room and turning around for a quick shake of her upright tail before heading onto the next object. To a human in a hurry this may seem like a primitive, senseless ritual. But a careful observer sees the cat's actions in a different light: she is patiently doing the work needed to be grounded in her physical surroundings, tending with attention each day to her garden of soothing smells.

This brings us to the **SECOND SACRED VIBE OF CATS**, which is balancing one's own needs with the needs of others. Bradshaw notes that humans' domestication of cats is both relatively recent—the fossil record suggests the process began around 10,000 years ago, compared to at least 20,000 years ago for dogs—and surprisingly incomplete. Because cats' "work" of catching mice has always been done independently of people, we have never been able to shape feline behavior in the same ways as other domesticated animals like horses, cows, or pigs. Our partnership with cats has been limited and dependent on mutual convenience. If a human had a large store of grain which attracted rodents, a cat might've been willing to take advantage of the concentrated prey on a more or less full-time basis. If the human provided a dish of cream, some soft places to sleep, and a warm lap, some cats might've accepted the offer of companionship as well. But the relationship lasts only as long as the conditions that supported its creation. If a kitten finds your attempt to rub his belly amusing, he will happily wrestle with your hand. When the game ceases to be fun for him, he will squinch himself into an upside-down U with a question mark tail and spring into the air. Enough! It's fine to indulge others, but not at the cost of one's own sanity.

The **THIRD SACRED VIBE OF CATS** is the making of wise discernments. While humans have a tendency to agonize over hypotheticals, cats take a more direct route when making decisions. Bradshaw puts it thusly: "Often, we find that cats can solve what appear to be difficult problems by applying much simpler learning processes." Vacuuming a home where a cat is present can provide a clear illustration of this. The first time a cat encounters the noise of a vacuum, she may be seized by a terrible panic. Such cacophony must surely signal the end of all things. 50 vacuumings later, the cat will simply retreat to higher ground and wait for you to turn off the machine. She has learned how much fear is warranted by the scenario and how long her alertness must be maintained. She remembers what is necessary to make life pleasant, or at least bearable during its more aggravating

bits, and does not exhaust herself with pointless analysis.

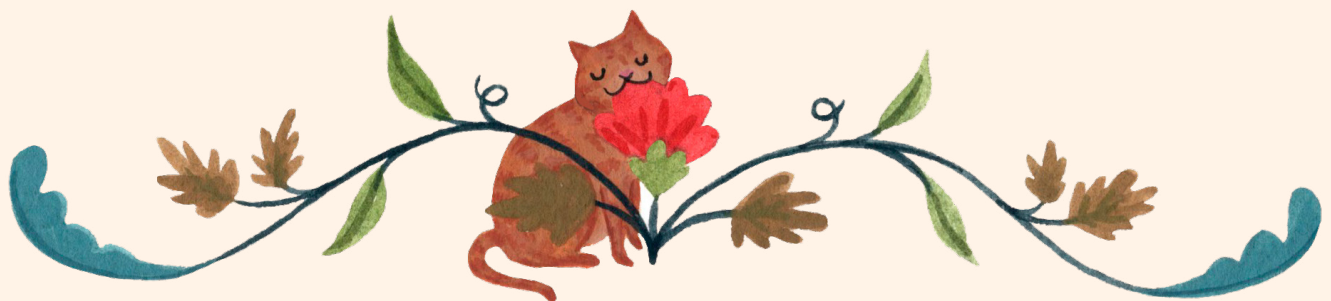
What of the **FOURTH SACRED VIBE OF CATS**: drinking in the world? This may be one of the most endearing cat behaviors to witness—particularly in the form of the *flehmen* response, which cat behaviorist Dr. Sarah Brown describes in her book *The Cat: A Natural History* (2020). You can observe the *flehmen* (German for “to bare the upper teeth”) response when you hold your finger just above a cat’s nose. Pay close attention to his top lip as he inspects you. He is imbibing your essence, so to speak, through his Jacobson’s organ. Located in the roof of the cat’s mouth, this is a secondary olfactory organ not attuned to the smells of food or prey, but musks of a social nature: whiffs of kindness, age, fear, and so on. A cat who encounters an intriguing person, animal, or object “will open its mouth slightly... and ‘lap’ its tongue over the scent to send it toward the opening of the Jacobson’s organ,” in the words of Brown. To witness a cat’s *flehmen* response is to be reminded of all the meaningful things we cannot see, hear, or touch—but can still somehow sense, if we are alert.

The **FIFTH AND FINAL SACRED VIBE OF CATS** is giving and accepting love without craving. In *The Cat: A Natural History*, Brown lists the many ways that cats show affection to both humans and other animals. Whether it’s a gentle head butt (“bunting”) or a soothing tongue-bath (“allogrooming”), cats learn which forms of affection are most appreciated by their companion.⁴ They don’t belabor the point, though. When a cat decides to show care for her human, she may thunk her skull against the person’s shin with great zest. But once the task is done she continues about her day. She has other roles in life to play aside from “giver of love.” Likewise, when a cat accepts care from another, she does so without clinging to that display of kindness. She may ask for it by purring: as Bradshaw explains in *Cat Sense*, a cat often rumbles “not to show that it is contented, but instead to prolong the circumstances that are making it so,” or perhaps to bring about those circumstances. Purring—the most obvious manifestation⁵ of a cat’s sacred vibes—“seems to convey a general request: ‘Please settle down next to me.’” A human may acquiesce and pet the cat’s fuzzy belly, which may be pleasing to the cat. But

even the most exuberant display of love, on its own, cannot make the recipient content forever. At some point the cat will get up and go away to pursue her other needs.

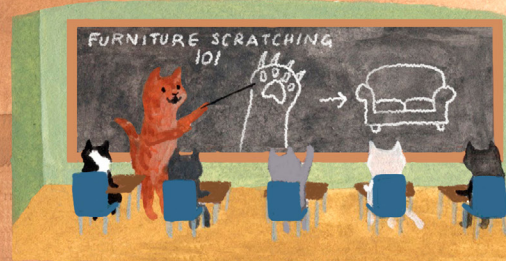
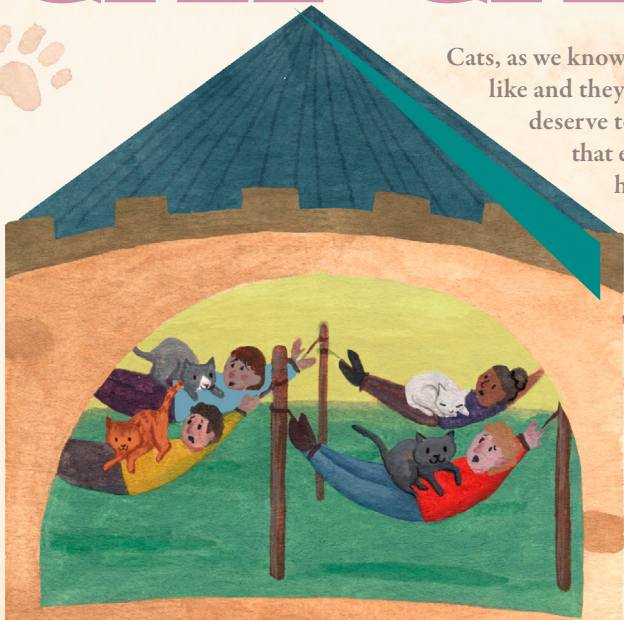
Cats are keepers of sacred vibes and it’s good to revere them like gods. Repeated often enough, these words begin to sound less like a lunatic mantra and more like the promise of a marvelous surprise. It’s often said that ours is a soulless era, and there’s some truth to that. But perhaps the answer to our existential angst isn’t to be found in a revival of the old spiritualisms. What if it were found in the form of a cat? What if we cast aside our fears of social stigma and paid attention to how we *feel* when a tiny paw is placed on our wrist? Why should we be ashamed to take delight in our fellow living beings and all they have to teach us? The cat is a wondrous creature—she chooses of her own free will to dwell with us, and in all the cat’s deeds she reminds us to be alive and awake. How fortunate we are! How blessed is life with a cat! 🐱

