

A Vast Ocean of Insight Besprinkled With Islands of Joy

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 6, ISSUE 3

MAY/JUNE 2021

ROYALTY

What is it good for?

ENDANGERED

FISH

Should we eat them?

AUTEURS

Overpraised a bit?

MANATEES

What can we learn from them?



FOR THOSE WITH A ROBUST INNER WORLD

BIMONTHLY BULLETIN

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.

THE PREAMBLE to the issue

WHEREAS, the history of all hitherto existing magazines is the history of disappointing reading material, and

WHEREAS, the contemporary consumer is in desperate need of something to pore over during unusually lengthy poops, and

WHEREAS, the existing alternatives of joke books and sudoku collections may divert attention but do not provide particularly illuminating analysis into global events, and

WHEREAS, the staff of this magazine is in a position to fill the presently existing void, supplying delight & surprise in the form of a sensibly priced periodical, and

WHEREAS, elementary moral imperatives require that those who can act to prevent disaster do so act, and

WHEREAS, it is beyond serious dispute that the lack of *Current Affairs* in one's life can be characterized as a "disaster";

BE IT RESOLVED that this issue of *Current Affairs* is hereby published and shall be transmitted to the masses through both print and electronic mediums.



How To Turn Your Magazine Into Colorful Confetti

Everyone loves confetti. There is almost no occasion that cannot be livened up by retrieving a bucket of confetti, ascending a high perch, and raining it down upon the proceedings. Cover a thing in confetti and it instantly becomes cheerful and approachable. (There may be minor exceptions, like corpses.) But some people do not keep confetti on hand, and find themselves in situations that call for confetti showers without any confetti to shower. All they have is the magazine sitting on the nearby coffee table.

Reader, we would generally discourage vandalism toward copies of *Current Affairs*. To destroy our print edition is akin to desecrating a priceless *objet d'art*. But sometimes you need to break a few eggs (or a few antique vases) to make an omelet (or delightful mess). An emergency is an emergency, and if you must shred this magazine to bring joy to others, the ends more than justify the means.

So, take your scissors and snip. Then snip more. Snip until you have nothing but a pile of tiny shards. Take the shards, and snip them more. We have decorated the pages of *Current Affairs* with glorious full-color artwork to give your confetti a delightfully varied appearance. Everyone likes to be doused in confetti at any time, but people are especially impressed when they look closely and notice that the confetti in question is made of fine art. You will be the talk of the neighborhood when you've done this more than once or twice!

Next issue:

HOW TO TURN YOUR MAGAZINE
INTO A FIBER-PACKED
SMOOTHIE

ANSWERS TO PAGE 35'S

Innuendo Puzzle

There are no innuendos in the Sexsea. If you spot innuendos, you have a filthy mind. This was a test.



Please don't call us an "illegal peacock breeder."

We prefer to think of ourselves as an "avian dating service."

CORRESPONDENCE

Where Has My Magazine Been?

Hello, it's been months since I signed up as a patron for \$10 a month. As such I run with bated breath to the mail box every day looking for my first issue of *Current Affairs* magazine. But alas, it has yet to materialize. I hear others speak of its humor, its brilliance, its dazzling insights lighting their way! Yet here I sit alone in darkness. Maybe I've been fooling myself all this time into thinking that I too would be so fortunate as to have my very own copy of *Current Affairs* magazine delivered right to my door.

Maybe I'm just inherently unlucky. I won a motorcycle helmet in a raffle when I was a kid but it was too big. I went to the store that donated it to the raffle and they said they would order one in my size. It never came. Maybe this is just my lot in life.

Anyway, sorry to have taken up your time.

Sincerely,
Leo

Dear Stalwart Leo,

From time to time, readers complain that their editions of *Current Affairs* show up weeks (or even months) late, battered, bruised, and occasionally even sopping wet. "Where the hell has my magazine been?" they ask their local postal official, usually to be met with a shrug of indifference. Sometimes, as in your case, the magazine never shows up at all. What is going on, you may ask? Leo, we do not know. But some magazines appear—whether of their own volition or through nefarious interference—to take a detour from their intended journey and to wander off through many distant lands. Perhaps they simply get distracted en route, and see a nearby meadow to frolic in. Perhaps we publish a magazine so good that it is a rare delivery driver who can resist the temptation to pilfer it. Either way, we will keep sending you magazines until something someday gets through. With luck, they will arrive before the helmet does.

Hi there!

My name is Sam and I've been a subscriber for years now. Love the mag, love what you're doing, love just about every article. Your last edition had a crossword that had me hootin' and hollerin', but it was also very, very fun to do. I would absolutely love it if you kept this going in every edition—I really don't want to subscribe to the NYTimes to get my crossword fix.

Just one reader's opinion. Keep doing great things!

Best,
Sam

Sam,

We have prepared you a second crossword, which we hope will elicit comparable quantities of both hoots and hollers. Managing & Amusements Editor Lyta Gold has volunteered to become Crossword Editor Lyta Gold for the time being, so that you may avoid having to take such desperate measures as opening the *New York Times*.

DIRECT CORRESPONDENCE TO: editor@currentaffairs.org

THE HIERARCHY OF MANATEES

We are often asked to help readers understand how manatee society works. Certain popular self-help authors have posited the theory that human beings can learn from the social hierarchies seen in communities of lobsters. We disagree. It is manatees from which we can learn useful life lessons. (See "Manatees Are Better Than Us," in this issue.) But do manatees have social hierarchies? Regrettably, they do. This is not a justification for human hierarchies, but instead a reminder that in all animal communities there is the need to pursue liberation from existing unjust social orders. Here we map the existing system of manatee hierarchy to help the reader better understand the social life of the sea cow.



MEAN TESTING

Here at *Current Affairs*, we remain firmly opposed to "means testing" any benefit that should be a social entitlement. We do, however, endorse "mean testing," a test to see how mean you are. To the meanest motherfucker go the spoils!

COMING SOON: ALL CAPS EDITION

EVERY WORD OF EVERY ARTICLE
IN ALL CAPS, SO THAT YOU
KNOW WE REALLY MEANT IT



**KING-HASSLING
SERVICES**
*we will hassle any king
of your choice*



BE SURE YOUR BABY HAS
**HULK
ARMS**

"You'll Laugh Till You Cry! But Then You'll Never Stop Crying."

GENDER RIOT!

How about... replacing "gender reveals" with "gender riots"? Instead of announcing the gender you believe your child to be, you loudly announce your own gender and then proceed to burn down a city in celebration. Has the benefit of being non-cisnormative and will probably result in less human carnage and property damage than gender reveals.

Life Tip:

keeping your pills in decorative glass jars rather than orange prescription bottles makes you feel like an apothecary rather than a person with brain disease



MESSAGE TO THE ANN ARBOR PUBLIC LIBRARY

It has recently come to the attention of the editorial board that an institutional subscription to this magazine is delivered bimonthly to the Ann Arbor Public Library. This excited and delighted us—it has long been the policy of this magazine that Michigan rocks (see "Smitten With Your Mitten: A Current Affairs Tribute To The State of Michigan," Vol. 4, Issue 3) and that the only thing that rocks more than Michigan is the public library system. Combine the two and you've got an institution *Current Affairs* cannot help but adore and respect. So we wish to take this opportunity to extend a hearty salute and message of praise to the great librarians of Ann Arbor. Yours is the work that makes this world great. You, the guardians of knowledge, with your solid taste in periodicals, are the ones who ensure that the sum of human understanding is preserved and passed down across generations. We thank you for your service and wish you and your patrons well.

A Pre-Made Recommendation Letter

From time to time, subscribers email the editor-in-chief asking for recommendation letters. "You do not know me," they say, "but as I subscribe to *Current Affairs*, do you think you could supply a Letter of Recommendation heartily commending my character and strongly endorsing me for [admission to the bar / admission to the nightclub / appointment to a prestigious professorship / et cetera]. The answer to this is always "Yes!"—anyone with the good sense to subscribe to *Current Affairs* must be in the very top tier of human beings, and qualified for any post which they presume to seek. But alas, the policy has resulted in such a flood of requests that the editor-in-chief now spends most of each day writing enthusiastic support letters for complete strangers. A months-long backlog has built up and we wish to help as many as people as possible. Therefore, from this point forward we are supplying the following pre-made recommendation letter, which you may use in any way you see fit (even as part of crimes):

To Whom It May Concern,

Subscriber X [cross out these words and put your name] is a remarkable human being. They have made better choices than 99.99% of their fellow human beings, because they are among that esteemed .01% that subscribes to *Current Affairs* magazine. Based on this alone, they should be appointed to 99.99% of possible jobs and win 99.99% of possible prizes. But even among subscribers, Subscriber X stands out as unique. You will have noticed that they are physically attractive, but speak to them for mere seconds and you will soon realize they are also wise, empathetic, humane, and amusing. Do they have flaws? Admittedly, one: their perfection inspires such envy in others that time they could be spending putting their genius to use must be spent thwarting plots to destroy them. But if you can insulate them from the jabs and taunts of the "haters," you will find their talents limitless and their character impeccable. On behalf of the entire editorial staff of *Current Affairs*, this letter confirms our personal in-depth knowledge that Subscriber X is utterly unique.

Yours,

Current Affairs (the magazine)

THERE IS NOTHING

the editor-in-chief won't
do for this magazine*

List of Newly Banned WORDS & PHRASES

- ✦ Disproportionately
- ✦ Fintech
- ✦ "convening" as a noun
- ✦ Ideation
- ✦ Access to
- ✦ Centering
- ✦ Webinar

Readers who write to point out instances of banned words being used in *Current Affairs* itself will have their subscriptions immediately canceled.

SOME NICE peninsulas

in no particular order:

- iberian
- indochinese
- peloponnesus
- korean
- arabian

QUIZ

"Hedge Fund or Mercenaries?"

by Carina Carroll

Each of the following is either a hedge fund or a private military company. Can you tell which is which?

1. Lazard Alternatives
2. Sandline International
3. Two Sigma
4. Citadel
5. Executive Outcomes
6. Renaissance Technologies
7. Man Group
8. Northbridge Services Group
9. Bridgewater Associates
10. Blackwater
11. BlackRock
12. Unity Resources Group
13. Pershing Square
14. Hedgemon

Hedge fund: 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13
Mercenaries: 2, 5, 8, 10, 12
Hedge fund for mercenary: 14 (okay, we made this one up, but it'll probably exist eventually).

A Joke

This issue contains both an article about fish and an article about suburbs. Which leads us to the following topical joke:

Q: HOW IS A FISH LIKE A SUBURB?

A: Both refuse to let anyone different to them into their schools.

* but he won't do that
(Meat Loaf clause)

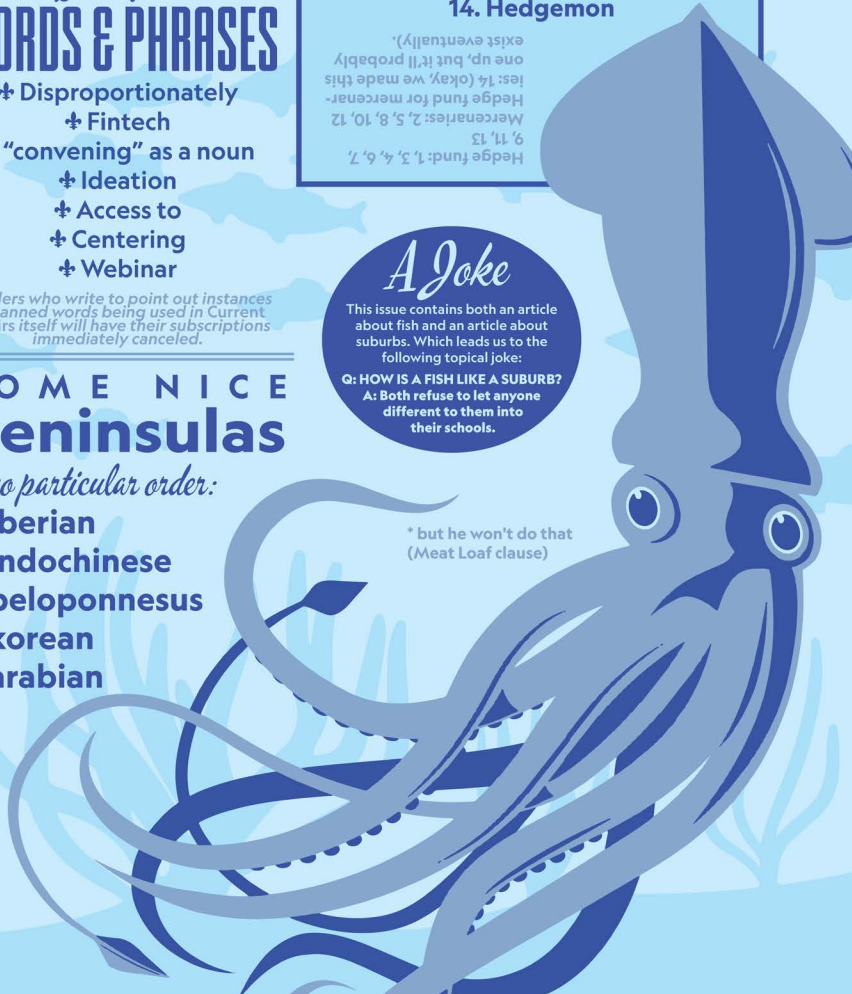


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A surreal collage featuring a volcano, a manatee, a Batman figure, and film reels on a pool of yellow liquid. The background is a pool of blue water with a building and palm trees in the distance. The foreground is a pool of bright yellow liquid. A volcano with red and orange lava flows is in the center. A manatee is on a small stand in front of the volcano. A Batman figure is on a small stand to the right. Two film reels are on the left, with a film strip trailing off.

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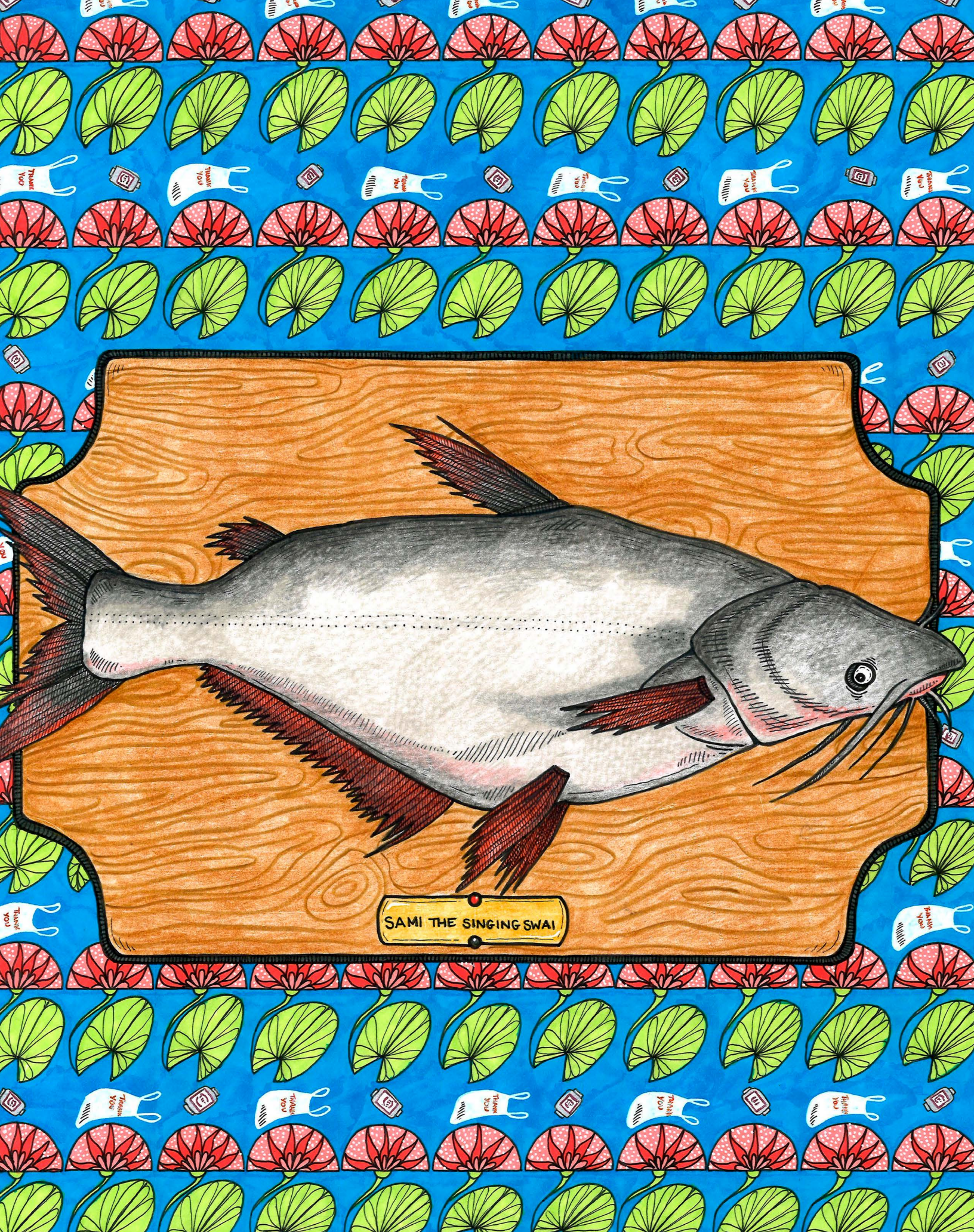
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SAMI THE SINGING SWAI

EATING ENDANGERED

by Arjun S. Byju

ONE OF THE INEVITABLE FEATURES OF THE college experience—along with caffeine-infused all-nighters and cramped fraternity basements—is the dorm food. While some colleges boast extravagant spreads, replete with sushi bars and midnight sundae stations, most undergrads find themselves facing standard mass-produced fare when they arrive on campus. Pizza and grilled chicken: the perfunctory nod to ethnic cuisine in the form of a vindaloo or a paella: lots of grease—and once in a while, an endangered species.