1. Here, the term “cat fanciers” is used in the vernacular, referring to anyone with a fondness for cats. No association is intended with the 110-year old Governing Council of the Cat Fancy, the United Kingdom’s premier pedigreed cat registry.
2. Vocolle’s *Revered and Reviled: A Complete History of the Domestic Cat* is, admittedly, a somewhat amateurish book. A talented editor would’ve done wonders for the prose and perhaps tempered the author’s oddly cavalier mentions of famous historical cats whose names involved the N-word (egads, H.P. Lovecraft and Robert Scott). Still, the book contains a fascinating collection of cat-related cultural artifacts from throughout recorded history.
3. The legend that ungrateful cats will feast on the flesh of their deceased caregivers acquired a veneer of scientificity when a 2020 study from the Forensic Investigation Research Station at Colorado Mesa University produced footage of two feral cats eating human corpses. The study’s authors were quick to clarify that such cases were unusual. As they said, “[There’s] no reason for people to panic about an epidemic of pets eating people. And the other thing that’s important to recognize is that just because animals will eat part of a corpse does not mean that they will eat you when you’re alive.”
4. Humans’ poor sense of smell means we miss many of the other messages cats are trying to send us. It must be frustrating for a cat to give her human detailed olfactory hints about her mood each day and never get a response.
5. The “healing powers” of a cat’s purr are a matter of debate but may be significant. In 2001, bioacoustician Elizabeth von Muggenthaler published a study that found cats produce strong purrs at frequencies of 25, 50, and 100 Hz. These frequencies are often used in therapy to promote bone growth, the healing of wounds, and pain relief (among other things). In 2009 another study in the *Journal of Vascular and Interventional Neurology* found that people who lived with cats had much lower risks of cardiovascular disease. Sadly the study did not specify if or how purrs might be responsible for this. The authors did note that living with a dog provided no similar benefits.



THE ULTIMATE CAT CASTLE

Cats, as we know, are finicky things. They know what they like and they know what they absolutely despise. But cats deserve to be treated as the tiny royalty they are. To that end, many cat owners build castles for their cats. Until now, however, these castles have been architecturally primitive. They have never given cats the environment they truly and fully desire. This, the *Current Affairs* Ultimate Cat Castle, gives cats everything they want, so that they may flourish and be their best selves.





NAMEOWSTE





A BETTER SON OR DAUGHTER

Donald Trump, Amnesia, and a Capitalist Fable

by Yasmin Nair

*And sometimes when you're on, you're really fucking on
And your friends, they sing along and they love you.
But the lows are so extreme that the good seems fucking cheap
And it teases you for weeks in its absence.
But you'll fight and you'll make it through
You'll fake it if you have to and
You'll show up for work with a smile.
You'll be better and you'll be smarter and more grown up
And a better daughter or son and a real good friend,
And you'll be awake,
You'll be alert, you'll be positive though it hurts*
—Rilo Kiley, *A Better Son/Daughter*

I. YOU'LL FAKE IT IF YOU HAVE TO

There are no surprises in Mary Trump's memoir about her uncle Donald Trump and their family. We learn that, yes, the former president was spoiled by his parents, that as a child he and his four siblings never bonded with their mother (who suffered from the debilitating and painful after-effects of a hysterectomy that left her incapable of more than the most basic maternal functions). Sexual lechery and inappropriateness is a family trait: when Mary was a young girl, her grandfather, Frederick Trump (Fred), showed her a picture of a nude woman. As a young woman, Mary happened to be around her uncle Donald while wearing a bathing suit, prompting him to yell out that she was "stacked." She also

claims that Donald Trump paid someone to take his SATs for entrance into Wharton, that he holds on to grudges and often acts on them. And so on.

The book—titled *Too Much and Never Enough*—does offer some glimpses into the inner workings of a large, wealthy family. At one point, Donald Trump almost succeeded in making himself the sole executor of his father's will while the latter was slowly slipping into Alzheimer's. Fortunately for his siblings, Fred Trump entered one of his rare periods of lucidity, matters were quickly resolved, and all three of the older siblings (Mary Trump's father was dead by then) were named executors. Years later, Maryanne Trump, the eldest daughter, told her niece Mary, "We would have been penniless. Elizabeth [Maryanne's youngest sister] would have been begging on a street corner. We would have had to beg Donald if we wanted a cup of coffee."

Well. All of Fred Trump's five children are educated and born into great wealth with connections of their own but then, perhaps, "penniless" means one thing to most people and another to people like the Trumps. Extremely wealthy families are all alike, and each is anxious about its wealth in the same way. For people like the Trumps, "penniless" means foregoing first class travel, not actually begging for coffee.

Mary Trump, daughter of Fred Trump's eldest son Freddy, was, by her own admission, never outside a family dynamic where everyone strove to always remain in the good graces of the domineering family patriarch who kept them all on tight financial leashes. She went so far as to change her signature when Grandpa Fred informed her, through an employee, that hers was not suitable. As a college student (whose entire edu-

cation was financed by her grandfather), she spent a year abroad in Germany hoping to please him by having lived in the land of his ancestors (this did not have the desired effect).

What really separates Mary from the rest is that she and her brother, Frederick (Fritz), fought for what they claimed should have been their rightful inheritance from their father (the family is remarkably unimaginative in naming its progeny: many of the men are named Frederick, and most of the women some variant of Mary or Elizabeth).