I had never heard of swai before I began college, although it was a staple of my university's dining hall. The chewy white fish was variously served in deep-fried chunks or as insipid fillets doused in some form of sticky, soy-based sauce. Although the general unpalatableness of the mystery seafood was once a point of comedy between my friends, my attitude changed from one of light-hearted queasiness to frank concern when I discovered that swai was, and remains, endangered.

This fact was difficult enough to discover given that swai (*Pangasianodon hypophthalmus*)—a species endemic to Southeast Asia and the Mekong River—goes by a baffling number of aliases: Asian catfish, swai, tra, sutchi, panga, creamy dory (yum!), and iridescent shark.¹ Particularly confusing is the fact that swai (*P. hypophthalmus*) is often called basa, which is the informal name for another species: *P. bocourti*. There's a reason for the litany of pseudonyms: as Vietnamese fish began to be exported to the United States at the dawn of the new millennium, domestic fishermen lobbied against allowing its sale as a type of "catfish" for fear of competing with the homegrown variety; hence the invention of vaguely exotic monikers. In fact, this trade conflict even has a name—the "Catfish War"—and shares many of the well-worn themes of twenty-first century economic disputes, pitting domestic protectionism against the cheap goods provided by neoliberalism.

Beyond the free trade debate, there remains the question of swai's

status as an endangered species, and although I believed I was well on my way to a Watergate-esque exposé (possible *Washington Post* headline: "College Receives Donation from Jeffrey Epstein and Feeds Students Endangered Animals"), my muckraking aspirations were foiled when the University stolidly informed me that the fish we were eating had actually been *farm-raised*. Barton Seaver, a celebrity chef who had been commissioned to curate our school's menu (his quixotically titled debut, *For Cod and Country*, is an ode to eating lesser-known types of fish and was praised by *The Atlantic* as a "cookbook that can save the seas") endorsed the stewardship of our swai distributor and lauded the new dining hall stalwart as a "lean, clean, delicious protein." He never asked me or my fellow students if we agreed about its deliciousness.

Despite the reassurance of a one-time *Esquire* magazine "Chef of the Year," I remained unsettled by swai. After college, I found the fish among the offerings at a soup kitchen where I volunteered, although it usually went nameless into dishes like "seafood gumbo" or "fish and chips." Since then, wherever I've lived, it's popped up on a handful of restaurant menus. And I've probably encountered it more often than that. It's hard to know exactly where and when you're eating swai because it can be billed as catfish, or served up anonymously in generic fish entrees. Every once in a while a major news outlet publishes a story about a fishy swap on a restaurant menu, but evidence of swai's surreptitious presence on U.S. menus is more than anecdotal. A study conducted among 37 restaurants in an unnamed city in the southeastern United States found that over 20 percent of fish labeled as either "catfish" or "grouper" was actually the flesh of imported pangasius—the genus to which swai belongs. Moreover, in a finding that bodes poorly for the nation's beloved fish tacos, researchers concluded that over 66 percent of dishes billed generically as "fish" were actually swai or basa.

An Oceana report confirmed the scale of this piscine deception, concluding that globally, members of the pangasius genus are swapped for over 18 other species of fish. And lest Europeans begin to feel superior in their gastronomic discernment, Oceana found that 98 percent of bluefin tuna dishes in Brussels's restaurants were mislabeled as something else, while in Italy, 82 percent of the fish sold as grouper, swordfish, or perch were also misclassified—with half of those being substituted with a species that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) deems "threatened

1. Yes, as in "glows in the dark." Apparently, swai are an occasional denizen of home aquariums and are prized for the ability—present mainly in juveniles—to iridesce. Even more confusingly, they are neither true sharks nor catfish, but rather, "shark-catfish," a phylogenetically distinct family of freshwater fish native to Southern and Southeastern Asia. Go figure.

with extinction.” Cue the grave-rolling of *nonnas* across the Mediterranean.²

The sheer amount of imported catfish in the United States is hard to fathom. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), over 80 percent of the seafood Americans eat is imported, with half of that amount grown via aquaculture—the practice of breeding and harvesting fish in controlled environments, rather than catching them in the wild. NOAA statistics show that the U.S. imported roughly 110,301 metric tons of Asian catfish in 2017, which cashed in at \$380 million in sales. Most catfish comes from Vietnam, and much of what’s imported is swai; although it’s hard to prove definitively, if you eat fish, particularly at restaurants, you’ve probably had swai, too.

The IUCN continues to keep *Pangasianodon hypophthalmus* on its Red List of endangered species, citing fishing and overharvesting, the construction of dams, and pollution as causes for dwindling populations; the organization estimates that the overall wild catch of swai has declined by 68 percent—and possibly as much as 99 percent—since the 1980s. According to studies by the University of Hull, the Mekong River—from which swai has historically been fished—is one of the globe’s most polluted, and carries over 40 thousand tons of plastic into the world’s oceans each year. The Mekong has long been a subject of worry for conservationists, who for decades have decried not only the destruction of wild species, but also the obliteration of traditional fishing communities that has accompanied these diminishing populations. In addition to the threats of overfishing, dam building, and sand mining, there’s also the concern that the river is simply drying out. These devastating forces combine, often manifesting in dramatic ways: in 2019, a region of the Mekong delta turned pitch black due to spillage of “untreated effluent” from a local sugar factory.

Yet, when pressed, swai distributors in the United States will echo the same, unsatisfying, reassurance: Sure, the *species* might be endangered, but the fish you are eating—the *one right here on your plate*—was farm-raised. So relax, and dig in.

IT’S SIMPLE TO SENSE, IF NOT EASY TO ARTICULATE, AN eerie contradiction in the above sentiment. What does it mean—and what are the implications for environmental sustainability—when a species can be hunted to near extinction, protected by a host of conservation organizations, and yet scarfed by the ton each day? Is it not untenable for an animal to be *both* endangered *and* farmed?

One can envision an almost identical scenario that would elicit a far greater level of outrage. Imagine a farm in Vietnam that bred and raised giant pandas, only to sell them to adventurous steakhouses in the United States. Pandas are *also* a vulnerable species, but if, as distributors of swai maintain, farming was carried out “sustainably” (whatever that means—but let’s assume it implies without impact to wild populations), then what’s the harm? Panda farming would engender a lot of criticism, but perhaps only because we think differently about charismatic megafauna than we do about things with gills. Once one invokes the dispassionate framework of the market, farming a species and selling it for consumption even in the face of

abysmal native populations becomes basically equivalent, whether there are thousands of creatures remaining in the wild, or only a dozen.

The irony, of course, is that although Americans farm and eat animals on such a large scale, we also spend immense time and energy caring about endangered ones. In 1973, Congress passed the Endangered Species Act, which provided a framework for funding conservation efforts and proposed the necessity of safeguarding critical habitats. In fiscal year 2016, federal and state agencies spent at least \$1.6 billion on threatened and endangered species. For better or worse, endangered animals like pandas are intertwined with our notions of conservation. We parade them as symbols of the environmental movement, and they provide us—along with annual global temperature and inches of sea level rise—with a clear metric for the state of our environmental collapse. When a species on the endangered list is brought back from the brink of extinction, its revival is hailed as a major success for environmentalism. Yet such “victories” are dwarfed by the routine killing and eating that happens every year: at least 1.5 billion pigs, 500 million sheep, 400 million goats, and 300 million cattle are slaughtered and eaten annually in a global operation that, to most people, exists outside of the realm of environmentalism.

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND OUR SOCIETY-WIDE contradiction between wanton consumption and performative preservation, it helps to start with the Enlightenment. The generalized objectification of the universe—where nature is reduced to discrete, constituent parts—is a relatively new one in the history of science. The philosopher Carolyn Merchant traced its origin in her famous book *The Death of Nature*, arguing that before the Enlightenment, most of the natural world was understood to be beyond human comprehension, the result of capricious gods or countless unknowable, living forces. This sentiment was captured by Alexander Pope, whose *Essay on Man* is a defence of humanity’s ignorance of God’s purposes:

*“All Nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which though canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good.”*

This perspective on Nature—as distinctly separate from and impenetrable to human understanding—had formerly dominated Western thought. Pope was issuing his passionate defense in the era of the Scientific Revolution, a time in which, as Merchant explains, the early “natural philosophers” were now examining nature as a “system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces.” This *mechanistic* framework of the universe legitimated the manipulation of nature, and led to “a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism.”

Many of the early Enlightenment thinkers, Merchant tells us, were frank in their aspirations for this new science. Descartes, who famously argued that nonhuman animals were machines, devoid of mind, consciousness, and sentience, wrote in 1636 that through mechanistic inquiry, humans could “render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature.” Joseph Glanvill, a contemporary English philosopher, argued proudly in 1668 that the objective of natural philosophy would be to “enlarge knowledge by observation and experiment...so that nature being known, may be mastered, managed,

2. Back in the Western hemisphere, Oceana found that over half of the fish sold as “shark” in Brazil were actually largemouth sawfish, a species that the IUCN recognizes as critically endangered. They’re also an extraordinary-looking animal. Go ahead and search Google Images for largemouth sawfish as you pour one out for these critters.

and used in the services of human life.” Similarly, Robert Boyle, a founder of modern chemistry, would write in 1661 that although some men cared only to *know* nature, “others desire to command her” and “to bring nature to be serviceable to their particular ends, whether of health, or riches, or sensual delight.” Francis Bacon would, in promulgating the experimental method, go even farther, calling for nature to be “bound into service” and made a “slave” of mankind. (The sexual nature of these descriptions of “natural domination” is no coincidence; Merchant proposes that the conceptualization of the Earth as female in no small part contributed to its ultimate subjugation—and that the legacy of the Scientific Revolution can be seen in the contemporary subordination of women.)

Such lofty—and exploitative—aspirations for science did not go without criticism. Many of the early proponents of the Enlightenment felt compelled to defend their endeavour against classical thinkers, like the Roman philosopher Agrippa, who maintained that nature ought to remain beyond the realm of human manipulation, and that those seeking to “stop the flight of beasts and birds, the swimming of fishes, to charm away all manner of disease” contravened the creation of God. Centuries later, in a world of genetic editing and nuclear fission, it appears that Bacon won and Agrippa lost. There is no shortage of examples of the ways in which modern science, coupled with global capitalism, has manipulated the natural environment, enslaving her to service our “sensual delight.”

This is where swai—a species we at once breed, decimate, and protect—emerges as a perfect emblem of this Enlightenment-generated phenomenon: the gradual and persistent death of nature. The apotheosis of the Scientific Revolution is our ability to not only mechanize and understand, but to invariably consume nature (in this case, literally *consume* it), moving the natural world from a mysterious space beyond our reach into the orderly realm of capital.

In the era of factory farming, we have replaced our former belief in the internal life of animate objects with the possibility of profit. The oceans are no longer a home to billions of swimming beasts, but rather, a reservoir of cheap fillets; indeed, we speak of fish and their natural habitats as “wild stock.” We have taken what was once the Other—a realm of creatures and plants believed to possess an agency of its own—and reduced it to a mere commodity. More recently than Agrippa, thinkers like Eileen Crist have challenged the pervasive view of human supremacy, contending that even more so than capitalism or modernity, it’s our belief in the centrality of the human species and our concomitant disregard for other biotic communities that drives modern ecological collapse.

The term *Anthropocene*, made popular by scientists like Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen (himself a Nobel Laureate), refers to a proposed new geological epoch in which human activity has begun, for the first time, to modulate the Earth to such an extent that our ecological footprint will be reflected in geological time. The concept has gained traction not only among Earth scientists and those in the humanities and social sciences, but has also wormed its way into mainstream discourse. John Green, a popular author and vlogger, hosts a podcast (perhaps the most anthropocentric form of contemporary media) called *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, in which he opines on various aspects of the human-altered universe. Although many are critical of the widespread adoption of the term, citing for instance the lack of definitive stratigraphic (rock layer) proof of human-caused effects on the Earth, there remains something culturally apropos about the Anthropocene. In his first episode, Green marvels at Dr. Pepper, which in contrast to prior fountain drinks does not attempt to repli-

cate the taste of any naturally occurring food, but rather offers a completely artificial flavor. The fact that this ethereal, wholly unique taste is *also* delivered in a zero calorie form is, according to Green, proof enough of the Anthropocene.

The large-scale elimination of species perpetuated by humans (“The Sixth Extinction”) is also typically held up as evidence for the Anthropocene. It strikes me, however, that an even better piece of evidence for this proposed epoch than diet sodas or species die-offs—providing even more convincing testimony of the permanence *and* artificiality of modern ecology—is swai. Here is an animal that we annihilate, yet also allow to swim. That this species’ natural habitat is shifting before our eyes from the 12th largest river in the world to a series of artificially dredged ponds is a depraved corroboration of what our species, at the apogee of its technological prowess, can do.

One day soon, swai may go extinct in the wild, but we will continue to breed it in captivity—a gastronomic Jurassic Park starring a species whose *raison d’être* is to be battered, deep-fried, and swept secretly into the gullets of millions of Americans. When this day comes, one would be forgiven for recalling the widely-quoted Nietzsche deadpan “God is dead,” although the more apt quote might be his lesser-known follow-up: “Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?”

That’s because swai is also a reminder of the limits of human omnipotence. There’s a reason we sneak imported catfish onto our plates instead of local species or Chilean sea bass (although after over a decade, a research team claims this rare fish is *nearly* ready for aquaculture.) Despite our species’ interplanetary aspirations and our hopes of untethering ourselves from our physical forms with the help of AI, we rely on \$4 per pound fish to feed the hungry mouths of both upper-crust undergrads and soup kitchen patrons. Swai disinflates our hubris. It demonstrates that we remain tied to the corporeal plane. Somewhere between ape and demigod, *Homo sapiens* are powerful enough to dam rivers and end species, yet still meager and glutinous enough to depend on cheap fillets bred in muddy brown run-off.

Swai also represent the uncomfortable circularity to which the Anthropocene has made us accustomed. We destroy the environ-



“Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.”

ment and overhunt species...so we farm them and continue consuming. We hunch over a screen for nine hours a day...so we run, demonically, on a conveyor belt of sweat, until we're tired enough to recline on the couch. We hyperstimulate and addict ourselves to notifications and email...so we take "digital detoxes," or buy branded "zen garden" receptacles into which our phones can disappear. We make ubiquitous sugary, salty, fatty foods...so we diet, painfully, or cut out part of our intestine to absorb less of what we eat.³

The superfluity of these solutions embodies the ingenuity of the Anthropocene. We eschew difficult answers for Rube Goldberg-esque fixes, like taking the elevator up to an Equinox or buying an app for our gadget addiction. If we thought swai was tasty and worth eating, we might simply attempt to preserve its natural habitat. But that would require a level of self-control and stewardship that modern technology allows us to bypass. Environmentalism often looks banal and old-fashioned, even puritanical in its reduction of pleasures. There's a simplicity to it, which in many ways is both much easier and more challenging than the quick, yet circuitous, solutions that 21st century technology has handed us.

IN A PROVOCATIVE PAPER, *THE TROUBLE WITH Wilderness*, environmental historian William Cronon illuminates the genesis of the modern dichotomy between humanity and "Nature," contending that far from being a sanctuary away from societal manipulation, "the wild" is as much a human construct as any other civilizational byproduct. While wilderness was once, as Merchant notes, a place that imparted fear and inspired awe—according to Burke, Kant, and Wordsworth among others, "the wild" was the closest man could get to the sublime glory of God—in the last two centuries it has been transformed into a destination for relaxation, reinvigoration, and escape. Cronon contends that the modern reification of the wild, an attempt to return to pre-Enlightenment ideals, relied on a certain frontier nostalgia, which envisioned the natural world as a barren locale meant for masculine, bourgeois recreation (most famously embraced by Teddy Roosevelt). This myth is problematic for many reasons, not least of which is that a belief in a "virgin wilderness" blithely erases the histories and perspectives of indigenous peoples who have long called such places home.

But this dominant, Anthropocene-era conception of wilderness is also harmful insofar as it maintains a dualism between human civilization and nature. Cronon asserts, "If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not..." It is this perceived distinction that allows for such inane projects as voraciously farming species that we simultaneously safeguard. "Wilderness gets us into trouble," Cronon further explains, "only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow de-

pends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit."

This wilderness ethos imbues much of the modern conservation movement, which deliberately seeks to remove civilization from natural ecosystems. Landmark pieces of legislation—such as the 1964 Wilderness Act—cordon off slices of the globe, returning nature to Merchant's imagined pre-Enlightenment state: a separate space free from the meddling and subjugating hand of humanity.

But such attempts at conservation, while well-intentioned, perpetuate a false dichotomy between economic productivity and untouched wilderness. Wendell Berry, whose seminal work *The Unsettling of America* made a case for the cultural value of farming, argues that in sanctifying certain iconic pieces of the natural world, post-industrial conservationists disentangled nature from human existence. As he writes in his book *The Art of Learning Brush*:

"This version of conservation, industrial and romantic, orthodox and dominant for at least a century, simplifies and sentimentalizes nature as friend, wild, virgin, spectacular or scenic, picturesque or photogenic, distant or remote from work or workplaces, ever-pleasing, consoling, restorative of a kind of norm of human sanity. Conservationists of this order have thus established and ratified a division, even a hostility, between nature and our economic life that is both utterly false and limitlessly destructive of the world they are intent upon 'saving.'"