Those details are complicated, but not riveting: The Trumps do what all wealthy families do, preserve their wealth by any means necessary. *Too Much and Never Enough* is not interesting for its tidbits about Trump and the lifecycle of a wealthy family, which are mundane and mostly well known already—but for what it reveals, inadvertently, about American politics and the condition of amnesia in which it exists. Even as this book lays claim to an unveiling of truth and facts, it cannot help but simultaneously occlude more inconvenient truths and facts about its subjects. In that, there's a strong parallel between Mary Trump's wilful recasting of her family history and the ways in which the United States continues, relentlessly, to ignore the turns and twists of its own history. In particular, Mary Trump's book echoes the broad tendency of many liberals, progressives, and even leftists in placing the problems of the last four years squarely on the shoulders of one man, her uncle, rather than considering how the Trump presidency's horrors were, first, not unique to him and, second, only a reflection of this country's blood-soaked and genocidal history.

Consider how Mary Trump frames the act of writing this book as brave, even heroic truth-telling, in the name of her dead father:

No one knows how Donald came to be who he is better than his own family. Unfortunately, almost all of them remain silent out of loyalty or fear. I'm not hindered by either of those. In addition to the firsthand accounts I can give as my father's daughter and my uncle's only niece, I have the perspective of a trained clinical psychologist. Too Much and Never Enough is the story of the most visible and powerful family in the world. And I am the only Trump who is willing to tell it.

And then, lest we think that this book was simply born out of family animus and a petty desire to fling long-buried skeletons out of their closets, she reassures us that it is in fact an act of deep patriotism: "Donald," she writes, "following the lead of my grandfather and with the complicity, silence, and inaction of his siblings, destroyed my father. I can't let him destroy my country."

But what was this destruction, exactly? Freddy (Mary's father) has been the shadowy figure in the Trump family saga, and his younger brother has often said that Freddy was the man he feared becoming. As Donald Trump tells it, his brother's alcoholism, which led to his early death, is the reason why he neither

drinks nor smokes. As Mary Trump tells it, her father had a passion for flying and was never interested in the family business, a fact that angered her grandfather. Freddy's disinterest allowed his younger brother to step in and extend the business beyond Queens and into Manhattan. In the meantime, Freddy tried several business ventures and failed at most of them; he was also fired from TWA and a prestigious pilot's job (at the time, both well-paid and glamorous) for his alcoholism. He spent the last years of his life in an refurbished attic in the house his parents lived in, and died of an addiction-related heart attack.

THIS IS A SAD STORY, BUT MARY TRUMP (maybe to avoid the appearance of gossipy pettiness) is determined to turn it into more than a personal tragedy. In her hands, the death of her father is a national metaphor. "Freddy couldn't retaliate," she writes, "when his little brother mocked his passion for flying because of his filial responsibility and his decency, just as governors in blue states, desperate to get adequate help for their citizens during the COVID-19 crisis are constrained from calling out Donald's incompetence for fear he would withhold ventilators and other supplies needed in order to save lives."

This is a bizarre statement: the two have nothing to do with each other. There are no parallels between a person feeling devalued by his family and governors worrying about angering a president who might withhold medical supplies. One is a person, bound by family histories and legacies and personal limitations, the other is a political system. The parallels that Mary Trump seeks to make, between Donald Trump's treatment of her father and his treatment of the country don't work at all. But the fact that she feels the *need* to make these kinds of parallels, over and over in the book—and critics have eaten it up—offers better insight into what *Too Much and Never Enough* is really about. In a strange way, rather than being a work of psychology (both personal and national), it may be read as an indictment of psychology itself.

Psychology—again, Mary Trump's field—is a discipline which has generally focused on surface problems, on creating narratives out of what is plainly visible. In contrast, psychoanalysis, which considers the realm of the unconscious and thus places importance on that which cannot be easily discerned, contemplates broken shards of buried experiences that have to be excavated. Where psychology looks for *what* the problem might be (and too often seeks to medicate them out), psychoanalysis seeks an answer to *how*. The purpose of psychoanalysis is much less visibly curative: there is no real "cure," only a deeper understanding. Psychology allows for the picking and choosing of what elements of a person's life matter, which is why Mary Trump can write a book about her

father's life and early death being a result of a tyrannical father and family, but somehow fails to wrangle with the possibility that perhaps Donald Trump—who was dissociated from his mother at the age of three—might be similarly strained.

Instead, she chooses to confirm a loosely floating “diagnosis” of Donald Trump that has been floating in the ether for years, that he’s a narcissist. Mary Trump adds, in her capacity as a clinical psychologist, that he also demonstrates possible signs of antisocial personality disorder, dependent personality disorder, and perhaps even an undiagnosed learning disability. All of this is, of course, carefully hedged with sprinklings of “probably” and “maybe” so that she cannot be accused of outright diagnosis without consultation, something the American Psychological Association has firmly spoken out against, especially when too many psychologists have issued diagnoses of Trump. It is a deeply unethical and unprofessional move on her part, but also fits in a larger cultural context where even laypersons feel comfortable diagnosing each other with copies of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) on their laps. Given Mary’s training and her express desire to see her book end her uncle’s career, it makes sense that *Too Much and Never Enough* is a psychological study with a neat answer and a set of diagnoses but not a psychoanalytic one, which might create a more complex and uneasy portrait.

To get a sense of what might be offered through psychoanalysis rather than psychology, it’s useful to turn to what is considered the first truly mainstream representation of psychoanalysis, Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Spellbound*, produced by Hollywood mogul David O. Selznick.

II. AND YOU’LL BE AWAKE, YOU’LL BE ALERT

Once upon a time in Hollywood, everyone, including Marilyn Monroe, had a psychoanalyst and Sigmund Freud was a celebrity (if a distant one). In 1924, Samuel Goldwyn, the legendary producer who was the G in MGM, sailed across the ocean to Vienna, hoping to persuade the famous doctor to “commercialize his study and write a story for the screen,” for \$100,000 (the equivalent of over \$1.5 million today), according to the sociologist Andrew Scull. Freud sent Goldwyn away with some irritation, but Hollywood’s fascination with the field he founded remained strong for a very long time. Psychoanalysis in Hollywood, it seemed, was what Scientology is today.

In the last few decades, psychoanalysis has fallen out of favor for several reasons, and some of those have to do with the growth in a version of psychiatry that’s about quicker fixes

via medications (and some would argue, over-medication). It’s hard to imagine now, but for a while psychoanalysis dominated medical and cultural discourse and was deployed and represented, if in somewhat hamfisted ways, by everyone from advertising executives to Hollywood producers.

David O. Selznick, the producer of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and one of the most powerful movie moguls of the time, had fallen into a deep depression and credited his psychoanalyst with his recovery. His experience made him want to produce a film that could highlight the uses of psychoanalysis; he chose Hitchcock, still under contract to Selznick and fresh off the success of *Rebecca* (1940). *Spellbound* (1945) was the result.

Spellbound is mostly incomprehensible in terms of plot, and profoundly sexist. Dr. Edwardes (Gregory Peck) arrives at Green Manors, a mental hospital in Vermont, where he is to take over as the new head. There, he meets the frigid, sexless Dr. Constance Petersen (Ingrid Bergman) who, of course, immediately melts at the first sight of this handsome young man and then proceeds to fall increasingly in love even as he berates her, inexplicably, for creating parallel lines with a fork on a white tablecloth to show him what the surrounding landscape looks like. He does this in front of all her colleagues and instead of, perhaps, slapping him—rhetorically or literally—she decides that *this* is the man of her dreams. As it turns out, he is not the real Dr. Edwardes and may even have killed the doctor, but he can’t remember anything of his past life and suffers from an inexplicable terror of parallel lines and white backgrounds. The two run away to an old friend of Petersen, Dr. Alexander Brulov. Edwardes (now calling himself John Brown) then proceeds to try to kill the good and canny doctor and even *that* fails to revulse Petersen. She only becomes more of a mother hen and convinces her friend to analyze Brown’s recurring dream so that they might all learn what he’s suppressing.



It's this scene, where Brown is placed into a trance to recall his dream, that gave rise to one of the most famous bits of cinema: a dream sequence created by Salvador Dalí. The shots employ all the classic Dalí tropes, beginning with a giant curtain emblazoned with massive eyes, which is then cut apart by a large pair of scissors. From there, as Brown continues his description in voiceover, we see a scantily clad woman flitting between tables (she of course turns out to be Petersen), people playing cards, a bent bicycle wheel, a faceless man, another running, and a cliff. All of this is classic Dalí surrealism, and it's hard to tell if the episode is a work of surreal art or just Dalí palming off his wares to a wealthy producer.

The remainder of the film is predictable: the real killer is found, the fear of parallel lines and snow is due to a long-repressed memory of Brown having accidentally killed his younger brother by pushing him onto a spiked metal fence. Petersen and Brown (whose real name is John Ballantyne) are now free to cavort as lovers: she finds her femininity, having gotten rid of her glasses and most of her brain.

Spellbound is not as interesting as Hitchcock's other works, over which he had more creative control; it takes psychoanalysis seriously but too literally, reducing it to a simple dream analysis, like the sort you might find today on dream interpretation websites. Hitchcock himself was contemptuous of the film, telling François Truffaut in a famous 1962 interview, "It's just another manhunt story wrapped up in pseudo-psychoanalysis."

But even with all its problems, *Spellbound*—especially in its surreal dream sequence—offers a fractured set of possibilities when it comes to what might be going on and, more importantly, it points to the fact that "truth" is sticky. What matters is not a neat rendition of meaning, but where the fractures lead you. It's Dr. Brulov's words to Brown/Ballantyne that clarify this as he explains what dreams are and what we might do with them:

*The secrets of who you are and what has made you run away from yourself, all these secrets are buried in your brain. But you don't want to look at them: the human being very often doesn't want to know the truth about himself because he thinks it will make him sick so he makes himself sicker trying to forget. ...Dreams... tell you what you're trying to hide but they tell it to you all mixed up like pieces of a puzzle that don't fit. The problem of the analyst is to examine this puzzle and put the pieces together in the right place and find out **what the devil you're trying to say to yourself** [emphasis mine].*

The struggle for Ballantyne in *Spellbound* is to recover from amnesia, to leave behind a forgetting. Breaking him down to recover the dream is to effect a necessary rupture, and psychoanalysis rests upon the idea that shattering is a positive effect. Psychology, on the other hand, often seeks to paper over bad memories and breaks, and creates instead a narrative and a set of stories. To put it another way, psychology aims to make you whole, and psychoanalysis aims to break you.

III.

AND A BETTER SON OR DAUGHTER

One day, when Mary Trump was only two years old, she heard her mother screaming. She found her father laughing out loud, apparently drunk out of his mind, pointing a rifle at his wife Linda's face as she screamed in terror. The weapon was one he kept on his yacht, for shooting sharks in the water (why, for hunting or protection or pleasure, is never revealed). Shortly afterwards, Linda Trump packed her children into a car. The violence was not the only problem in the marriage: another issue was that he never seemed to have a full grasp of how to run a business. One of the ways Freddy Trump tried to make money was to charter his boat and private plane for tours. But instead of using the boat for commercial trips on the weekends, the most lucrative time, he paid the pilot to simply speed him and his friends around for leisure—we get a hint at the reason for his popularity among others. Mary Trump insists that her father never received as much as Donald from the family, but in interviews, his friends have said he showed up at Lehigh University with a new Corvette every year, a sign that while his ambitions may have been thwarted by his family, he was not exactly, to use a familiar term, left penniless.

This is not an attempt to write off Freddy as a privileged monster: he may indeed have been an anguished man, and alcoholism is a complicated set of issues that's not just about drinking irresponsibly, as moralists might have us believe. Wealthy families, with millions or much more at stake, habitually grind down any offspring who show even the slightest deviation from family norms of creating more wealth. But Mary Trump grants no agency or will at all to her father, portraying him as a helpless victim of his disease and of his bullying younger brother. This may, admittedly and sadly, just be a sign of Mary wanting to be a good or better daughter to a man who in turn apparently wanted always to be a good or better son to his own cold and unfeeling father. In the same vein, we could argue—and his niece does, in a way—that Donald Trump became a greedy, uncaring, and monstrous human being because he wanted to work so hard at being a good son, as cold and ruthless as his father, having supplanted the place of the eldest brother. All of this needlessly personalizes matters and leaves out the systems that created the Trumps and today's America: Mary Trump is happy to reveal her grandfather's coldness, but conveniently leaves out the fact that he was arrested, in 1927, for refusing to disperse from a Ku Klux Klan rally (years later, he would be charged with racist and exclusionary policies as a landlord, and Woody Guthrie, a tenant, famously wrote the unrecorded "Old Man Trump" about him). For her to admit to this would be admitting that the problems with this family go deeper than emotional manipulation and greed, and

for us to contend with it would mean that we see Trumpian economic rapaciousness as being rooted in a long, terrifying history of capitalist domination and spread that has involved brutalizing millions in a centuries-long history that goes beyond mere “greed.” Which is to say: recognizing the systems that brought us the Trumps would mean recognizing how we are all implicated in history.

But this, Mary Trump’s memoir, is psychology: the creation of a narrative, based on certain facts and eliding others. There’s one critical person whom Mary Trump leaves out entirely, placing her in an ancillary position in the whole drama: her own moth-

er, Linda Lee Clapp Trump. Mary reveals that her mother was forced to attend Trump holiday gatherings even after her divorce from Freddy Trump, and even though both sides clearly didn’t want her there: at a party, Mary finds her mother sitting almost in the dark, alone at a table, her face “stricken.” Astonishingly, for a book so consumed with spilling all the secrets, we never learn what actually happened to Linda Trump, or what her life might have been like, to be married into such a family. Mary Trump does not even disclose that her mother in fact died, back in 2001. In order to resurrect the father, the mother is effectively disappeared.