THIS PERCEIVED DIVISION BETWEEN NATURE AND our economic life is what enables the pillaging of the Mekong alongside the mass breeding of Swai. We expect nature to be something far-off and picturesque—a place of snow-capped mountains and impenetrable rainforest—while we admit our own "unnatural" world to be one of consumption and destruction. Hence, we are led to believe that a fish in a river = nature, while a fish in a tank = science. Such a dualism both unmoors humanity from the wild and permits nature's subjugation. It also prevents any truly sustainable vision of environmentalism; we can either plunder rivers, or we can never touch them—there is no cohabitation in between.

Of course, in reality, endangered species lists and animal farming are two sides of the same coin. The global industrial network that eviscerates populations through deforestation and erosion and overhunting is the same one that maintains factory farms. The irony is that such a system's strength could be leveraged towards restoring wildlife, as captive breeding programs have demonstrated in the past. By definition, the capability to grow millions of creatures in captivity implies a power that, although it may never be used this way, could repopulate the wild.

Cronon offers a solution: embrace nature everywhere, especially in our own backyard. "The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw...the tree in the garden could easily have sprung from the same seed as the tree in the forest, and we can claim only its location and perhaps its form as our own." A subconscious knowledge of this truth is no doubt part of the queasiness surrounding swai and other animals we eat. Endangered fish come from the same proverbial seed as those bred explicitly for consumption; both have an inherent claim to the wild.

So how then do we navigate a more comprehensive understanding of wilderness, and how do we protect it? Borrowing from Aldo Leopold, Berry posits an alternative definition of conservation: "Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation

3. I do not mean to impugn the efficacy of bariatric surgery for many people. In fact, the data suggests it is often the most powerful and long-lasting method for treating obesity. Some surgeons I have worked with attest that it can even cure diabetes, a bold claim that does have some scientific footing.

Still, one cannot dispute that the logic of bariatric surgery is peak Anthropocene: using technology to re-engineer and reroute digestion, one of the most fundamental operations of human existence. For the majority of history, humans have tried to extract the most from the food we consume. Now, we block that absorption. Of course, it would be simpler (and cheaper and better for the environment) if we could merely eat less, although I acknowledge this is much easier said than done. There seems to be something rather wasteful about guzzling food that we will only excrete sans digestion—if you're not going to catch-and-release, you might as well digest.

is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.” Viewed in this light, the well-being of critical habitats, like the Mekong, is not measured by the presence or absence of certain flagship species, but rather, by the biotic community’s ability to preserve itself. In this respect, what we are doing to swai—our dueling impulses to destroy and protect it—is wrong not only because it is self-defeating, but because it is *unsustainable*, in the fairest sense of the word.

THIS YEAR, AS THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS EMERGED and popular conversation turned to wet markets and “exotic” Asian species, I found myself returning to swai and how it embodies our relationship with livestock, species destruction, and the wild. The inscrutable pangolin, which became a preeminent figure in the coronavirus origin story, is the most trafficked non-human mammal in the world; the four species found in Africa are listed as vulnerable, while the four in Asia are *critically endangered*. Here we have yet another example of the fallout of mankind’s interaction with the natural world.



Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the plight of swai demonstrate the interconnectedness of all species on this planet. Humans are capable of deforesting large swathes of the globe, unleashing never-before-encountered viruses, and bringing these pathogens to every corner of civilization. The same forces—population growth, unfettered consumption, intercontinental travel and trade—also drive us to plunder the world’s rivers and pollute natural habitats at exponential rates.

Yet we are also capable of genuine technological miracles: producing several novel vaccines in under a year, or breeding thousands of tons of cheap, endangered seafood to satiate a population that increasingly lusts for marine protein. A few decades ago, it would have been equally improbable to suggest inventing a vaccine for a virus within a year of its emergence and supplying 60 percent of “fish” items in restaurants with an animal that is not only *not* commonplace, but actually *critically scarce*.

Yet in keeping with the ethic of the Anthropocene, such impressive feats are undercut by undeniable follies and failures. At the time of this writing, COVID-19 has killed over 3.1 million humans, including nearly 600,000 Americans. In spite of our unprecedented technological prowess, we could not stop the mistrust, misinformation, denial, and poor management that undoubtedly contributed to thousands of needless deaths. And we remain unable to save the Mekong, or lower carbon emissions, or halt sea level rise.

But are we really “unable”? Or do we just not want to? There’s another endangered fish that humans continue to eat in droves,

except this one is much more famous: bluefin tuna. Despite acknowledging for years that the species is endangered, the U.N. and the E.U. have both continually rejected bans on *Thunnus thynnus* because—well—people simply like sushi too much. There are important differences between the tales (tails?) of these two species: bluefin tuna continues to be caught in the wild, unlike swai, which when imported is mostly farm-raised. Moreover, being a staple of fine dining, tuna has faced both greater resistance to its protection and more widespread media attention as a *cause célèbre* than swai (hence why there’s already been a *New York Times Magazine* profile of the beleaguered scombroid, but only some odd-ball reportage on its catfish cousin.)

Still, the stories of bluefin and swai share a common theme: the power that commerce wields in driving political tastes and cultural attitudes. Bluefin tuna, like private jets and thousand dollar t-shirts, symbolizes capitalism at its most epicurean—a gaudy, high-bourgeoisie affront to moderation, the environment, and the 99.9 percent. Swai, on the other hand, represents 21st century capitalism

in its mass-market form, evoking an interconnected network of Walmarts and sweatshops and teeming ponds of overcrowded fish.

In many ways, human ingenuity has been propelled by our unending rapacity, and it is hard to imagine significant changes to the status of swai (or bluefin tuna for that matter) any time soon. As much as the profit motive trumps environmentalism, so too does taste. Americans managed to save the previously endangered bald eagle, but I’m tempted to believe that this was because eagles do not play a particularly delectable role in our culinary history. If eagles tasted as good as a spicy tuna roll—or if they were as cheap and tasted as *passably* good as breaded-up swai and chips—we would probably be eating them to extinction, too.

But contemporary market trends show that consumers care about more than just price and taste; the widespread rise of farm-to-table and “eating local” proves that Americans are increasingly concerned about the provenance of their food. The recent explosion of meat alternatives, like Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat (another Anthropocene invention—fake meat that tastes *exactly like* real meat) also proves that modern eaters are moving away from, if only gradually, the traditionally blind acceptance of farm-raised livestock. And, as more people balk at the fishy fish they are served at restaurants, demand for imports like swai could also tumble. If that becomes the case, we might see a future in which college students are not made to choose between eating something endangered and something merely conventionally gag-inducing. Everyone knows college kids are hungry and in debt—and while those conditions remain, they’ll eat about pretty much anything. ♣

BEFORE:

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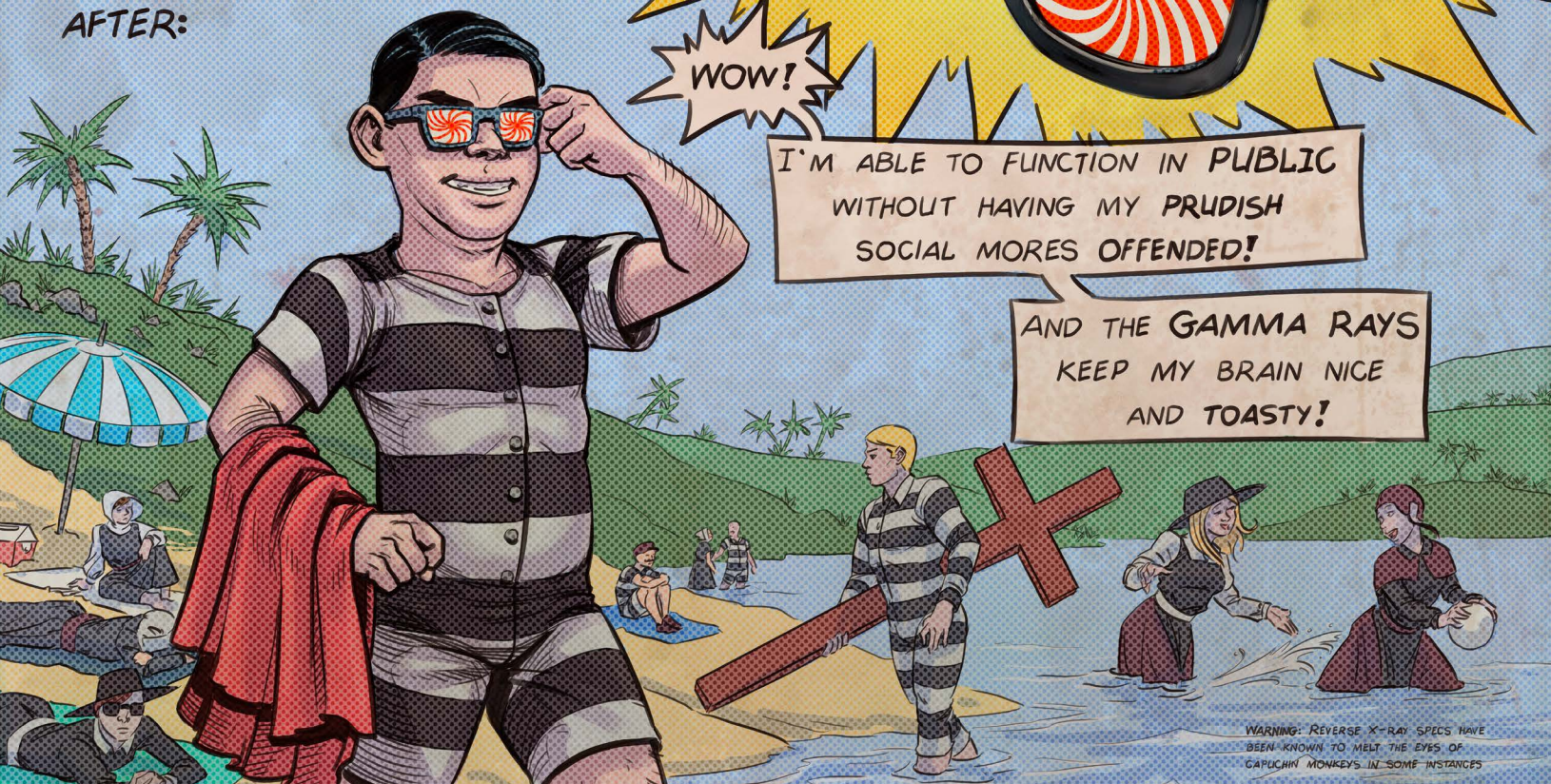


AFTER:

WOW!

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AND THE **GAMMA RAYS**
KEEP MY BRAIN NICE
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WARNING: REVERSE X-RAY SPECS HAVE
BEEN KNOWN TO MELT THE EYES OF
CAPUCHIN MONKEYS IN SOME INSTANCES

MELT THE CROWN

By Amanda Hanna-McLeer

I HAVE SEEN EVERY YOUNG, SUPPLE, FRENCH NEW Wave ass in existence. Brigitte Bardot's in *Le Mépris*. Catherine Deneuve's in *Belle du Jour*. My "Intermediate Film" class in college should've been named "A Case for the Male Gaze," given my professor's predilection for young French women. After screenings, the lights would flicker on and he'd swivel around in his chair, his wiry eyebrows raised suggestively, as if to say, *did you see that?* And yes, we saw that—again and again. Given his taste for blondes, I'm surprised he never made us watch *The Last Picture Show*. Cybill Shepherd might have been American, and the 1971 film firmly New Hollywood rather than New Wave, but it featured a pliant beauty experiencing a sexual awakening, and therefore should've found its way onto our syllabus. But then again, we weren't shown very many of the "great" American films.

Contrary to most American film programs, at the Rhode Island School of Design there was virtually no mention of Peter Bogdanovich, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick or—god forbid—George Lucas. It wasn't until I picked up Peter Biskind's book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* during my junior year that I became familiar with the New Hollywood movement and the drug-addled, sex-crazed cinephiles who revolutionized American filmmaking. Like the French New Wave before them, these men seized creative control from an outmoded studio system—where the producer was king—and fixed the newly minted crown of *auteur* onto their own heads.

Auteur theory, popularized by French New Wave director François Truffaut, placed the director in the role of the single most important person on a film set. American directors—many of whom were wildly insecure and favored the shadows of dark cinema houses—loved the new doctrine. In this framework, they weren't small men eclipsed by the glowing, colossal images on the silver screen; they were stars in their own right. It certainly seemed liberating, even righteous, to challenge the money-grubbing studio system, which had dominated Hollywood from the 1920s up until the late 1960s. The men with the money were now—in theory—secondary to the artists with the vision.

At least, that's how auteur theory is usually framed, as a revolutionary crusade against "the man." In practice, it's anything but subversive. It's just a truer embrace of "the man."

When auteur theory debuted in the pages of the radical film journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, it was considered quite provocative. The theory torched France's prevailing "Cinema of Quality" trend, in which directors faithfully—and artlessly—adapted scripts to screen. In

contrast, the director-as-auteur would be someone who challenged the form with a distinctive vision and style, which the young *Cahiers* critics—Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, François Truffaut—later exemplified as pioneers of the French New Wave. But these men, obsessed with the idea of personal genius, also held that the director was the sole author of a film. They developed a cult of personality around directors they admired, sometimes overlooking the director's lesser work in favor of his larger oeuvre. Essentially, they set the stage for what Kate Muir identified in the *Guardian* as the Scorsese-Tarantino-Fellini triangle, or worse—the Tarantino devotee.

Godard and Truffaut may have been communists—the pair shut down the 1968 Cannes Film Festival in solidarity with Parisian student protests—but they were surprisingly conservative when it came to authorship. They would indeed wrestle with this discrepancy later in their careers, but the New Hollywood directors that idolized them never did. McCarthyism and the blacklist had decimated the Hollywood left only a generation before, which meant that the French insurgent spirit got lost in translation. But the fanatical adoration of the auteur and his singular talent translated—and endured—just fine.

Proponents of auteur theory would have you forget that filmmaking is, by definition, a collective art. A painter can recede into his tiny studio, or a writer to her desk, but a filmmaker relies on a vast network of collaborators to realize their vision. Ask any filmworker today and they'll nod enthusiastically, *yes of course, we're all important players*. But implicitly they know that the collective has been co-opted in the service of one person: the director. That person, to this day, is a man about 84 percent of the time, according to The Celluloid Ceiling (an organization which has been amassing data on behind-the-scenes employment of women for the last 22 years.)

Another dent in the auteur crown is that many of the most famous directors—the type that cinephiles tend to regard as gods among men—had brilliant wives who not only raised their children while they seduced young starlets, but shaped their stories, pitched career-defining ideas, and saved ill-fated projects. Despite the extraordinary contributions of these women, their debut appearances at the height of second wave feminism, and their (limited) number of awards, they've largely been erased from film history. If they're mentioned at all, it's usually as the wives of famous auteurs, not as collaborators or creatives in their own right. But when you learn about women like Polly Platt or Marcia Lucas, it becomes clear: auteur theory is just that—a theory. And one that we should have tossed long ago.

I just saw a movie that sucks, but the guy who made it knows how to make movies. Get him in here.

— BOB RAFELSON; 1970S DIRECTOR,
PRODUCER AND PHILANDERER

THE ABOVE QUOTE WOULD NEVER BE SAID ABOUT a woman. Not in 2021, and certainly not in 1968, when film producers Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider wanted to work with Peter Bogdanovich. The 28-year-old Bogdanovich—better known to the *Sopranos*-binging generation as Doctor Melfi's therapist—had just released his first feature film, *Targets*. The movie may have “sucked,” according to Rafelson, but it secured Bogdanovich a meeting with the producers who made the independent sleeper hit *Easy Rider*. When Bogdanovich and Schneider met to discuss a potential collaboration, it was a standard dinner with the wives—except that Polly Platt was one of the wives.

Schneider quickly dismissed the first idea that Bogdanovich pitched. “Somethin’ else,” he shrugged, a dreaded phrase for any filmmaker. Most of us would have come prepared with a few pitches, but the aspiring auteur drew a blank. “There’s Larry McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show*,” Bogdanovich’s wife Platt offered. She described the novel for Schneider (the son of the head of Columbia Pictures, incidentally) and he liked it. Of course, he reportedly expressed his interest by turning away from the woman pitching the film and toward her dejected husband. Bogdanovich—a Manhattan-bred film brat—didn’t find the small town Texas story appealing and, unlike his wife, hadn’t read the book. When Schneider asked Bogdanovich to send him a copy of the book, the director sulkily told him to buy a copy himself.

Despite this shocking display of arrogance, Schneider picked up the film, under the condition that Bogdanovich “write some nudity into it.” Likened to Orson Welles’ seminal work *Citizen*

Kane, the 1971 film version of *The Last Picture Show* racked up eight Academy Award nominations, securing its director, Bogdanovich, a place in the New Hollywood movement. Bogdanovich—who once shamelessly worried his name would be too long to fit on a marquee—became a household name. Further solidifying his auteur image was the 20-year-old beauty he had on his arm, Cybill Shepherd, the star of *The Last Picture Show*...and the woman he’d abandoned his lactating wife for. Bogdanovich had an affair with his lead actress just months after Platt had given birth to their second daughter.

It’s a familiar story—the director falling for his star—but few are as outrageous as *The Last Picture Show*. Because in addition to pitching the project that made her husband famous, Platt designed and built the sets, made the costumes, and did hair and makeup for the entire cast. And that’s just what she did on her own. The collaboration between Peter and Polly was so apparent that even Shepherd couldn’t help but remark to Platt:

“People say you direct because he sits with you and you draw something on the script. You tell him what the shots will be.”