HEARTWARMING STORIES OF CAPITALISM GONE *RIGHT!*



AMERICA'S PRISONERS GOT TALENT(ED FRIENDS)

The inmates at Reagacorp Debtors' Prison might be behind bars for failing to pay up, but one classroom of local 3rd graders decided to pay it forward by putting on a talent show to buy phone cards for the delinquent debtors! The heartwarming spectacle featured juggling, gymnastics, and even a magic act—which earned the kids \$100 in donations, enough for almost ten minutes of calling time!

ROCK AND ROLLLLLLL, RACHEL!

For the last five years, Rachel Gutierrez has been doing double shifts at the Dairy Queen to pay for a very special present to herself. “I have a degenerative nerve condition in my legs,” says Rachel, “and a wheelchair would help me get around without such terrible pain.” Patience is a virtue, it seems, because Rachel just got the final \$500 she needed! In a surprise ceremony, her boss revealed he’d been helping her save up over the years and had decided to give her a loyalty bonus, in a move he said was unrelated to his pending charges for wage theft.



THE REAL MR. CLEAN

When you walk into the gentleman’s room at Duke Frederickson’s Premier Leisure Club, the first thing you notice is the row of rare animal heads on the wall. The next thing: the magnificent ivory toilet in each mahogany-paneled stall. The opulence is so overwhelming you might not give a second thought to the wizened old attendant handing you a towel. But Albert Rubenstein, who just celebrated his hundredth birthday, prefers it that way, probably. Keep those commodes sparkling, Albert!



GOOD OLD AMERICAN HUSTLE

For inner city coders, the Hungry Hungry Hackathon is a chance to show their chops (and hopefully make a connection or two). But for James Kim, Chris DiAngelo, and Sam Hableh, the hackathon turned out to be the opportunity of a lifetime. Not only did their app win first prize, it also won them the attention of tech billionaire Josh von



Josherjosh, who offered the friends 50-year contracts on the spot. Thanks to an obscure clause in the entry form they’d signed, it was an offer they couldn’t refuse!

HERE, KITTY KITTY!

Billy Jenkins, 7, always told his mom how much he wanted a kitten. But when she died after contracting COVID-19, Billy thought his dream had died, too. Not so fast, champ! His mom’s supervisor at the meatpacking plant surprised Billy yesterday with a 4-week-old kitten of his very own! The man said it was “the least I could do” after refusing to provide Billy’s mother with PPE and denying her request for unpaid sick leave once her symptoms became untenable.



What the devil is she trying to say to herself?

What Mary Trump does triumphantly reveal is that it was she who obtained and handed over a massive trove of financial documents which then enabled the *New York Times* to produce its huge and popular story of Donald Trump's financial dealings, including the fact that he has paid hardly any taxes. She—very heroically—exposed an evil villain, or so goes her narrative.

But while the story exploded at the time and people saw the revelations as examples of Donald Trump's greed, forgotten in all the furore were some simple facts: just about all wealthy families employ leagues of lawyers and accountants to do exactly what Trump did, avid readers of the *Times*—among them many of whom might have made hurried calls to their lawyers and accountants as the story broke. We might also remember that in 1984, the *New York Times* ran a worshipful profile of Trump titled "The Expanding Empire of Donald Trump," a breathless account of his rising profile as a developer. The same paper that wants to claim his downfall was among those who propped him up and, indeed, created him. In recent months, fans of *Home Alone 2* have sought to erase Trump from a scene where Macaulay Culkin's child character asks him for directions. But could the same be done with multiple episodes of various television shows (such as any part of the *Law and Order* franchise), which include numerous references to "The Donald?" Can we erase Trump from our culture, and the broad milieu that created and supported and championed him for decades?

What the devil are we trying to say to ourselves?

Amnesia is the American state of being, so it only makes sense that Mary Trump's neat psychological profiling of Donald Trump and her family is currently the preferred narrative. It's a simple story of heroes and villains, agents and victims. This is the failure of the book and of the entire political project upon which America rests: seeking to explain historical, systemic failures away by locating them on the shoulders of villainous individuals.

It's worth pausing here to consider the difference between a liberal political project and a left one. Liberalism is about maintaining the status quo and to that end, it does not challenge concepts like the nation-state, the necessity for the family, or, in this case, the greatness of the American dream. And it embarks on a constant quest for forgetfulness, for an amnesia about history. Consider, for instance, the ongoing outrage over Donald Trump placing "babies in cages." When the news first broke that Trump's immigration policies were wrenching children away from their parents and placing them in detention cages, several photos depicting said children in said cages circulated quickly—until it was discovered that the photos were from the time of the Obama administration. Even after such fact-checking, the phrase "babies in cages" circulates with ferocious persistence to describe the worst of the Trump administration's crimes, implying that he and he alone was responsible for such conditions. On occasion,

some will excuse the Obama photos, with the largely specious claim that *those* children were separated only under exceptional circumstances, such as parental cruelty. All of these explanations avoid the central issue: the problem is not whether we have babies or adults in cages, and whether the reasons for caging are "good" or not, but that cages constitute a central and long-standing tradition of American immigration policy.

DONALD TRUMP'S LIBERAL CRITICS HAVE OFTEN insisted that "this is not who we are. Echoing this popular refrain, Mary Trump writes that there is now an "atmosphere of division" because of Donald Trump, one that's "wearing the country down, just as it did my father, changing us even as it leave Donald unaltered." She continues: "It's weakening our ability to be kind or believe in forgiveness, concepts that have never had any meaning for him." She writes all this as if the United States has not in fact always been a breaker of both dreams and bodies.

In 2017, as psychologists everywhere began to insist that Trump was a narcissist, mentally unstable, and unfit to govern, Allen Frances—who actually defined the DSM-5 criteria for narcissism—wrote to the *Times* that Trump "may be a world-class narcissist, but this doesn't make him mentally ill, because he does not suffer from the distress and impairment required to diagnose mental disorder." He was critical of the psychologists who like Mary Trump were quick to offer armchair diagnoses, emphasizing: "Mr. Trump causes severe distress rather than experiencing it and has been richly rewarded, rather than punished, for his grandiosity, self-absorption and lack of empathy. It is a stigmatizing insult to the mentally ill (who are mostly well behaved and well meaning) to be lumped with Mr. Trump (who is neither)." He concluded, "The antidote to a dystopic Trumpean dark age is political, not psychological."

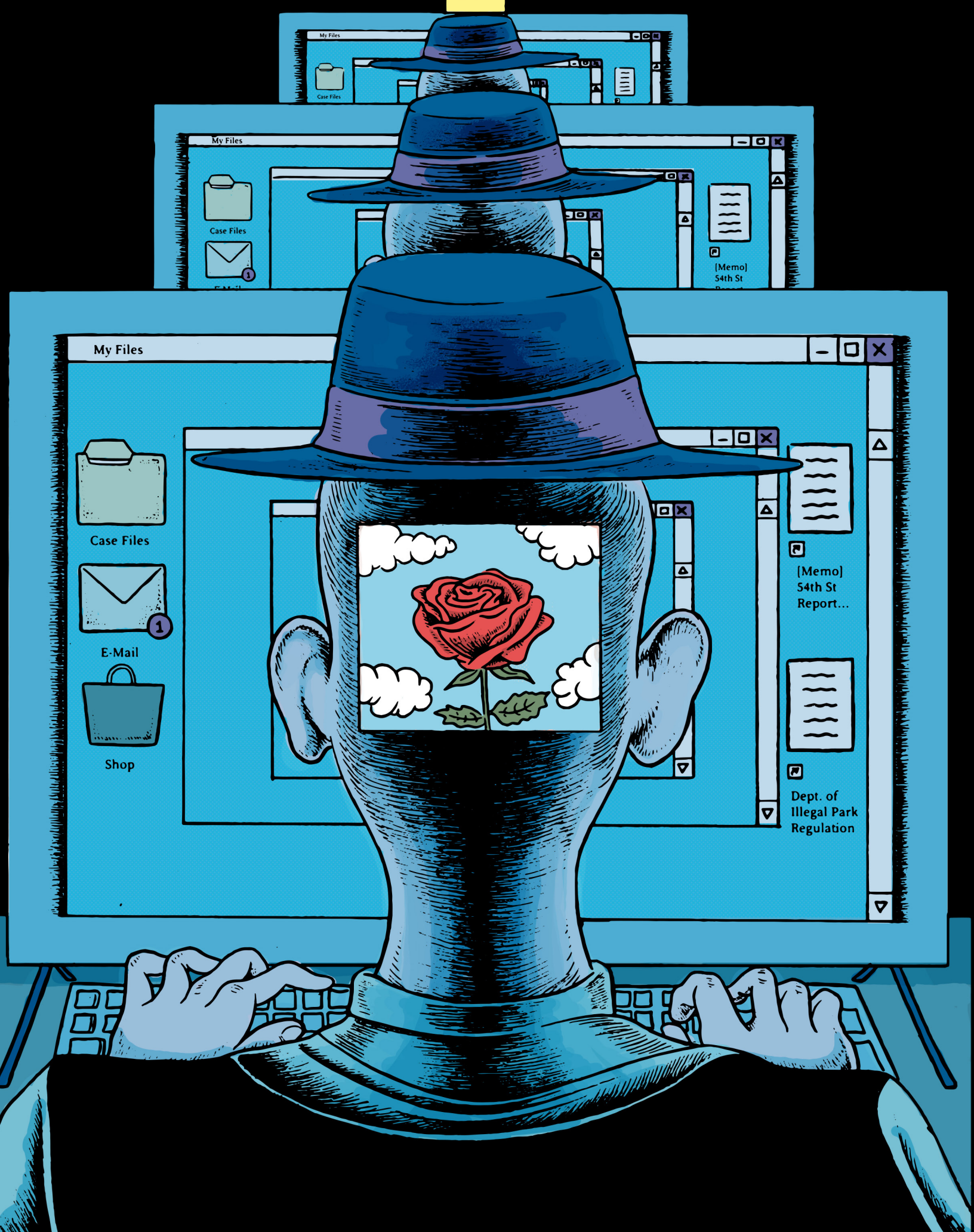
The story that psychologists like Mary Trump and the general public seem to want is of a cruel and unfeeling monster whose actions are unique to him and to history. But if we applied psychoanalytic principles instead of psychological ones, we might instead consider that historical amnesia is not desirable: we might begin to plumb the depths of the unconscious that we have tried so hard to scrub away. We might consider that torrid and morbid tales about stupendously rich people don't tell us anything about the state of things if we don't understand that the problems lie with the massive political and cultural systems that create such wealth—and fetishize it—in the first place. Has Donald Trump been a greedy, rapacious, abusive, and destructive force creating havoc in the world? Yes, of course. But these are the same qualities of capitalism, the far bigger problem that is actively destroying the planet and everyone in it. The answers are bigger than we may be comfortable with, and finding them may involve a shattering. ✦

—With many thanks to Julian Hayda.

Rose-colored glasses

YOU WON'T NEED TO SEE THEM COMING ANYMORE







THE GOD OF 54th ST.

By Max Rachimbarg

THE 54TH STREET MATTER CAME TO MY attention by mistake. At the time, I had no inclination that it would lead to the ruination of my career; nor could I predict that this ruination would become, in turn, the triumph of my life. It began last July. I was sitting in my office at work, shopping online as usual, when a new email appeared in my inbox—but not just any email. This was a designation memo from the Bureau of Consumer Protection assigning a new case. For almost two years I had extensively assisted with cases—researching regulations, writing memos, and maintaining case files—but always as a junior employee; I had never been entrusted with a leading role. I was hungry for action, and so when I saw the new case arrive in my inbox, I determined to claim it for myself. No one was going to stop me.

And what a case it was! The memo detailed credible reports of an illegal installation on 54th Street between 30th and 31st Avenues. Apparently, there were flowers and plants all over the street and the sidewalk, obstructing pedestrians, parking and probably even traffic. All of it was completely unlicensed, and the relevant files showed no record of even a permit application! As I read the memo, I imagined the suffering of the industrious residents of 54th Street. These unlicensed plants could be carrying diseases! They could be invasive species! They could completely disrupt the aesthetic effect of the officially sanctioned foliage along the street, sowing discord and an explosion of speculative opinions, pitting resident against resident, turning the district against itself! This was exactly the type of intolerable situation I had signed up to fight against.

From an early age I knew my calling was to be a public servant. I have always loved the city and its profusion of life: cars everywhere roaring and honking, eagerly accelerating into the future; people rushing about on important business; vacant land developing into profitable stores and sleek new residences. How safe it felt to step into a new restaurant, past the happy green “A” in the window, knowing it had been inspected by a city official and achieved a superior score. Above all how invig-

orating it felt to leave all the concrete and noise behind in the city’s parks. Every tree and lawn and bramble was exactly where it should be, all according to plan. The city parks all got an “A” in my book. It was, therefore, completely natural that I wound up working to protect the integrity of the city’s parks at the Department of Illegal Park Removal.

I immediately forwarded the designation memo to my department head, a leading expert and pioneer in the field of illegal park removal, and requested to be put on the case. You can only imagine the restlessness I felt as I stared at my inbox awaiting his response. Fearing the worst, I prepared the appeal I would make by phone. “For two years I have studied and learned from you,” I would say. “I know the regulations by heart. I maintain the case files better than anyone. I’m ready. My success will be your legacy.” Yet no appeal was necessary, for the department head neither granted nor denied my request. Instead he pointed out a consequential detail that I, in my exuberant inexperience, had overlooked. “The case cannot be assigned to you,” he wrote, “because the case has not been designated to our department. The memo is addressed to the Department of Illegal Art Removal, not the Department of Illegal Park Removal, and therefore falls outside our jurisdiction. It was sent to our department by mistake. You should read more carefully in the future.”