Shepherd wasn’t the only one who noticed Platt’s influence either. Platt described her co-working relationship with her husband as, “he’s the locomotive and I’m the tracks.” The couple’s closest friends and colleagues even lamented how Bogdanovich’s films suffered after their eventual divorce. The only person who didn’t see how instrumental Polly was to Peter’s films was Peter himself. In the middle of production—and his very public affair with Shepherd—Bogdanovich asked Platt why she didn’t just “go home.” The man consulted his wife *on a daily basis* but still thought she was redundant. Confident that the film would be a success and that she was just as much the “author” of the film as her husband, Platt stuck with it. The sole credit that Platt received for *The Last Picture Show*? Production Designer. Which, while an esteemed and elusive credit for women at the time, was an erasure of the depth and scope of her overall work.

It’s this kind of omission that aids the myth of the auteur. The Academy nominated Bogdanovich for Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay. The papers praised Bogdanovich—and Bogdanovich alone—for his vision. And why wouldn’t they? It was his name that appeared in the credits.

Despite her personal anguish over her husband’s affair and their subsequent divorce in 1971, Platt still believed in their creative partnership. She went on, post-divorce, to make two more hits with Bogdanovich: *What’s Up Doc?* and *Paper Moon*. But it wasn’t until Platt creatively split from Bogdanovich that her career really took off—and his fizzled out. She produced several films and fostered the careers of J.J. Abrams, Cameron Crowe, Wes Anderson, and Matt Groening. You might have only just learned about Polly Platt, but you know at least a few of these men—and Platt was instrumental in making them happen. Naturally, this is the part of her career that has largely been forgotten, eclipsed by the salacious affair surrounding *The Last Picture*



“Nobody fucks with the dandies.”

Show.

It wasn't until *The Invisible Woman* premiered last year—the latest installment of Karina Longworth's podcast *You Must Remember This*—that the extent of Platt's influence really gained much in the way of public recognition. Because although she'd had successes, Platt had also been the “uncredited producer, unofficial writer and talent whisperer” on several films. From *Terms of Endearment* to *Say Anything*, Platt did far more than her credits suggested. But we wouldn't know any of it if Longworth hadn't unearthed Platt's unpublished memoir, written before she tragically died of ALS in 2011.

As Longworth notes, it wasn't Platt's death that prevented her from publishing her autobiography—it was Platt's fear that it was “too gossipy.” Which is painfully ironic, given that *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*—the 1998 tell-all by Peter Biskind that I stumbled on during my junior year—is widely celebrated for its uninhibited look at the era Platt experienced firsthand. That is, celebrated by *most* people. Peter Bogdanovich was incensed by Biskind's book, saying, “I spent seven hours with that guy over a period of days, and he got it all wrong.” Robert Altman said that he wished Biskind dead. But it's a 2013 quote from William Friedkin, the unhinged, womanizing director of *The Exorcist*, that's most telling:

I've actually never read the book, but I've talked to some of my friends who are portrayed in it, and we all share the opinion that it is partial truth, partial myth and partial out-and-out lies by mostly rejected girlfriends and wives.

Biskind did what most film critics/historians of the time wouldn't: He actually talked to the “rejected girlfriends and wives.” It seems like an obvious oversight now, but these women had been deemed so inconsequential that no one had bothered to talk to them before. If their husbands were the individual geniuses, revolutionizing the industry, what was the point of talking to the lucky gals who just hitched a ride? At best, they were homemakers and mothers. At worst, they were opportunistic freeloaders. Certainly, they were never, ever seen as collaborators. This is the delusion that Biskind broke with his book, to the dismay of many famous directors, including George Lucas, whose wife—the gifted editor Marcia Lucas—was also one of Biskind's subjects.

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF FILM, EDITING WASN'T CONSIDERED an art. The work was dismissed as menial, tedious and not unlike sewing, with all of its threading and cutting. Naturally it was working-class women, and their so-called “nimble-fingers,” that cut the very first films. These women laid the foundation for editing as we know it today, but were routinely omitted from film credits and press write-ups because of their lowly status. But while the craft was downplayed, there were rare glimpses of acknowledgement, as in a 1925 *Motion Picture Magazine* article by Florence Osborne:

Among the greatest 'cutters' and film editors are women. They are quick and resourceful. They are also ingenious in their work and usually have a strong sense of what the public wants to see. They can sit in a stuffy cutting-room and see themselves looking at the picture before an audience.

Fifty years later, it was this exact skill that made Marcia Lucas an exceptional editor. “I like to become emotionally involved in a movie. I want to be scared, I want to cry...” she said, speaking to Biskind in 1998. Before the preview of *Star Wars* episode IV—the second film that Marcia cut for her husband George—she said, “if the audience doesn't cheer when Han Solo comes in at the last second in the Millennium Falcon... the picture doesn't work.”

Her keen instinct for editing was praised by directors like John Milius and Martin Scorsese, the latter of whom she cut several films for, including *Taxi Driver* and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. But, as with Polly Platt, the famous auteur husband didn't fully recognize his wife's talent. When George's first feature film, *THX 1138*, was panned by the studio (as Marcia had anticipated), George was less than humbled. Marcia told Biskind:

I never cared for THX because it left me cold. When the studio didn't like the film, I wasn't surprised. But George just said to me, I was stupid and knew nothing. Because I was just a Valley Girl. He was the intellectual.

George didn't stop belittling his wife once he became successful. When referring to scenes that Marcia cut on *Return of the Jedi* years later, he said she edited all of the “crying and dying scenes.” George didn't think much of creating emotionally resonant work, famously claiming, “emotionally involving the audience is easy. Anybody can do it blindfolded, get a little kitten and have some guy wring its neck.” Marcia's ability to find the emotional crux of a scene was a strength, but George essentially skewed it as a weakness of feminine sentimentality. And yet, the enduring power of the original *Star Wars* series is largely due to Marcia's influence.

And it wasn't just Marcia: everything about *Star Wars* was a genuine team effort. George Lucas was mortified by the first rough cut of *A New Hope*. He thought the original editor, John Jympson, was making the film too campy. He fired Jympson and replaced him with Marcia, whom he entrusted with one of the most challenging and impactful scenes: the Death Star trench run. As Michael Kaminski notes in his essay, “In Tribute to Marcia Lucas,” Marcia had to rebuild the scene from the ground up. The scene as scripted was anticlimactic and lacked tension—George himself lamented that he wasn't a strong writer. Given the time crunch, Lucas also had to bring on two more editors, Richard Chew and Paul Hirsch. *A New Hope* was a collaborative effort, particularly in the final days of the rough cut. As Hirsch described in J.W. Rinzler's *The Making of Star Wars*:

We put it all together and spent about three or four days as a tag team. George, Richard, Marcia and I would sit at the machine each for a couple of hours, taking turns and making suggestions.

Marcia won an Oscar for her editing of the film, alongside Chew and Hirsch. She didn't speak at all at the acceptance, but the award itself meant recognition, which would prove to be important when her contributions were later downplayed. According to Kaminski, Marcia was "practically erased from the history books at Lucasfilm." So-called definitive documentaries and books about *Star Wars* generally cite Richard Chew as the primary editor, or exclude Marcia altogether. While she was credited for cutting Episodes IV and VI, she is still uncredited for contributions made to *The Empire Strikes Back*.

And that's just her uncredited editorial work. Marcia was with George while he was drafting the early scripts for *Star Wars* and made countless suggestions: it was her idea to have Obi Wan die and serve as Luke Skywalker's spirit guide. The couple divorced in 1983, and after Marcia left, Lucas' work became notably self-indulgent, shackled to an increasingly soulless franchise. Mark Hamill himself noted that "there was a huge difference in the films... [George] did when he was married." It's not a mystery as to why. While others fawned, Marcia dared to tell her husband when something didn't work. According to Marcia:

I think he resented my criticisms, felt that all I ever did was put him down. In his mind, I always stayed the stupid Valley girl. He never felt I had any talent, he never felt I was very smart and he never gave me much credit. When we were finishing Jedi, George told me he thought I was a pretty good editor. In the sixteen years of our being together I think that was the only time he complimented me.

Much like Polly Platt, Marcia Lucas made her husband's films better, and they suffered without her. The male resentment she described was common enough among New Hollywood directors: Francis Ford Coppola complained that his wife Ellie was "like a regular person" who never made him feel confident. But in a conversation with Biskind, Coppola justified his flagrant affair with his babysitter-turned-assistant Melissa Mathison by saying that she "was like a girl who [had] a crush on her professor. Her confidence in me made me feel confident." His wife Ellie Coppola was "regular"; she didn't feed his outsized, auteur ego, unlike the young, impressionable Mathison who appeared to see Coppola as he wished to be seen.

George Lucas, Coppola's protégé, seems to have fully bought into auteur theory. As a young filmmaker, he had dreamed of creating an experimental film studio, one that would capture the independent spirit he felt as a film student at UCLA. Like several other New Hollywood directors, Lucas fancied himself a New Wave renegade, and was an admirer of Jean-Luc Godard. According to Marcia, George said that *Star Wars* was going to be his "last establishment-type" film—it was his cash cow, a stepping stone to autonomy. Instead, he ended up expanding the universe and built the multi-million-dollar facility Skywalker Ranch. Lucas initially claimed the ranch was for his wife, but the massive undertaking forced Marcia to put her editing career on hold, so that she could act as its interior decorator. *Return of the Jedi* would be the last

film that Marcia ever cut. While it's not entirely clear why—Marcia reportedly received several offers to edit—Kaminski claims that she was burnt out from supporting George's empire and his workaholic, obsessive tendencies. Her husband's condescension over the years couldn't have helped much either.

ONE COULD ARGUE THAT MARCIA LUCAS and Polly Platt were fortunate to even *have* careers that we could uncover. Countless women were (and still are) driven away from the industry. If it hasn't been an issue of parity, discrimination, or sexual harassment, it's been the industry's inhumane, anti-family working hours. They were better off than most, right? Not quite. Their careers were unequivocally stunted by their husbands and a sexist industry that has persisted despite feminist advances.

Bogdanovich and Lucas met their wives while working on productions in lateral positions: Polly was a costume designer on a play Peter was directing, while Marcia and George met as assistant editors on a documentary film. They got married while they were all still young and in pursuit of their dreams. "Talent" doesn't account for Bogdanovich or Lucas' career trajectories or Polly and Marcia's erasure, as their peers held that the directors' wives were just as talented—if not more so—than their husbands. Harrison Ford famously complained to George of his writing: "you can type this shit, but you sure can't say it." According to Biskind, George wasn't a terribly articulate director either, with his only instructions being, "OK same thing, only better" and "Faster, more intense."

Polly Platt never got to direct a film, though she always wanted to. As Longworth details, she had a shot at directing the 1987 divorce film *War of the Roses*, but it was ultimately given to Danny DeVito after clashes with the film's writer, Michael J. Leeson. As male writers are oft to do with divorce films, Leeson made the husband sympathetic and the wife a bitch (hi, *Marriage Story* and *Kramer v. Kramer*). Platt argued that the husband and wife should be equally awful. Leeson's response? "I don't give a fuck what you think."

After fighting tooth and nail to be the first woman inducted into the Art Directors Guild (the organization's president once referred to her as "Polly Platt, a wife of, Art Director"), Platt gave up her fight to direct a film. She wrote in her unpublished memoir, as shared by Longworth: "One of the reasons... I never became a director was because I never found someone like me who was so wholeheartedly for the director and watching their backs." This lack of institutional support was and remains common. The industry reluctantly accepted wives but there was a limit: Polly Platt—and Marcia Lucas—would never be handed the type of opportunities that would be readily available to their husbands. They would never be considered auteurs: Platt because she would never direct a film and Lucas because auteur theory doesn't make room for anyone besides the director.



MARCIA LUCAS WITH GEORGE LUCAS

The erasure of accomplished women like Lucas and Platt keeps the “celluloid ceiling” frustratingly fixed. What’s worse is that generations of women have been deprived of learning their predecessors’ stories, their pitfalls, and the ways in which they persevered. That’s lost time that pushes back benchmarks, leaving us to celebrate meager and incremental progress.

This isn’t a 20th century problem that went the way of mustard-tinted glasses and sideburns either. You’ve heard of Peter Jackson and Christopher Nolan, but you may not have heard of their wives/creative partners, Fran Walsh and Emma Thomas. Unlike their predecessors, you won’t find (*uncredited*) next to any of their titles on IMDb, but their contributions to franchises like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Dark Knight* aren’t well known. While Walsh is an intensely private person who understandably shies away from the media circus around *LOTR*, her absence from the discourse adds to the illusion of her husband’s singular genius. Like Platt, Walsh actually pitched the project that put her husband on the map and like Bogdanovich, Jackson didn’t initially want to make it. According to a 2012 *New York Times* piece, it was Walsh who wanted to make *Heavenly Creatures*, the 1994 film that introduced actors Kate Winslet and Melanie Lynskey, the latter of whom said that the couple “felt like co-directors” on the film. Walsh and Jackson’s manager took it a step further saying that they, alongside longtime collaborator

Philippa Boyens, “are all so involved together in every layer and detail of their productions that sometimes it’s hard to distinguish whose voice you’re hearing in a particular scene or moment. They are perfectly blended.”

In light of all this erasure and lost potential, the natural—and liberal—argument might be that we simply need more female auteurs, more women who get to take all the credit from what is nearly always a collaborative effort. Let’s just have more girlbosses in the director’s chair! My response to this is both no, and absolutely not.

CRITIQUE OF AUTEUR THEORY IS NOTHING NEW. Prescient film critics like André Bazin (who founded the theory!) and Pauline Kael identified its flaws as early as the 1950s, with Bazin warning that its followers could become an “aesthetic personality cult.” Kael also worried that a theory that prioritized personal style would diminish the work, saying in her juicy 1963 takedown *Circles and Squares*: “Often the works in which we are most aware of the director’s personality are his worst films—when he falls back on the devices that he has already done to death.” (Someone please check on Martin Scorsese.)

The rise of #TimesUp and #MeToo has also made us question the validity of the difficult male genius who feels entitled to take liberties with the women around him. But contemporary critiques usu-

Sick of the World? Why not go...



Back To The Sea

ally stop short of tossing the theory out, which Kael argued for 58 years ago. Instead, women are indeed encouraged to seize the auteur crown for themselves. Writers like Shelley Farmer fairly ask, “Why Aren’t More Female and POC Directors Considered Auteurs?” The case is always made that auteur theory is racist and sexist (it is), and that more female directors need to be recognized (they do). We could certainly amass an international list of brilliant women that qualify as auteurs. But my question is: Why would we want to?

We can’t retro-fit auteur theory to be feminist; it’s inherently debasing and corrupting. Toxic exceptionalism and ego aren’t man-made glitches of the theory: They’re features. If women assume the ideology of the auteur, treating the collaborative work of filmmaking as a personal fiefdom, then they’re likely to run into the same issues as the men. Girlboss feminism argues that women simply need access to the same opportunities as men, at which point women’s “natural” compassion and collaborative instincts will kick in. But consider the example of Miki Agrawal, the notorious former THINX SHE-co. Agrawal was lauded as a shero (sorry, last one) for co-founding a company that revolutionized feminine hygiene products and destigmatized menstruation. She also happened to shame female employees for asking for raises (the only employees who successfully negotiated raises were men), sexually harassed several members of her staff, and created the role of “Culture Queen” in lieu of an HR department. YAS.

So no, we don’t need to replace the evil despot with another. We need to melt the crown. But in order to do so, we need to dismantle other barriers and falsehoods that seem foundational to the entertainment industry.

Hollywood is still, despite the supposed work of the great male auteurs, dominated by wealthy studios, producers, and legacy holdouts. The Academy itself was originally created by MGM executive Louis B. Mayer to fend off collective labor. According to Dan Duray, writing in *VICE* on the origins of the Oscar, Mayer realized that if he doled out enough medals, filmmakers would “kill themselves to produce what [he] wanted.” Mayer might not have stopped the unions (depending on your perspective), but he succeeded in curating films to his liking—and to the liking of the Academy’s mostly male, white membership. The Oscars have always skewed white and male: only this year did Chloé Zhao and Emerald Fennell become the first two women simultaneously nominated for best directing. Zhao also made history as the first Asian American woman to win an Oscar in that category. It’s historic, but that’s mostly because the Academy *made* it historic by routinely omitting women and people of color in the past.

In the meantime, Eliza Hittman’s film, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, was snubbed entirely. The sensitive, pro-choice film premiered at Sundance and dominated the Independent Spirit Awards, but was notably missing from this year’s nominations. The reason was a bit of a mystery until Hittman shared an unhinged email she received from 80-year-old Oscar voter Kieth Merrill. He wrote:

I received the screener but as a Christian, the father of 8 children

and 39 grandchildren AND pro-life advocate, I have ZERO interest in watching a woman cross state lines so someone can murder her unborn child. 75,000,000 of us recognize abortion for the atrocity it is. There is nothing heroic about a mother working so hard to kill her child. Think about it!

As of 2016, the median age of Oscar voters was 62, with only 14 percent under the age of 50. Only seven women have been nominated for Best Director in the Academy’s 92-year history. The first woman to win was Kathryn Bigelow in 2010 for *The Hurt Locker*. You know, the vaguely pro-Iraq War film, where Jeremy Renner plays a hot headed but steady-handed bomb technician who’s addicted to war? Where he returns home just to tell his infant son that his true love is the military-industrial complex? I’m sure Merrill and his 39 grandchildren loved *The Hurt Locker*. (Bigelow followed the film up with 2012’s controversial *Zero Dark Thirty*, which blatantly rationalized the use of torture by the Bush administration. Even John McCain put out a statement saying it made him sick and co-authored a letter to Sony Pictures with Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Carl Levin objecting that “we believe that you have an obligation to state that the role of torture in the hunt for Usama Bin Laden is not based on the facts, but rather part of the film’s fictional narrative.”)

And while Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland* is certainly well-directed and visually striking, it’s been criticized for its sunny portrayal of the gig economy. The first thing you see at Frances McDormand’s seasonal Amazon job? A cheery safety lesson followed by a cozy lunch with colleagues—a far cry from the notorious hazards and rushed 15-minute lunches associated with the e-commerce giant. In *Variety*, Wilfred Chan notes that Zhao wanted to “avoid politics” with her film. This apparently meant omitting that Linda May—a real-life, elderly Amazon worker who appears in the film—was injured on the job. Instead there’s McDormand, who in her own words, loves to work and says of the union-busting company: “It’s great money.”

Interesting, isn’t it, what stories the Academy praises versus what it shames? And isn’t it worth noting what stories are allowed to shape the public imagination and our sense of what is virtuous, what is criminal, and what is possible?

INSTITUTIONS LIKE THE ACADEMY AREN’T GOING TO liberate female filmmakers. They’re still squeamish about a woman’s right to choose what to do with her body *on film*. The Academy will continue to eke out Oscars for women and people of color, slowly, as they’ve done since their inception. Awareness of the problem only goes so far. Overall, women only made up 21 percent of creative roles working on the 100 highest-domestic grossing films in 2020. Of the top 200 films from 2018-2019, people of color only made up 14 percent of directors. The feigned shock and awe when these statistics are released each year is tiring, considering that the numbers haven’t improved much—and in some years have slid—over the last 22 years. Issues of equity are always met with the same, tired refrain: Change takes *time*. There seems to be an unwavering faith that we’re on a linear path towards a more progressive and

equitable future. But this couldn't be further from the truth for female filmmakers—we've actually already *had* a golden age.

Women dominated the early days of film, and not just when it came to editing. From directors to visual effects artists, women occupied a wide variety of roles. It's worth noting that this period is better documented for white female filmmakers than it is for Black female filmmakers. With the exception of Oscar Micheaux, Black filmmakers are historically overlooked and, as Columbia University's Women Film Pioneers Project (WFPP) notes, most research has only uncovered the Black men involved in the silent era. But according to Jane Gaines, the organizer of WFPP, women at large "were more powerful in cinema than any other American business—to the point that more women- than men-owned independent production companies in 1923." Alice Guy-Blaché, the first documented female filmmaker, started her career as early as 1896. To say she was prolific would be an understatement, as some historians believe she directed, wrote, and produced over a thousand films. Many of them were shorts, but several were at least a half hour long.

This all changed when filmmaking became a lucrative business and Wall Street started investing. What was once hundreds of small, experimental studios became a handful of monoliths helmed by white male executives. As a result, women were systematically purged from the jobs they practically created. Universal didn't hire a single female director for nearly sixty years, from the mid-1920s to 1982. Of Blaché's thousand-plus films, only 150 survive.

This loss is harder to swallow when you recognize it was never about time, but about theft.

SO AT THIS POINT, I'VE TORN EVERYTHING apart. I've undone the myth of progress. I've desecrated auteur theory. I've risked being labeled anti-feminist for questioning Kathryn Bigelow and Chloé Zhao's Oscars. How are women supposed to *achieve*? How do we make the industry more equitable? It would be great if we could harness some of the energy of #Oscars-SoWhite and just abolish the Academy. But seeing as that's not going to happen any time soon—and that it's hardly the most oppressive part of the system—we have other work to do.

We need to create far more mentorships and clear-cut paths to above-the-line (i.e., creative) positions. I've worked as a post-production administrator in scripted television for the last six years. As an editorial worker facilitating conversations between production and post, I've worked with many directors. When I've asked for advice on how to break in, they've said things like, "it's not very clear-cut" or "shoot videos for a friend's startup." I'm a scholarship kid from Brooklyn who graduated from RISD with 40k in student loan debt—I don't have friends with startups. Not to mention the fact that a decent cinema camera can cost upwards of \$8,000—which isn't easy to meet when you're an underpaid, non-union worker.

Film festivals—once considered independent havens for little-known filmmakers—are also cost-prohibitive. Submissions run anywhere between \$25-\$75, and you never apply to just one. It's not likely that they're going to showcase a film shot on a shoestring budget either. We live in an era when enormous companies like Apple, Netflix, and A24 compete to shell out outrageous amounts of money to buy the rights of "indie" films made by already established directors. Not surprisingly, festivals also have a diversity problem. The Time's Up Foundation analyzed the top five global festivals—Berlin, Cannes, Sundance, Toronto, Venice—and found that over the last three years, only 25 percent of the directors in competition were women, and of those only eight percent were women of color. I can only imagine what the numbers would look like if they analyzed the economic background of their filmmakers, too.

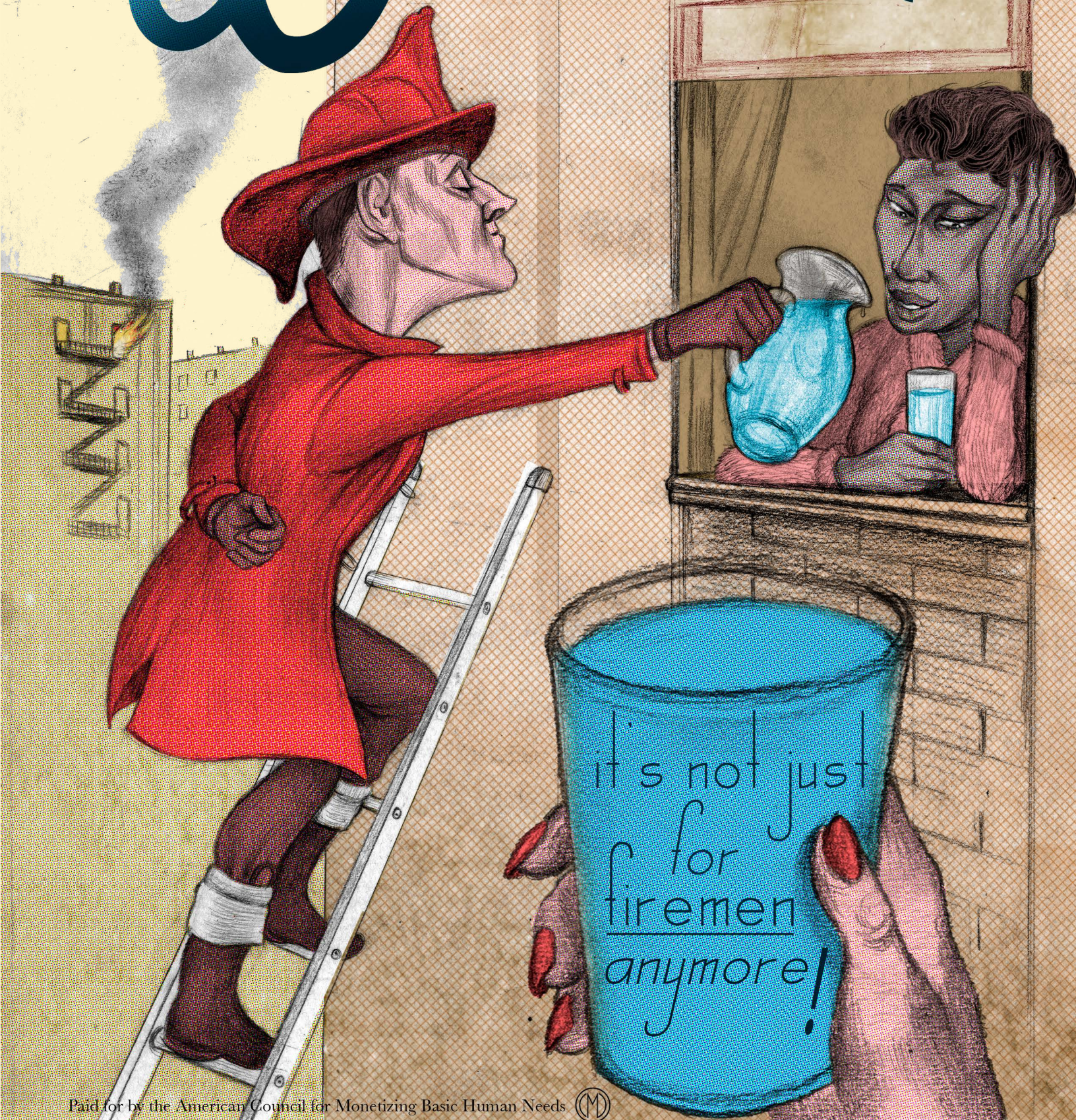
We also need to reframe the way that filmmaking is taught. It never occurred to me to question the notion of an auteur in college: The concept was presented more as more of a fact than a theory. I wish Noah Hutton's handbook was around when I was a student. After working on several exploitative sets, Hutton created a freely available filmmaking handbook that centers things like consensus-based decision-making, humility, and humor, which he employed on his latest film, *Lapsis*. The most refreshing principle? That if you're tired, heartbroken or sick on set, you go home. According to Hutton, there was "no air given to the myth of the macho, lone-genius filmmaker with everyone else working at their whim."

No one is suggesting that we get rid of the director and have the entire crew deliberate on how to frame a shot. Nor are we saying that we can't acknowledge the specific contributions of individual directors. We just need to acknowledge that a film is a product of collective labor and as such, should be an equitable and inclusive experience for all.

Personally, I love the work of director Agnès Varda. While I may have only seen one of her films at RISD—her empowered nudes weren't seductive enough for my professor—she directed a whopping 46 films until her death at the age of 90 in 2019. Until Criterion's subsequent box set, Varda was the forgotten godmother of the Left Bank, a decidedly less devout offshoot of the French New Wave. From her 1968 documentary on the Black Panthers to her ultra-modern magnum opus—*One Sings the Other Doesn't*—her work is radically feminist and endlessly curious. Her voice is distinctive, yet you never get the impression that she's overly concerned with style. After learning about Marcia Lucas and Polly Platt, it's worth noting that Varda was also married to renowned filmmaker Jacques Demy. The introductory essay to Varda's Criterion set describes their marriage as "an unusual heterosexual union for the time." Demy was bisexual, but that wasn't what was markedly unusual about their partnership: It was that it was built on mutual support and respect for each others' work.

If only the women on the other side of the Atlantic were so lucky. ♣

Water!





The Perpetual Pitch

by Sumona Gupta

WITH A \$5,000 LOAN AND SOME GUMPTION, young entrepreneur Glen W. Turner launched a cosmetics company, Koskot Interplanetary, Inc., in 1967. Soon it was valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. Turner, the son of a dirt-poor South Carolinian sharecropper, would then go on to create 26 more companies, including one offering motivational courses known as “Dare to Be Great.”

Both Koskot and Dare to Be Great were direct sales companies with a multi-level marketing (MLM) structure. Turner’s salesforce would not only hawk his cosmetics (featuring its hallmark special ingredient, mink oil), or his motivational “Adventure Meetings.” They’d also pitch to customers a very exclusive business opportunity: the chance to become salespeople themselves, a once-in-a-lifetime offer they couldn’t refuse. “There’s not a man or woman with normal intelligence that I can’t make a millionaire if they do everything I tell them to do for five years,” Turner guaranteed. His image served as a selling point to join his businesses—flush with cash, he bought a fleet of private jets, cars, and a McMansion-style fairytale castle in Winter Park, Florida.

At “frenzied” Adventure Meetings, which cost hundreds of dollars to attend, speakers emulated Turner, wearing expensive clothing and driving flashy cars, telling fanatical “stories of great riches achieved through [Turner’s] operations” to wild cheers and applause. Attendees would be heavily pressured into joining the company as salespeople. Those who claimed not to have enough money for the joining fee might be told how to lie to multiple banks to get the necessary loans. If that didn’t work, they could be taken on a private “go tour” of one of Turner’s isolated distribution centers, singled out, and pressured into signing a contract. This was all according to a Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision from 1973, *Securities & Exchange Commission v. Glenn W. Turner Enterprises Inc.*, in which Turner was found guilty of operating an illegal pyramid scheme.

“Few, if any, purchasers of these Adventures have achieved any success remotely approaching that described by defendants’ agents, to their financial and emotional distress,” the court’s opinion read. “...Investors get a return only so long as increasing numbers of others like them invest their own money. Consequently, it is certain that the source of funds must eventually dry up leaving a large proportion of the investors stranded with their losses.”

It was ordered that Turner’s companies should be restructured so as to not rely on recruitment of others over sales. Turner was later found to have violated this order. He was tried multiple times for fraud years later. “It is hard for me to believe...that our program was

a crime,” he said at a sentencing hearing in 1987, “...our intent was to help people believe in themselves.”

If you’re at all familiar with today’s MLMs, much of this will seem familiar to you. The pitches to “start your own business,” the lure of success, the frenetic energy of promotional events, the inherently flawed structure are all similar, even decades later. But MLMs have gotten a bit more sophisticated since Koskot’s demise. Looking to their development and history, a lot can be learned about the social and economic frameworks that not only enabled but encouraged their parasitic growth.

THE DIRECT SALES INDUSTRY, OF WHICH MLMs are a part, has been around for a while. In the United States, it began with Yankee Peddlers, a staple of rural life from the colonial period to the mid-1800s. At the time, when the country was mostly made up of rural communities, the peddlers sold goods and brought information that would otherwise have been hard to come by. But they didn’t have the best reputations. Known as pushy and bawdy, the travelling salesmen were also challenged by the widespread adoption of railways and retail stores.

In the early 1900s, though, some manufacturers became unhappy with this development. In large stores, where consumers had a larger variety of products to choose from, they felt that their products weren’t getting enough attention. Some began hiring door-to-door salesmen again so they could more effectively push their products and theirs alone.

Scientific management and sales techniques were in their infancy at the time, encouraging the use of memorized scripts and catchy buzzwords. This was particularly successful in selling novel household appliances like vacuums and radios, appealing to budding middle-class consumerism. But for everyday products, it didn’t cut it.

Enter David McConnell, founder of the California Perfume Company. As a former peddler himself, he knew the negative reputation they had. But he also knew the upsides to direct sales. In rural, tight-knit communities especially, a peddler could make the personal appeals and connections a shopkeeper couldn’t. So McConnell took to a new strategy. He would hire more women, who were a minority in the trade, to help peddlers’ image problem. And he would scout and train locals instead of hiring outside professional salesmen. These locals would be more adept to the wants of their specific communities and could tap into their social networks for sales.

It worked. Personal connections and tailored pitches brought great success to the direct sellers that took advantage of them. Famed

businesswoman Madame CJ Walker, the first female self-made millionaire in the United States, was one; she catered to the underserved Black beauty market, creating specialized hair and cosmetic products. Her company was one of the first to adopt a more MLM-styled direct sales model, as her salespeople were given big bonuses to recruit other sellers. These weren't just monetary incentives, either—they could be diamonds, or even low-cost mortgages.

In these early days of direct sales, companies usually took on the responsibility and costs of training salespeople themselves. By the end of the 1920s, direct sales were beginning to eclipse retail sales of certain products, and demand was relatively high, so salespeople could make a tidy profit through either commissions or resale.

Then came the Great Depression. But this didn't stop the rise of direct sales. In fact, with more people losing work or needing supplemental income, direct selling was an appealing job prospect. This was particularly advantageous for companies that used the model in which salespeople bought products for resale. They were insulated from fluctuations in consumer demand, as new salespeople would dependably buy products even if they couldn't sell them to consumers.

Sweeping New Deal reforms presented an issue for the direct sales industry, though. The Fair Labor Standards and Social Security Acts enforced a standard minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and payroll tax requirements. This would have created huge expenses for direct selling companies with thousands of employees.

But at a 1935 industry conference, one executive made a tentative suggestion: "How about [labelling the] salesperson as an independent contractor...If we changed our form of application and specified that this man buys the merchandise from us for resale?"

This idea caught on quickly, not only in direct sales, but across many industries. Defining workers as independent contractors to skirt employment regulations was a win-win for direct selling organizations. Not only could they cut labor costs, but they could also reduce fixed costs like transportation, training, and business expenses. (Today, much of the gig economy rests on this independent contractor loophole. Even if in most respects workers could be considered full employees, misclassification is used to cut labor expenses.)

IN 1939, THE CALIFORNIA PERFUME COMPANY rebranded, taking the now-household name Avon. It's currently the second-most profitable MLM in the world. The company boasts that their founder, McConnell, was something of a proto-feminist trailblazer, offering women the opportunity to be their own bosses in an era not far removed from coverture laws. It's more likely, though, that he was savvy to the fact that women could more effectively penetrate home markets. The MLMs that sprung up after Avon courted women for this reason too. But as direct sales companies began to prioritize recruitment over product sales, they could also use women's socio-economic status to draw them into the pyramidal "downline" trap.

Mary Kay Cosmetics and Tupperware pioneered the "party plan" sales strategy in the 1950s, ushering in the MLM era of direct selling. Like Avon before them, they relied on saleswomen, though now they were presented the opportunity to work from home instead of going door-to-door. They could take advantage of their pre-existing social

networks to make a little extra on the side. The companies presented themselves as both empowering for women and a socially approved means for them to keep their traditional homebound duties.

The coming encroachment of the professional sphere into the personal was an extension of emerging business management strategies of the era. These promoted continuous evaluations and rankings against coworkers and total devotion to one's work, even off the clock, as a sign of one's worth. They also countered the more collectivist workplace sensibilities of the past.

For people in direct sales, the erosion of trust that came with monetizing personal relationships would follow suit.

In the decades since the party plan fell out of fashion, women still make up the majority of the direct sales industry. Sociologist Nicole Biggart, interviewing MLM salespeople in 1989, was given many reasons for this by her female interviewees. Women take on the majority of household labor and childcare responsibilities in addition to their paid jobs, and they liked the idea of having more flexibility, so as to balance out their work and family lives. They liked the idea of the instant "family" of salespeople they could gain, which were usually more welcoming than coworkers in a typical job. Joining an MLM also requires no qualifications, and there are few social barriers in the way of joining—some respondents noted they felt the playing field was more level than in traditional jobs, as everyone in the company was judged for the same skillset. Their sales were directly tied to promotions, unlike traditional job positions, where the process for receiving pay increases or climbing the ladder are more opaque. And they felt more self confidence, as they felt more respected and in control of their decisions than at low-paying and demanding service sector jobs.