“But clearly there is a more fundamental mistake here,” I thought, refusing to accept defeat. That’s the department’s unofficial motto—“refuse to accept defeat”—and we type it after our signature on every email. The email I sent in response is probably the greatest I will ever send. In it, I passionately pleaded not just my claim to the case, but the department’s claim, which had been usurped by this incorrect designation. “The installation on 54th Street is clearly an illegal park,” I argued, “not merely an illegal artwork, and the representatives of *that* department are completely ill-equipped to handle the botanical aspect of this removal, not to mention their inexperience enforcing the requisite regulations that pertain to this botanical aspect. And besides,” I added, “our department needs to

protect itself from outside encroachment. Far be it from me to impugn the motives of a fellow civil servant, but it is inconceivable that the intake specialist at the Bureau of Consumer Protection could make such a basic jurisdictional error out of benign neglect. We must protect our turf.” I offered to pursue, through the appropriate bureau channels, correction of the jurisdictional error; I would fight to claim the case for our department.

“OK,” my department head replied. And so began what I now regard as the apotheosis of my short-lived bureaucratic career, a months-long campaign of strategic bombardment so indomitable, so overwhelming in the sheer quantity of written deployments, that Robert Moses himself, I imagined, was applauding from his grave. Several weeks after my initial email salvos, it was determined that a bona fide jurisdictional dispute existed between our departments, and the matter was docketed and scheduled for adjudication at the Office of Inter-Bureau Jurisdictional Dispute Resolution. Over the following months, I feverishly prepared the argument I would deliver at the hearing.

The core of my argument was obvious and straightforward: the aesthetic effect of any botanical installation is primarily derived from its materiality qua its botanicality, and therefore this aspect must predominate in any consideration as to whether the installation in question is primarily a park or primarily an artwork. This is particularly true where, as here, the botanical element is not merely an attendant feature of a larger non-botanical installation, but is the primary substance of the installation itself. These contentions are obviously unassailable, and only a fool would argue to the contrary. Yet I discerned in my case one glaring weakness, an argument I would be defenseless against if I did not carefully prepare a response.

The problem could be framed as a question: who made this installation, and why? If I could not answer this, and could not convince the adjudicator of this answer, my case was sure to collapse. For as we all know, whenever we do not know why something was made, we simply call it art, even if it is clearly an illegal park. I fretted over these issues for many sleepless nights. “The plants are merely performing their plantness as an incongruous juxtaposition with the concreteness of the street,” I imagined my unknown adversary arguing at the hearing. “Yes, the plants appear in the form of a park,” my adversary would continue, “but this appearance is itself a performance, a mimetic representation of the dialectical relationship between the park and the street. The installation is therefore clearly a work of art. In fact, it follows that the entire concept of an illegal park is, by definition, the concept of an illegal artwork. Therefore,” my adversary would conclude, “the Department of Illegal Park Removal should be closed, and its funding transferred to the Department of Illegal Art Removal.”

Who could gainsay such logic, fresh from the most advanced graduate schools of contemporary social theory? I began to realize that in my exuberance I had exposed my entire department, and with it my livelihood and my vocation, to annihilation. I desperately sought some plausible explanation for the installation’s provenance. But reason alone provided no answers. For in truth, I was mystified as to why anyone could possibly seek to install an illegal park in the street, particularly when there are perfectly good licensed parks nearby. I needed more information, and so I began an exhaustive program of online research, in which I cataloged every publicly known fact about the installation.

I determined the installation began sometime during the night of May 1st. The next day, May 2nd, the residents of 54th Street awoke to find their street radically changed. Overnight, someone, or some group of people, had removed all the cars parked on the street and replaced them with flatbed trailers, linked together so that the trailers formed an uninterrupted line on both sides of the street running the entire length of the block. Each trailer-bed held a giant rectangular planter full of soil several feet deep, from which grew a reckless profusion of illegal botanicality. There were plants of every known variety, and even plants whose names did not appear anywhere in the licensing manual—plants I would not name even if I could, out of moral principle. On each side of the street, the plants were reportedly arranged around a central dirt path that linked all the soil beds, so that an unsuspecting citizen could walk down the entire city block atop the illegal installation, using the dirt path instead of the concrete sidewalk.

Reports said neighborhood residents soon began using the path, completely unaware of the danger all around them. Even worse, it was reported that they found the path *pleasant*, and particularly enjoyed the little niches that appeared here and there where one could sit surrounded by flowers and chat with friends and neighbors. There was even a little fountain. And it was all free.

BUT THAT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING. SOON after the matter first came to my attention in July, it appeared that the people in the area had actually begun to voluntarily tend and maintain the plants—weeding, planting, trimming, and so on, so that the installation, which they called a garden, did not merely deteriorate with time, but actually grew. People passed more and more time there, and held meals and parties there, and invited people who walked down the path to join these meals and parties, even complete strangers! It was, indeed, a dire situation. The people were being led astray, ignorant of their peril, into the domain of illegality.

Then, sometime in mid-August, new reports emerged, reports contemporaneous to the events they described, indicating that people in the area had taken it upon themselves to block off the

BUYING PROPERTY IN 3021



"PROPERTY PRICES ON MARS HAVE ONLY RISEN 300% IN THE LAST 3 YEARS. IF YOUNG PEOPLE WISH TO MOVE OUT OF THE OLD EARTH SLUMS, THEY SHOULD GET A THIRD JOB" - SENATOR MALCOQUEST



With the impending cryo-immigrants set to defrost within the next 5 years, many under 30s are taking extreme precautions to ensure their place in the property market prior to the predicted upcoming property shortage. 132,991 cryogenically frozen old earth natives are set to thaw after freezing themselves in 2022 to save up to buy using interest. Almost certain to cause a

shortage on the already cramped Mars Territories, Trillenials have started taking what some consider to be unreasonable measures to save money. Not buying their coffee from Starbucks. Countless Planetary Union leaders have already advised against such measures, stating that young people should consider getting a third job before causing such harm to the economy.

SAVING TO BUY PROPERTY?

TAKE A NOTE FROM THE 2022 CRYO-IMMIGRANTS & SUSPEND YOURSELF UNTIL 4021 TO SAVE WITH US

CRYOCORP 20%
TECHNOLOGIES OFF



street completely, and were actively filling the street itself with soil, and planting more plants and trees in this soil, and they were connecting the two gardens on the parking lanes to make one continuous garden covering the entire block. They were even installing planter-boxes on the sides of the buildings. I read that in one apartment a jet began to shoot water out of an open window over the heads of the path-walkers into a fountain, thereby linking the garden with the adjoining buildings, and in fact inducing the buildings to become part of the illegal park.