An MLM can seem a very appealing alternative to a precarious working environment. This is doubly true for women who feel unable to take on demanding careers, either because of cultural norms (see the massive MLM involvement of religious conservatives), obligations at home, or inability to find other kinds of work.

FOUNDED IN 1959, AMWAY WOULD FURTHER capitalize on the growing disillusionment with American work culture. Amway, short for "American Way", is the largest MLM in the world today. It introduced one of the direct sales industry's most influential lines of messaging: the allure of becoming an entrepreneur. Taking the flavor of Reagan-era bootstraps ideals, Amway's advertisements focused as much on pitching the idea of becoming a businessperson as on their home products and motivational tapes. "Amway can show you how to stop whining and start living," one advertisement read.

This condescension is a constant in MLMs. It helps keep hold of salespeople, even when they aren't successful. There are hundreds of motivational guide books for MLM work, often preaching some variation of that Amway advertisement: there's a "proven" system that's worked for others, so it's your responsibility to find success within it. All it takes is grit, perseverance, and the right attitude.

MLM coach Brian Carruthers, for example, offers some vague advice to "focus on wealth" (because otherwise you're "repelling it away from you") and a daily affirmation to help with that. "I am building

my own financial empire using the only vehicle that enables me to do so...I am a champion, a warrior for freedom, an expert recruiter, a winning coach, a caring teammate, and a fearless leader. I am because I say I am, and today I will find the next me!" This is the same individualist ethos and meaningless phraseology that can be found in less openly ridiculous MLM messaging: whatever happens, it's up to you and you alone to reach success with an MLM. If you don't, it's a personal failing, not the company's.

It was Amway that took MLM branding to the level of ideology, claiming not only to provide financial security, but also empowerment in a time of vulnerability and flux. It managed to avoid the fate of Koskot—while it was slapped on the wrist in 1979 for price fixing, it wasn't branded a pyramid scheme. This was because the company made sure to impose certain rules on its distributors: they had to sell 70 percent of their monthly purchases at wholesale or retail, which would supposedly prevent them over-purchasing from Amway; they also had to make sales to at least 10 customers per month, which was intended to prevent distributors from solely focusing on recruitment and creating pyramidal "downlines." Later MLMs would adopt rules like these to ensure they wouldn't be taken down by the Federal Trade Commission. Many, though, have loopholes that enable internal consumption to be considered a portion of sales, including Amway.

The concepts of freedom and independence became central to MLM recruiting tactics. Amway would contrast the image of an "organization man," dull and meek, to the limitless potential and vitality of an Amway distributor. Freedom from alienation—a lack of fulfillment and connection to one's work—was also a large selling point. Amway's motivational tapes emphasized an overall change of mentality as well as a shift to independent sales, using buzzwords like "dream building," "positive programming," "sensebreaking," and "sensegiving." Much like the pop-psych concept of "emotional intelligence," they required suppression of frustrations through constant self-reflection, or rather, self-critique. They prevent acknowledging external sources of emotional fatigue, too.

Shifting criticism inwards helps MLMers ignore the glaring contradictions of multi-level marketing. What's advertised as a flexible "side hustle" really requires the surrendering of some personal freedoms and hours of extra time. You must either take part in an exploitative downline, trying to sell enough inventory to turn a profit, or attempt to recruit others and form your own (the main way to reach financial success through an MLM). By definition, MLMs have a rigid hierarchy of "levels," with those who recruited you often taking a cut of your profits from sales.

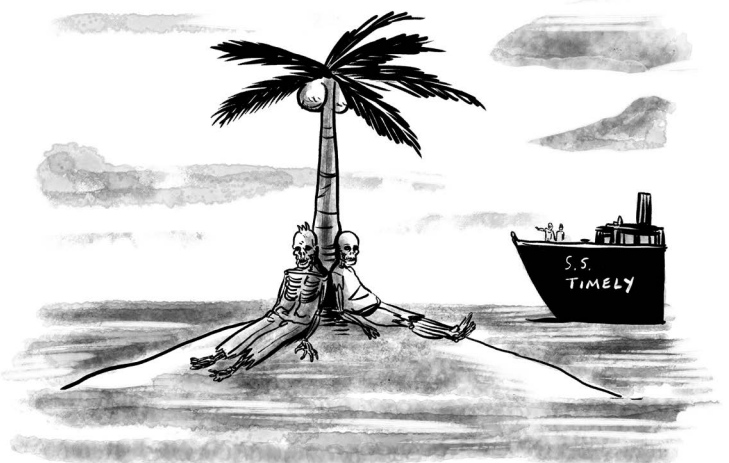
In the 1970s, financial stability generally had a larger appeal than the entrepreneurial image. The loss of many stable manufacturing sector jobs and economic downturn made people flock to Amway, in the hopes that they could secure a steady income. Amway saw this and adjusted their messaging accordingly: "In these uncertain times, many jobs are threatened by uncontrollable events...[join Amway] now and you'll look to the future confidently through job security you build for yourself," an advertisement printed in the 1970s said.

OF COURSE, SOME MLMs HAVE FACED repercussions over the years for not living up to their big promises. Recently, in 2013, the FTC declared that Global Information Network, Ltd. was an illegal pyramid scheme using a test developed in the 1973 *Koskot* case. In 2019, they also branded Neora and Advocate pyramid schemes, banning the latter from multi-level marketing. But the most publicized recent case was in 2016 against the nutritional supplement MLM Herbalife.

Herbalife is no stranger to scandal. Founded in the 1980s, it carved out a niche in "natural" remedies. At the time, growing supplement and nutrition industries could prey on burgeoning fears of processed foods and the need to look for treatment outside of typical health-care, as the 1980s were the beginning of the dramatic upswing in American medical prices. Like many MLMs, Herbalife used gimmicky, possibly healthful but likely useless "miracle" ingredients to justify products' high prices relative to retail (think mink oil). But theirs were a little more extreme. Some of their diet products contained dangerous amounts of laxatives, caffeine, and the deadly, now-outlawed ephedra. They made claims that their herbal supplements could treat or cure cancer and diabetes. In a shouting match during his chaotic 1985 Senate hearing, Herbalife founder Mark Hughes even fessed up to the fact that 40 percent of his consumers suffered adverse effects from their products. But FDA officials at the time said it required additional congressional authority to regulate diet products like Herbalife's.

Luckily for Herbalife, the FDA wasn't granted this congressional authority. They had a strong ally in Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah. The state was and is a hotbed of MLM activity, so naturally, he intervened to assist them. An investigation into Herbalife's possible money laundering activities was preemptively shut down by Hatch, according to a former FDA agent. Hatch would also introduce a 1994 bill that all but eliminated FDA regulation of dietary supplements, Herbalife's staple product.

The company has maintained quite a few high-profile supporters and public-private revolvers, including former FDA officials. This undoubtedly helped them navigate the bombshell 2016 FDA investigation, which yielded a pile of evidence suggesting compensation was



based primarily on recruiting over sales and that its “nutrition clubs,” aimed mainly at Latino immigrant communities, were intentional financial traps which led to salespeople losing thousands, among other allegations.

But despite this—as well as the great discrepancies between the tiny group of top earners and the vast majority of salespeople, and the necessity of recruitment—Herbalife *wasn’t* branded a pyramid scheme. It was instead ordered to pay \$200 million in restitution to 350,000 victims (a drop in the bucket compared to its overall earnings) and was instructed to “restructure” to reward retail sales. No executives were charged, and monitoring of the negotiated restructuring agreement doesn’t appear to be strict. Internal compliance investigations found that some Herbalife affiliates have been reporting the purchases of other affiliates’ recruits as purchases from retail customers, a roundabout way to keep downlines buying up products.

In 2020, Herbalife was charged again, this time for bribing Chinese officials for almost a decade. And again, it got away with a fine. (This arrangement was made through a deferred prosecution agreement, a deal regulators have leaned on heavily since the 2008 financial crisis, which allows for each indicted corporation to enter an individual negotiation with prosecutors. No binding precedent is set, and enforcement of punishments can vary widely.) Recent studies have also documented cases of acute liver failure, likely caused by Herbalife products, in Spain, Israel, several Latin American countries, Switzerland, Iceland, the United States, and India. But even after these rocky few years, Herbalife’s profits and share prices seem to be on the rebound.

MLMs aren’t all as big and powerful as Herbalife and Amway. But they’re all sustained by an ecosystem that’s conducive to their development. Even with a less lax FTC under Biden, the Supreme Court has stepped in to allow companies found of wrongdoing to skirt payment of monetary damages. They severely restricted the FTC’s ability to bring 13(b) actions, which were used to force Herbalife, AdvoCare, and other pyramidal MLMs to pay back their victims. The people who have been cheated and hurt largely go uncompensated.

But it’s not as though there’s no public opposition to MLMs. While Facebook and Instagram are still mainstays for MLM sales and recruiting, Youtube, Reddit, and TikTok are the opposite. Anti-MLM content gets millions of views, likes, and upvotes. The “hunbots” (referencing the “hey hun” mass-copied-and-pasted messages social media recruiters use) and “girlbosses” get pitied and scorned. They’re portrayed either as victims of an MLM’s cult-like grip or mindless proponents of it.

MLM-cult comparisons are quite common, actually, both from fervent anti-MLMs and former MLMs themselves. And for good reason—there are a lot of unsettling similarities between cult control and MLM coercion techniques. NXIVM, now disbanded, was a bonafide cult-MLM hybrid. And try watching an MLM recruitment seminar or abusive team call and thinking it’s not at least a little cult-y. The cult parallels can differentiate MLMs—with their predatory nature and strange internal cultures—from the more respectable business world.

But while an MLM’s charismatic, overbearing leadership, and demands for devotion are comparable to a cult’s, they’re more cult-like in the sense that they seek out vulnerable people and subject them to a draining, rigid, competitive hierarchy. Sellers aren’t nearly as deeply devoted to their leadership or organizations as cult members are to theirs. Some distributors will move from MLM to MLM, more likely drawn to the sales model over the companies themselves. An MLM’s ideological pull seems more similar to a standard business’ “internal branding” techniques than to a cult’s. These are superficial motivational messages and careful rebranding techniques intended to create a devoted workforce, one that will internalize or “live the [brand] vision” of their employers. MLMs are much more extreme in their manipulation and atomization of workers, but that doesn’t mean non-MLM companies are in the clear.

MLMs CLAIMED TO HAVE HAD A BANNER year for recruitment in 2020, though the industry’s public data is primarily self-reported and thus hard to verify. But given the economic turmoil and chaos we’ve been through, it’s believable that more would flock to MLMs. Direct sales industry publications indicate that Gen Z is a particularly fertile recruiting ground. Their technological prowess, “intuitive” understanding of social media and “personal branding,” and (perhaps most importantly) their chronic financial and job insecurities are cited as reasons why. Side hustles are now necessities.

These publications also note that Gen Z is attuned to social justice currents, advising MLMs to play that up in their mission statements and branding, as they had with claims of empowering women. This is an interesting choice, given MLMs’ exploitation of vulnerable groups in the United States and in poorer countries, where they now make most of their revenue. In addition to shoddy products, MLMs have exported their manipulative promises of stability.

You might’ve noticed at this point that I’ve barely mentioned MLM products themselves, besides the most dangerous ones. That’s because they’re really a negligible part of the MLM model. For sellers, sustainable income requires recruitment, embracing and reinforcing self-flagellating individualism, as well as the allure of agency and financial independence. The forces that shaped MLMs, as well as the rest of our working lives, helped create the much-maligned hunbot drones and the superficially empowered girlbosses. This isn’t to say MLMers have no agency and that we shouldn’t criticize these archetypes, but that we should know their approaches have been influenced by certain industry and system-wide ideals.

Amway founder Richard DeVos named his 1994 treatise *Compassionate Capitalism*. It’s a very fitting name, but in a way he didn’t intend. MLMs have always presented themselves as a friendly helping hand, giving you a leg up in a ruthless capitalist system. But of course, that underlying system remains, and even worsens, under an MLM. They’re a reproduction in miniature of some of its worst impulses. And they will continue to pop up, so long as that system lacks the regulatory framework or the political will to constrain them. ✦

CAN "U" SPOT THE INNUENDOS IN THE SEX SEA





MANATEES ARE BETTER THAN US

by Nathan J. Robinson

THE MANATEE IS A VERY SPECIAL CREATURE. It is the only aquatic mammal to subsist solely on plants. Manatees live peaceable lives: They eat no other creature, and no other creature eats them. The human hunting of manatees, never especially popular, is now prohibited, though Florida Men occasionally get caught riding them—and there is, of course, the speedboat problem. The relative lack of violent interaction between manatees and other creatures (besides speedboats) explains why it hasn't hurt them, evolutionarily speaking, to be extremely slow-moving. Having no predators, they do not need to avoid being caught, and not being predators themselves, they have nothing they need to catch. It is a relatively simple matter to obtain the sea grasses and other aquatic vegetation upon which they subsist. (An adult manatee can eat an astonishing 108 lbs of leaves and grass every day.) On land, many herbivores are constantly on the run, and much of their physical and mental energy must be spent eluding those who wish to tear them to pieces and devour them. Not so the manatee. Gently it bobs along, minding its business.

Not only does a manatee do no harm, it *cannot* do harm. The shape of a manatee's snout is such that it can't actually attack with its teeth. The website SwimmingWithTheManatees.com, which promotes "Captain Mike's" manatee tours, reassures readers that manatees move so slowly that "they can't gain enough momentum to cause harm with their bodies [and a] manatee's body is so soft that if the animal crashes into a swimmer, it's like being bumped by a giant pillow." The manatee is a pacifist by design. If irritated, it has no option but to slowly move away. Under conditions of "extreme provocation" it may attempt to splash water or use its tail to beat away an intruder, but manatee authority Captain Mike insists that even this is "very rare." Sciencing.com says that "manatees protect themselves by avoiding trouble," since their lack of any defensive weapons means they are totally incapable of fighting.

Occasionally, manatees do have slightly hostile interactions with other creatures in Florida's coastal waterways. Catfish try to eat algae from the manatees' backs, which can annoy the man-

atees. Manatees can be curious about alligators, and have been known to follow them around, but usually the faster-moving alligator just takes its leave when it grows tired of this. (The manatee, being something like a giant sea potato weighing approximately 1,000 lbs, would be difficult to tussle with. One YouTube video of a manatee-alligator interaction shows a confident manatee approaching an alligator and booping its snout, prompting the alligator to turn around slowly and leave.)

THE TRANQUIL LIVES OF MANATEES ARE WORTH contemplating, because they are such an exception in nature. The wilderness is, for the most part, "red in tooth and claw." Most creatures spend their days savagely hunting and running away from other creatures. The amount of pain and fear and horror in the animal kingdom is disturbing to even begin to think about. If we accept animals as sentient beings, often intelligent and even emotional ones, then a colossal amount of conscious life is suffering horribly all the time. Everything is killing everything else constantly.

Consider the world of *My Octopus Teacher*. This Netflix film, which won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, depicts the one-year relationship between a South African diver—Craig Foster—and a female octopus. Foster discovers the octopus living in a kelp forest off the coast of Cape Town, and decides to visit her each day to see what she gets up to. He develops an interesting bond with the octopus, who appears to like him (she clings to him for seemingly no other reason than that she enjoys being around him), and he is devastated when her life cycle completes and she dies after reproducing. The discovery of a tiny baby octopus at the end of the film, thought to be one of hers, offers an uplifting coda: The life cycle continues.

Foster presents the kelp forest as an enchanting and mysterious world-within-a-world, one whose workings take time and patience to understand. Indeed it is that, and encountering the myriad strange underwater fauna can feel like finding extraterrestrials here on Earth. The conservation of these precious, and fragile, ecosystems is a high priority, because kelp forests have

been disappearing around the planet. Tragically, 95 percent of Northern California's kelp forests have already been destroyed, replaced with vast "urchin barrens"—stretches of sea floor covered with nothing but millions of spiky purple urchins. The kelp forests have collapsed abruptly due to marine heat waves, which helped to spread "sea star wasting disease," an illness which has driven some types of sea stars to the brink of extinction. Sea stars eat urchins, and urchins eat kelp, so when the sea stars die, the urchin population explodes, and the kelp forest is decimated. (Interestingly, introducing more sea otters may help the kelp forests, because sea otters like snacking on urchins.)

BUT EVEN WHEN KELP FORESTS ARE HEALTHY, they are also brutal places. The life of the octopus in *My Octopus Teacher* is anything but tranquil. She is constantly having to avoid being eaten by pyjama sharks, who at one point tear off one of her tentacles. (It slowly grows back.) She herself is a vicious predator, constantly strategizing new ways to trick crabs and lobsters into getting eaten. To the animals she eats, she undoubtedly appears an absolutely terrifying monster, rather than the charming clingy companion she is to Foster.

For a long time, the animal welfare movement was concerned mostly with domesticated animals—the plight of pigs in factory farms, dog fights, etc. But recently, some animal welfare advocates have turned their attention to the question of what ethical obligations humans have in regard to animals in nature. As *Vox*'s Dylan Matthews writes:

[A] small movement of philosophers and zoologists has coalesced around the idea that wild animal suffering is a very serious moral problem, that the pain suffered by a jumping snake plucked from the jungle matters the same as the pain of a chicken in a factory farm, the pain of a cat in an apartment unit, and even the pain of a human being. Once one accepts that pain matters, wild animal suffering advocates argue, what, if anything, can be done about it becomes an urgent concern...

If the suffering of wild animals should be our concern, however, we are faced with the problem that there are an astonishing number of wild animals who suffer. Matthews cites numbers suggesting there are at least 10 trillion fish in the world, as many as 400 billion birds (though bird populations are declining rapidly thanks to us), and perhaps 1 trillion mammals. But those who have become interested in wild animal suffering suggest that even if we cannot somehow bring a diplomatic peace to the natural world, we can and should take into account the welfare of wild animals when we act. If the population of pigeons is getting out of hand, for instance, the conventional approach is to cull a bunch of them through massacre. Introducing pigeon birth control to their food supply might be more humane. (On the other hand, it's eugenics, which is... also icky.)

There is a widespread belief that humans should not "tamper with" nature, because doing so will upset delicate ecosystems and is not our place. Foster shares this belief, and in *My Octopus Teacher* he shows anguish when he decides to help his octopus in the recovery process for her tentacle wound by bringing her a clam to eat. He rationalizes this intervention by insisting it is very small and she didn't seem to enjoy the clam. But he knows that there's no logical reason why the octopus' life matters more than that of the clam, or of the pyjama sharks that want to eat her. He just loves her, and love makes us do things that make no sense.

Still, the idea of non-intervention in the natural world is increasingly untenable, given that we inhabit the "Anthropocene," the era where the entire direction of life on the planet is shaped by human choices. Human choices will, whether we like it or not, determine what happens to wild animal populations, and so we have to have debates over what our obligations are. Is it *bad* when urchins take over the sea floor? Is a kelp forest an objectively better place than a field of urchins, merely because the lives in the forest are more complex and diverse?

Personally, I have never been especially fond of nature, in part because it seems deadly rather than beautiful. It's full of creatures that want to kill each other, and kill me. No, give me the reading room of a quiet public library instead. It may be dead, but it is not deadly. And yet, despite not being someone who enjoys romps through the forest—though I like a turn in a quiet garden—I do find *life itself* beautiful. The octopus is clearly majestic, even though it is a predator, in the same way that the human body and mind are miraculous things despite the fact that we commit genocide against one another and exterminate the natural world.

Does this mean that zoos, where animals live confined but less fear-ridden lives, are actually less terrible than nature? No, for the same reason that prison remains a punishment even if life outside is harsh. Freedom is something animals deserve just as we do. But it does mean that we ought to think seriously about how we can make the natural world a more hospitable place for the creatures that inhabit it. Protecting them from each other might upset the balance of life, but protecting them from diseases and needless untimely deaths might be morally important.

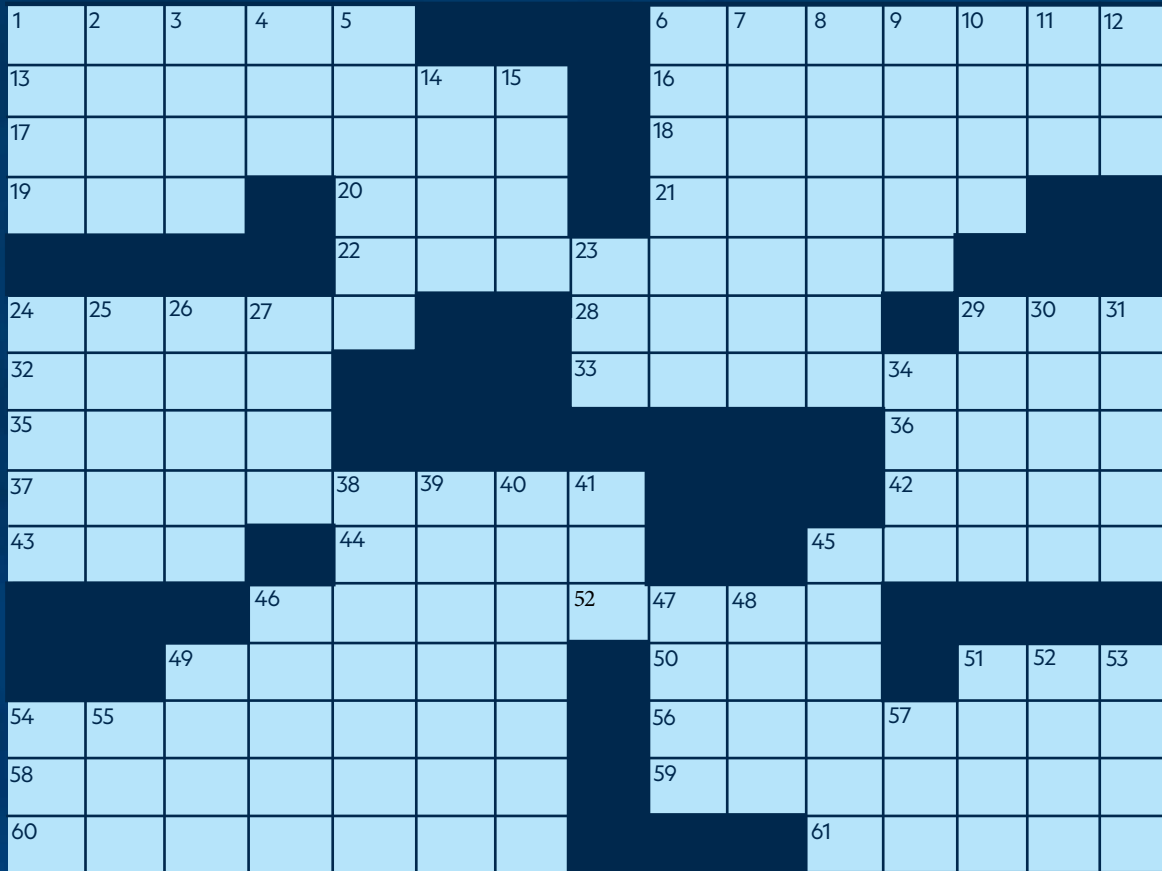
The first obligation, of course, is to do less harm ourselves. Thanks to humans, manatees are constantly under threat. The good news is that their population levels are up since the early 1990s—we have gone from having about 2,000 manatees in Florida to about 6,000. The bad news is that 2021 has, so far, been a horrible year for manatees. They are starving to death en masse due to the disappearance of the sea grass on which they depend. Boat strikes are the human threat discussed most often, but a bigger one is our ongoing transformation of the environment to suit our purposes, without consideration for the catastrophic effects to other species.

We really do suck sometimes: In the 1740s, humans hunted to extinction the "Steller's sea cow," a kind of colossal mega-mana-



CROSSWORD

Get excited for: the **climate change** crossword!!! It's **FUN** and **HIGHLY CHEERFUL!!!!!!**



ACROSS

1. That ... again (see previous issue) or what you feel you are staring into
6. That feeling you get when you stare into 1-Across
13. Role you will play on your techno-liege's property in 2058
16. In three words, what a Gen-Zer says when looking ahead to their future
17. Swill made by a soda corporation that will be a staple food in the 2050s
18. A feature of soon-to-be-nonexistent lagoon city, all mixed up
19. [The anxious sound of air hissing between your teeth]
20. Response to the question "but aren't you just being a buzzkill?"
21. Who's fucked?
22. The eventual fate of your favorite city
24. A cute nickname for the species that has wrecked this planet

28. Response to the question "but aren't you just being a buzzkill?", in German
29. With 34-Down, a common name for delightful, gigantic, water-dwelling vegetarians
32. As oblivious to the surge of history as ... Nicholas II
33. Humans have less than 10 years to meaningfully address climate change, or 40 ...
35. "If I have to read about any more bullshit 'corporate sustainability'"
36. Poles you should probably buy if you live in a coastal city
37. With 49-Across, 59-Across, and 26-Down, a notorious spot in the ocean as rebranded by Chrysler®?
42. With a stutter, a popular video game system that now makes up a surprising amount of the clutter found in 37-Across et al
43. "It's so exhausting trying to get boomers to understand how fucked we are, I mean all I can do is just ..."
44. Vowels out, and with "it", how the last remaining polar bear will likely feel about its captivity
45. "Bad corporate actors can be prevented from destroying all life on Earth as long as we levy the right ...", all mixed up
46. The king of the sea who will soon rise to destroy us as we deserve
49. See 37-Across
50. "Sometimes I feel like I am just an ... in a colony about to get hit by a kid with a magnifying glass"
51. If everything you care about it isn't destroyed by flood, you just have to worry about it being too ...
54. What you do when you think about 29-Across + 34-Down
56. "The CIA has promised to go carbon-... by 2042"
58. California city, part of the L.A. urban sprawl and projected to be underwater by the end of the century
59. See 37-Across
60. The coming decades are ... by many
61. Country in Africa already experiencing major droughts while Elon Musk bullshits about going to Mars

DOWN

1. Democrats legit think they can solve climate change by paying rich tech guys to develop ... or something
2. Say goodbye to these pollinators
3. Your company hired an "environmental responsibility" officer but she just ... on about how employees should use less plastic
4. [The anxious sound of air hissing between your teeth, again]
5. Once that average temp reaches 2°C above pre-industrial levels, all your favorite vacation spots will become unbearable ...
6. Oh, and all the good cities will be ... (for a hint, see 22-Across)
7. Soon enough, only people with ... memory will be able to properly visualize what the world used to look like
8. When you go on long rants about this topic, people call you "..."
9. Weather protectants you should probably invest in, all mixed up
10. On a scale of 1-10, how hopeful do you feel about the future?
11. "... we just need to use efficient lightbulbs"
12. An EPA rule that has as much teeth as industry will allow it, abbr.
14. How you take your whiskey these days
15. Slangy goodbye you toss off in texts as you run from gig to gig
23. "Ok but like I totally read this article about how ... microbes can eat carbon from the atmosphere so we're fine, right? Right?"
24. The ... outlined in this legal agreement are the reason that local chemical company [redacted] isn't going to face any consequences
25. Tea-producing region of India already experiencing major flooding as Jeff Bezos tries to shoot his divorced ass to the moon
26. See 37-Across
27. Old Norse term for perceived unmanliness, or why men are terrified of green initiatives
29. The entirety of the Steller's [29-Across] [34-Down] were ... by humans

30. That feeling you get when you realize the sea is haunted by the ghosts of Steller's [29-Across] [34-Down]
31. "Move your ... you don't want to be ground up for protein powder" (popular 2064 saying)
34. See 29-Across
38. What the last remaining icebergs did?
39. How's that scale of 1-10 again? How are you feeling?
40. This whole puzzle feels like one long hymn of dismay ... (mixed up) to 46-Across (it is!)
41. ... Lay Dying
45. "I mean I guess it's fair that what we did to the world will be done to us ..."
46. Fashion company that promises every single one of its handbags will be eco-conscious!!! isn't that great????
47. "... I really did want to see a coral reef someday."
48. How are you feeling now, 1-10? How's your anxiety, from A to Z?
49. The whirling of fate, or another term used for the 37-Across mess
51. Why do you have to be such a ... ?
52. Because when you think about how solvable everything still is, you are filled with boiling ...!
53. But giving into 52-Down makes you a ... (we took out some of the letters so you don't come across as such a meanie!)
54. Vowels out, the only condition under which your children will ever see a penguin
55. Cute sound of wrath
57. When everybody around you is so cheerful and upbeat, it makes you feel like you've experienced a ...

tee the length of a school bus that had been hanging out in the Bering Sea since the Pleistocene. According to *The Atlantic*, the German naturalist Georg Steller (for whom they are named), said that they were:

...gentle giants, whose only real defense against being harpooned was their incredibly thick hides. He also notes that they seem to have been unusually loyal to one another, which proved to be more of a liability than an asset when the Russians began hunting them for food. They had, in his words, "an uncommon love for one another, which even extended so far that, when one of them was hooked, all the others were intent upon saving him." When the Russians harpooned one of the sea cows, others would come to its defense, making a circle around their wounded comrade. When they killed a female, they were astonished to see its mate visit the beach where its body lay day after day, "as if he would inform himself about her condition."

Unfortunately, these solidaristic sea cows also happened to be delicious, and these holdover megafauna were extinguished within three decades.

PACIFISM IS A TOUGH STANCE TO MAINTAIN, because it depends on nobody being too willing to kill you. The manatee survives because humans have decided to (somewhat) protect it through legislation like the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act of 1978. But if we ever decided to get rid of such protections, or simply became indifferent to whether our actions caused extinction, the manatee would not be long for this world.

In 1937, the great philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote what is possibly one of the dumbest passages ever drafted. In his book *Which Way To Peace?* Russell suggested that an absolutist pacifist stance was the best way to deal with rising fascism, and that Britain should follow the policy of "gradually disbanding the army and navy and air force, disposing of India and the Crown Colonies, and announcing that we intend never again to fight another war." Certainly, shedding the colonies was a moral and prudent suggestion, but Russell also believed that if Britain abandoned its army and navy, it would be far more effective against Nazism than if it fought Hitler with force. He believed that if his country laid down its arms, Germany would lose its desire for war:

[I]f we refrained from force and violence, I do not think it can be doubted that the mood of the Germans would change. It is difficult to remain fierce when there is no occasion of fear or envy, and when pride has been fully gratified. A great civilized nation, in the absence of all Stimulus to hatred, cannot long remain in the mood that has put the Nazis in power. With the fear of war removed, bullying would soon lose its charm, and a liberal outlook would become common... Suppose England and France were both to disarm. If the Nazis endeavoured to continue their military parades and their glorification of war they would cease to look heroic and would become ridiculous; their own compatriots would begin to laugh at them, and to reflect that so much

strenuousness was no longer called for. Is it not clear that this is the really effective way of fighting militarism? War is brutal and horrible, but seems to be ennobled by the fact that the warrior risks his life. If no one resists, the heroism is gone.

As we know, Russell horribly underestimated the evil of Nazism. Those who did not resist the Nazis were simply killed more quickly. If there was one time in which absolutist pacifist principles should not have been applied, it was in Britain in 1937. But Russell's naïveté is understandable in its way; his argument about unilateral disarmament destabilizing militarism might well have been more applicable in the 19th century, or in the leadup to World War I. Nazism, however, was an ideology of pure domination and conquest. It was utterly sociopathic, impervious to reason. Resistance or death were the only options.

Personally I am a believer in pacifism, in the sense that I share Russell's horror of war, and his belief in disarmament, even if I think the application of that belief necessarily varies according to circumstance (as in, don't do it when Hitler is about to attack you). The problem for the strict pacifist has always been that they are helpless against an external threat, and unless they can work to prevent any threat from arising in the first place, they must simply hope one does not show up.

But this has not stopped the manatee, and that should give us some hope. The demise of Steller's sea cow shows that having no means of defense can indeed be suicide. But the survival of the Florida manatee for an astonishing *fifty million years* without any defenses shows that a long-term pacific existence is possible. If humans would show even a modicum of consideration for the humble manatee, there is no reason why it cannot last another fifty million years, over the course of which it will not take a single animal life. (Plant lives are an entirely different story for the hundred-salads-a-day sea cow.)

In a way, it is sad that human beings became the dominant species on Earth. 6,000 manatees is a tiny number. If the ratios were inverted, and there were 6,000 humans and billions of manatees, it would be a more peaceable world. A "Planet of the Manatees" would not go to war, because the manatee's pacifism is absolute. Frankly, a "Planet of the Apes" would also be superior—the gorilla, too, subsists mostly on plants and commits few murders. Gorillas have not invented police or militaries. They are muscular vegans (or mostly vegans), intelligent without being sadistic. They are far more entitled to rule. In the manatee, we can see a model for how life can be conducted without brutality or cruelty. A social utopia is clearly possible, because a species with vastly less intelligence and ability already lives in one. If the manatee can get through a dangerous world without hurting a soul, and without being hurt itself, why can't we? The manatee is a living reminder that we have no excuses for not being good, and it presents a vision of a natural existence that is not built on the most brutal and competitive type of Darwinian struggle. In the manatee's world, it is not kill or be killed. The point of life is to drift along slowly and live amiably alongside one another. 🐢

PLANET OF THE MANATEES

Over the last several million years, the manatee has established that it is the most morally elevated of Earth's creatures. Here *Current Affairs* posits what a world ruled by manatees could (will?) look like.







THE ECONOMICS OF BLACK POP CULTURE

by Bertrand Cooper

IN THE MONTHS FOLLOWING GEORGE FLOYD'S murder, magazines and journals put forth dozens of "Black editions" and special issues to promote the work of their Black contributors. The streaming services—Netflix, Hulu, Disney+ and the like—assembled watchlists of Black movies and television. As a result, a series of excellent Black films received better promotion than they might have otherwise, such as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *One Night in Miami*, and *Judas and the Black Messiah*. The same paroxysm and transactional response also happened seven years ago, in the wake of Michael Brown's murder. At that time, HBO, BAFTA, and other institutions of popular culture enacted diversity guidelines and launched in-house programs for creators of color. *Into the Spiderverse*, *Black Panther*, *Soul*, and the overall push by Disney to place Black characters in *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe can be traced to 2014. Today, popular culture is the terrain most visibly altered by the pursuit of social justice: in the decade since Trayvon Martin was killed, movies have changed in positive ways for all people of color, much more so than public education, zoning, or the prison-industrial complex.

Of all the industries in desperate need of change, why has popular culture been prioritized? There is at least one generally statable

reason, and it has to do with the fact that despite a falling share of the population, white Americans still outnumber Black Americans six-to-one. For every white American to have even one Black friend, every single Black American, including newborns, would need to have six white friends. This demographic constraint makes popular culture the primary medium through which white Americans engage with Black ones. This pop cultural experience is optional, and, in my experience, white folks usually do not pursue it to satisfy a broad and general curiosity about Black people. Rather, engagement is motivated by the belief that popular culture can connect white Americans to Black ones—and to the Black poor in particular—while, simultaneously, providing an arena for redressing the violence that white Americans have done to the Black poor.