How powerless I felt at that time, seeing this illegal park proliferate while my hearing date was still months away. It was too much. Jurisdiction be damned, I needed to obey the higher call of duty. I swore an oath to protect the citizens of our great city from illegal parks, and so I resolved that even if I could not yet remove the illegal park, I could at least warn the citizens of its dangers. What I could not yet achieve by force, I would accomplish through sweet persuasion.

I picked the date of my journey into the heart of darkness and made all the necessary preparations. I checked and rechecked my route, and planned a backup route in case of subway failure. I purchased new hiking boots and wore them all day at work for two weeks to break them in. I blended trail mix for nourishment. I prepared a stack of pamphlets containing the relevant city regulations for the enlightenment of the wayward citizens. On August 29th, I set out.

What I found defied all expectation.

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A BEAUTY BEYOND words, one that evaporates all your pre-occupations and anxieties, and you stand before it as if with a naked soul, transfixed? So I stood, upon turning the corner onto 54th Street, transfixed before a vision of city life I had never imagined possible, until a young couple promenading hand-in-hand along a nearby path turned to me with warm and gentle smiles, took me by the hand, and welcomed me to join them.

I cannot convey the convertive force of what I experienced that day, for my words are not a harmony of fragrant air, shining sunlight, green life, and joyous smiles—I cannot reach out of this page and enchant the room or subway car or café or park bench where you are reading. But, you can. Reader, if you seek but cannot find what I recount, you must imagine it for yourself, band with others, and make it in the world. I can say only what it inspired in me.

I felt a new spirit there, manifest in the flowering groves ringing with laughter and lively discussion, the shimmering fountains and colonnades of verdant young trees bursting into the sky, the vine-adorned facades of the enframing buildings, windows and doors flung open, wafting down the smell of de-

licious cooking—and everywhere people, radiating with beauty and vigor as they create a shared life together in the flourishing garden that surrounds them. With exuberant cheer, strangers and neighbors greet each other warmly. They meander beneath the shady colonnades, bask on stones warming in the sun, and picnic in secluded groves. They tend to young plants, coaxing forth green shoots and guiding each towards its rightful place in the harmonious whole. They delight in the play of birds. They gather bright stones and arrange them in pleasing patterns. They attend with light ears to the music of the fountains, add their own soft melodies, and dance with quick feet to songs of their own making. They discourse on the shapes of clouds and the meanings of dreams. They emerge from buildings carrying heaping platters of savory dishes, and feast together in abundant variety. And throughout all this, in each and every expiring breath they bequeath to the garden air, a breath they will never recover, the only breath they can take in that specific, unique, irrevocable moment in their short lives, they exalt with reverent pleasure the poetic artistry of their manifold shared creations. They invite all into their community who seek to join.

Later, I returned to the Department of Illegal Park Removal fairly bursting with momentous news. I went straight into the office of my department head and fumbled for words to describe what I had seen. In truth I failed, for I am no poet. He stared at me with a look of dawning contempt, then commanded me to silence and announced that the wonders of which I spoke cannot be real, and the only explanation is that I had succumbed to the intoxicating influence of art. “You should never have gone without permission,” he said, “particularly where the installation in question is potentially an illegal artwork, which you were clearly completely unprepared to encounter.” He concluded that the department would renounce its jurisdictional claim. I asked him once to go with me, to see the garden with his own eyes. He refused, and banned me from returning to the garden. I quit.

Now I pass my days in the garden. We tend it together, and tend to each other. When I first arrived, I did not know the name for what I saw, but now I know. Here, at last, I have found the reconciliation of humanity and nature, the discovery and joyous expression of our spirit in the harmonious cultivation of nature, and through this cultivation the rediscovery that we are, and always have been, of nature. A god lives here, a god we have made, a god that lives in us and our creation: the god of 54th Street.

One day, I fear, they will come to kill our god, and we will defend the garden. Yet even if they destroy the garden, they cannot destroy our god, for the spirit lives in us, and we shall plant new seeds everywhere. ✚

The Illustrators



Nick Sirotich



Ben Clarkson



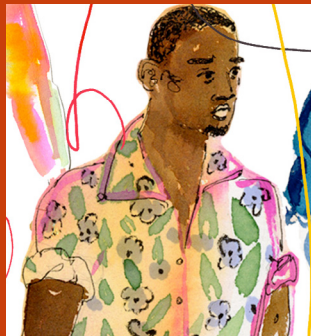
Ellen Burch



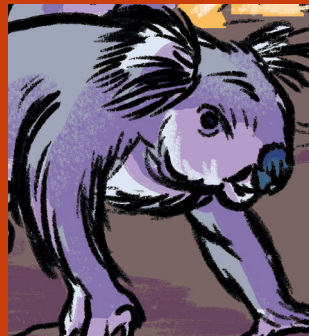
Nick Sirotich



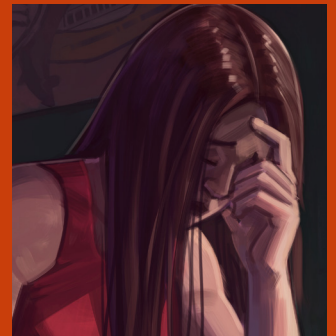
C.M. Duffy



Patti Pogodzinski



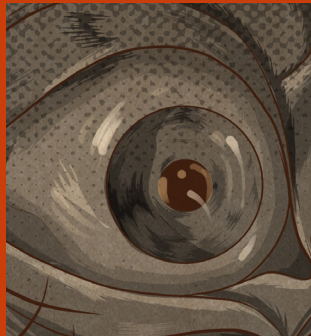
Mike Freiheit



Skutch



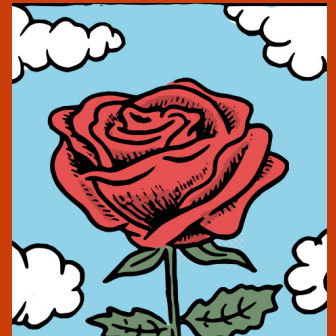
Ellen Burch



John Biggs



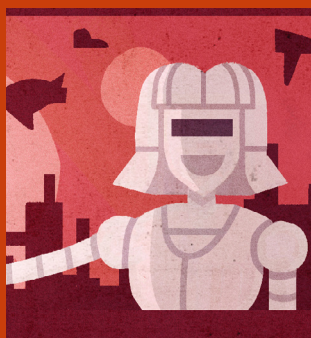
Jolene Yeo (CDS)



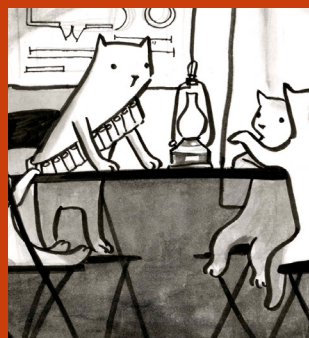
Maxwell Singletary



Helen Geiger



Kyle Brian Prior



Harriet Burbeck

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