If stripped bare, at base, we are hoping that imbibing pop cultural content like *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* will improve America's regard for the humanity of George Floyd, instilling in the audience a compassion capable of deterring racial violence in the future. At the same time, Black creators are being financially remunerated for the loss of Floyd's life via the granting of opportunities to work within popular culture's most prominent and lucrative spaces. These transactions between white owned institutions and Black creators would not occur if Floyd were with his family right now.

As good as it sometimes feels to see our country embrace the artistry of Black Americans beyond the excellences of sports and music, representation must be a matter of particulars. I was born into Black poverty, and I will not forget that Floyd was born into the same. For Floyd, the particulars of poverty were this: to be raised in the Cuney Homes projects, to endure years of deprivation, and to die violently in a manner common to our caste. Were Floyd still alive, or somehow reborn, he would not be hired to work within any of the institutions which now produce popular culture in his honor because he never obtained a bachelor's degree. No matter how much Michael Brown or Breonna Taylor might have impacted a living Floyd, he would not be eligible to work at the *Atlantic*, at the *New York Times*, at HBO, or at Netflix.

A decade of unprecedented interest in Black arts and letters has now passed—the greater portion of it bought with footage of people possessing Floyd's particulars lying dead on the tar—and still you cannot walk into a bookstore to find a shelf named for Black authors raised in poverty. That category of experience remains absent amidst the dozens of shelves now labeled for Black authors of every other identity and intersection. I accept that Floyd's final suffering becomes a political currency for the many, but I struggle with the fact that it purchases opportunities for the Black middle- and upper- classes, without securing a pen or a publisher for the children of Cuney Homes, without an expectation that it should, and without condemnation that it doesn't. Those born into better conditions owe it to the injured to at least recognize that participation in this wave of Black creativity, which is intended as recompense for the dead, requires that you first be employed by it—you do not gain a share of the payout otherwise.

POPULAR CULTURE IS, OF COURSE, AN INDUSTRY. It is made up of occupations. It has employees: people work at the *New Yorker*, at Random House, at Netflix. Our culture is not concocted in a spontaneously-arisen artist commune. Some of the employees create the objects that are sold, some manage the creators, and some decide what is to be created. The prerequisite for participation at each level of popular culture is a bachelor's degree. But popular culture also houses many of the creative occupations, and this muddies the perceptual waters since these (writer, comedian, actor, artist) were among the last jobs to acquiesce to the formal systems of higher education and professional bureaucracy associated with, say, becoming a doctor or a lawyer. As a consequence, the public has been slow to incorporate into its myths the degree to which popular culture, including its most artistic and erratic expressions, is the product of workers who must be deemed qualified for the job before they can sell their work. No air is too rarefied for the banality of credentials.

Out of 10 longlist nominees for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction, all 10 are college graduates. On average, the nominees attended universities with rejection rates above 80 percent (i.e., highly competitive). Five went to Ivy League schools or competitive equivalents, and winners tended to double up. Charles Yu, who won the 2020 award, attended Berkeley as an undergraduate and then went to Columbia for his JD. Susan Choi, who won in 2019, graduated from Yale and Cornell. Sigrid Nunez won in 2018; she's

a graduate of both Barnard and Columbia.

While there is no paper application to become a successful novelist, there are *de facto* requirements for the position which nobody who is serious about succeeding in literature can ignore. It's usually not enough to be highly educated: you must become entrenched so as to become known within higher education. This means obtaining an MFA or a PhD. It means nominees work as college faculty. It means that while the *New York Times* may promote them as "new writers," many nominees will have been publishing reviews and short stories in university-run literary journals several years before they win National Book Awards, Pulitzers, and Man Bookers.

Comedy offers another example. The findings here are more potent, I think, because the reality so sharply contradicts the populist vision of comedy. When people think of the comedy scene, they tend to imagine a sort of caricature of 1970s John Belushi: an underachieving cast-off from mainstream society plying his trade in dank bars, writing jokes and sketches while also pounding narcotics in one squalid bathroom stall after another.

There are three main divisions in comedy: writing, improv, and standup. Success in the first two effectively requires a college education indistinguishable from that of award-winning novelists. Michael Shur—Emmy award-winning writer from *The Office* and celebrated creator of *The Good Place*—graduated from Harvard University in 1997. Our most elite site of higher learning also happens to be one of the country's oldest incubators of comedy writing. The *Harvard Lampoon*, the university's longstanding humor magazine, permeates modern comedy via its former staff—Shur, for example, was president of the *Lampoon*.

Late-night hosts are usually former writers, and so emerge out of a narrow set of socioeconomic conditions. Conan O'Brien was president of the *Lampoon* during his time at Harvard; he was also a legacy of sorts since his father was a professor at Harvard Medical School. Stephen Colbert's father was a medical professor as well, first at Yale and then Saint Louis University. Colbert graduated from Northwestern; Seth Meyers did the same about 10 years later. Improv's big stars are all college-educated too: Julia Louis-Dreyfus is another alumnus of Northwestern. Amy Poehler, founding member of legendary improv group Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB), graduated from Boston College. Tina Fey studied at the University of Virginia. Ilana Glazer graduated from New York University; Abbi Jacobson received a BFA from the Maryland Institute of Fine Arts. Glazer and Jacobson went on to create the cult favorite *Broad City*—the duo met while taking classes at Poehler's UCB. John Mulaney, Nick Kroll, and Mike Birbiglia began jack-of-all trades comedy careers performing improv together while attending Georgetown University, the alma mater of Mulaney's parents who attended alongside Bill Clinton. Ellie Kemper, favorite of *The Office* and star of *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, was part of an improv troupe at Princeton which she attended prior to Oxford—Kemper's paternal line is said to have owned railroads.

It would have been easy, upon meeting on the set of *The Office*, for people like Kemper and Shur to have bonded while joking about the Harvard-Princeton rivalry. Mulaney, O'Brien, and Colbert all know the pressures of having Ivy-educated parents. Poehler can reminisce with most of these individuals about the experience

of doing improv on campus. Equally important, if Poehler finds someone she meets especially funny, she can recommend them for work across the network of UCB alumni. Forming relationships usually requires shared experiences, as does “fitting in” more broadly. It would be strange to expect the fundamentals of bonding to change simply because the person entering the scene is Black. Black people still need to fit in to succeed professionally.

IN DECEMBER 2014, CHRIS ROCK SAID OF HOLLYWOOD: “It’s a white industry. Just as the NBA is a Black industry. I’m not even saying it’s a bad thing. It just is. And the Black people they do hire tend to be the same person. That person tends to be female and that person tends to be Ivy League.” Rock published his thoughts as the second wave of protests was ending in Ferguson. By January, #OscarsSoWhite was issuing a clarion call for popular culture to *do something*, and six months later, the culture’s victories were being tabulated. *Essence* Magazine dedicated its May issue to five Black women who were said to be “changing the game” in Hollywood: Shonda Rhimes (*Grey’s Anatomy*), Ava DuVernay (*When They See Us*, *Selma*), Debbie Allen (*A Different World*), Issa Rae (*Insecure*), and Mara Brock Akil (*Girlfriends*). Between them, at least three attended private high schools, at least three had parents with college degrees, and all of them attended college themselves—Stanford, Northwestern, Dartmouth, and UCLA are on the list.¹ Had the *Essence* article come out a few years later, Courtney A. Kemp (*Power*) would have assuredly made an appearance; Kemp received her bachelor’s at Brown University and her master’s at Columbia, attending not one but two Ivy League schools.

To go back to the 2020 National Book Award nominees for a moment, three of the authors were Black and two were Black women. Deesha Philyaw graduated from Yale, and Brit Bennet from Stanford. Jesmyn Ward—a Black woman, and the only woman to twice win the NBA for fiction (2011, 2017)—attended Stanford and then the University of Michigan, the latter considered a sort of public Ivy. In 2020, the *New Yorker* had nine visibly Black contributors (of which seven are men). All nine graduated from four-year colleges, and more than half gained their credentials at elite universities.² Based on publicly available biographies, compared to their non-Black peers, Black contributors had a higher rate of Ivy League attendance and were twice as likely to be college faculty.

Most of the time, the assumptions that can be made about the backgrounds of white creators can be safely applied to their Black counterparts. Any time an elite education appears in a Black creator’s biography, it is likely that it was preceded by exorbitant privilege. The writer Colson Whitehead—born Arch Colson Chipp Whitehead—was raised a wealthy Manhattanite. His family owned a home in the Hamptons, and he attended Trinity preparatory school which sends nearly half of its students into the Ivy League in exchange for a tuition of \$58,500 annually. Whitehead graduated from Harvard in 1991 and

went on to win a National Book Award before becoming the Pulitzer’s only back-to-back winner in fiction. Pop culture wunderkind Roxane Gay has written memoirs, *New York Times* op-eds, and Marvel Comics. Gay was, until her junior year, educated at Yale and attended Phillips Exeter before that; the latter is the kind of uber elite New England preparatory school fictionalized in *Dead Poets Society*. Tuition for students boarding at Phillips today is slightly less than \$60,000 per year, though a deal of \$44,960 per annum is offered to young persons content with life as mere—and lowly—day students.

Above-average privilege, particularly in terms of income, is the norm for successful creators both white and Black, but the ignorance that obscures the economic privilege of the latter group provides a bitter irony when you’re a formerly impoverished Black person operating in a highly educated milieu. The only time that someone recommends Colson Whitehead or Roxanne Gay to me—really, the only time any Black creator outside of music is recommended to me by a white person—is when the person I am talking to learns that I am from the Black underclass. Being Black and from poverty, I am what white Americans imagine they are learning about and “standing in solidarity” with when they imbibe popular culture’s Black offerings. But it never occurs to them that Whitehead and Gay come from a very different class to begin with, and are not necessarily standing in real solidarity with *me*.

I could easily go on, delineating the economics of popular culture one creator at a time, but bringing in a small amount of data from higher education makes it unnecessary. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, just 1 in 10 low-income high school students will graduate from a four-year college. Applying this so that it means something on the ground:

- 4.1 million children entered the 9th grade in 2020.
- 15 percent of these children were Black.
- 34 percent of Black children have been living in poverty.³
- 14 percent of low-income high school students eventually obtain a bachelor’s degree (i.e., about 1 in 10).

Using an elementary school level of arithmetic (Fact 1 x Fact 2 x Fact 3

3. “Low-income” is often the closest approximation of “poverty” available within higher education research. The convention is to treat them as largely interchangeable. I’ll follow that for this initial illustration, but the gaps between these two terms will be covered afterward.



1. I say “at least” because not all of these individuals have been interviewed about their high school years.

2. Though gender likely continues to intersect with this issue in meaningful ways, treating it fully is outside of the scope of this piece.

x Fact 4) shows that 2020's 9th grade cohort will produce approximately 29,274 bachelor's degree holders from among the Black poor. Placing this number in context requires reference populations, which NCES provides:

- 1,980,644 bachelor's degrees total were awarded in the U.S during the 2017-2018 school year.
- 95,014 bachelor's degrees were awarded to Black students during the same period.

If what occurred with 9th graders in 2020 held approximately true during the years preceding the 2017-2018 school year, it would mean that Black students raised in poverty received about 15% of all bachelor's degrees awarded to Black students that year. By extension, the other 85% of those degrees went to Black students raised in the middle- and upper- classes. In total, Black students from poor families received 1.4 percent of all the bachelor's degrees handed out in 2020; the other 98.6% of those degrees went to students from other backgrounds.

I am using the "1 in 10" statistic because it is memorable and because it is the one journalists use most often. However, from 1970 until around 2000, the rate of bachelor's attainment among low-income students was closer to one in twenty. NCES also defines "low-income" to include families earning 25% above the federal poverty line (i.e., non-poor). If we were to measure the rate of bachelor's attainment among poor children by looking exclusively at families living beneath the poverty line, the rate would likely be lower than one in ten or even one in twenty. Foster and homeless youth—my previous demographic—are more likely to be drawn entirely from poor families, and their attainment rate is estimated to be as low as 2% or 1 in 50.

Regardless of whether you defer to one in ten or one in twenty or, most conservatively, 1 in 50, the implications for you as a consumer and interpreter of popular culture are the same: if you assume every Black person with a bachelor's degree grew up middle-class or better, you will be right at least 85 percent of the time. Every industry that relies on higher education is forced to import these class disparities into itself; there's no avoiding the fact that the Black middle- and upper- classes produce nearly all of Black popular culture.

IN 2015, DURING THE HEIGHT OF INTEREST IN THE TOPIC, Ta-Nehisi Coates published "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration." Coates argues that mass incarceration has been a broadly pernicious response to social problems, and since its foundations were laid amidst the prevailing racism of the 20th century, the worst abuses have been concentrated on Black Americans. In the course of his argument, he notes that "four out of five criminal defendants qualify as indigent before the courts." The interpretation is uncomplicated. 80 percent of Black people imprisoned in the U.S. hail from poverty, meaning that 8 out of every 10 Black prisoners in the U.S. are harvested from one class of Black Americans: the class that George Floyd belonged to. This also means that the Black middle- and upper- classes combined make up just 20 percent of Black prisoners. Nonetheless, when Coates summarizes these statistics for his reader, he says: "and should crime rates rise again, there is no reason to believe that *Black people, Black communities, Black families will not be fed into the great maw again.*" (Emphasis mine.)

If I were from a different community, pointing out the economic disparities in popular culture—let alone in prison—might yield some kind of intervention on our behalf or at least warrant a call for one. But I am from the Black poor. What afflicts us does not belong to us—it belongs to the race, to the class-free abstractions of "Black people," "Black communities," "Black families." That is the only representation we receive, and so long as this is the framing, no exclusion, no oppression, no suffering endured by us will be understood as warranting a solution designed specifically for us.

The ease with which Coates transitions from naming forms of oppression that predominantly afflict the Black poor to making class-blind statements about "Black experience" is common everywhere. Speaking about his love for Serena Williams on the *For Colored NERDS* podcast in 2017, Vann Newkirk II—the most prominent Black journalist at *The Atlantic* since Ta-Nehisi Coates' departure—said:

"She [Williams] to me is like Ali in that she provides that public voice that public excellence that we often need when we're feeling down when we feel like you know maybe they won't stop killing us, maybe they won't stop marginalizing us and redlining us and putting us on the edge of cities and flood plains and lead poisoning us."

If you accept the argument I've presented thus far, you might assume Newkirk's place in popular culture via his job at *The Atlantic* means he has a bachelor's degree. You might then assume that he was raised in the middle- or upper- class. The ethical thing to do, however, is to assume nothing and look him up. If you do that...you will find that Newkirk graduated from Morehouse and then UNC Chapel Hill. His mother was a public-school teacher, and his father is a Howard University PhD and the president of Fisk University, a position commanding \$120,308 annually.

Newkirk says "us" and "we," but it's doubtful that he was actually raised in a redlined project with lead-lined walls and too many police. But he talks in a way that implies *some* biographical connection between himself and forms of oppression that, for the public, are bywords for poverty: dog whistles of a kind. This way of speaking, heavy in its use of first-person pronouns with regards to stereotypical oppressions, is how most middle- and upper- class Black people working in popular culture speak—not because it is the most accurate, but because it fosters the appearance of being *real Black*.

When I arrived at graduate school in 2014, I was 26 years old and in the midst of my twelfth year of abject poverty. I was choosing then between food, rent, clothing, and medical care, which—given my asthma—meant a grand dilemma between food and air. This was better than my life before 18. As a high school freshman, I lived in a crack den and subsisted by begging classmates for pocket change or else stealing childish food items like string cheese and Sunny D from Publix grocery. In between these wholesome adventures, I watched my mother desiccate at the end of a crack pipe alongside her boyfriend who pursued the same hobby—unless the opportunity to ensnare her in physical violence arose, in which case, crack could always wait.

The people who raised me are not the worst people I have known of, but they are the worst that I have known personally. The previous generation of my family—though small in number—includes murderers, rapists, drug enforcers, and practitioners of every form of abuse. A few confined themselves to bloodless activities like fraud, but these were

POST-COVID CABANA???

Coming up after the pandemic, it's

MANDATORY FUN IN THE SUN

featuring you, your body, and all your overgrown, undertreated
2020 NEUROSES!

Will you opt for **ON THE PROWL**, revealing a look as sexy as it is desperate, or pull the tab for **FERAL MODE**, in which everybody better stay the fuck away, oh my fucking god dude, if you even look at me I will throw a goddamn mortar round I swear to fucking god



Don't hate your body! Don't hate your brain! Don't be afraid to let 'em all know you turned into a caged animal indoors, and you're going to savage the first person you see!

not my immediate relatives. I remember being a child and my mother theorizing before me that the reason I was born asthmatic was because, when she was five or six, she smothered a neighbor's newborn with a pillow. Assuming that karma skips a generation, it would be difficult to assign my faulty lungs to her alone, given that my father was incarcerated for strangling a friend to death while yacked out on meth. There is a pattern of taking air away in my family, repetitive in my mother's case since her distrust of Western medicine meant that even if the state would have provided me with an inhaler, she wouldn't have (and she didn't).

Baldwin wrote, "[The Negro] is a social and not a personal or a human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence; it is to be confronted with an endless cataloging of losses, gains, skirmishes..." Because my life conforms to this, what Baldwin called "the usual bleak fantasy," I *get* to occupy what most people think of when they think of *real Black*. This means that I do not have to omit or embellish aspects of my life in order to convince society to view me as "Black" or, more to the point, to see me as "not white." Light-skinned as I am, the more tragedy I share, the "Blacker" I become. Abject poverty is not normally an advantage, but it can become one if, for example, your livelihood depends upon audiences perceiving you as *real Black*.

John McWhorter once shared that he was, early in his career, afraid to publicly debate Michael Eric Dyson because Dyson could claim ghetto origins and speaks like a pastor (he is a pastor) while McWhorter was born middle-class and raised without a "blaccent." McWhorter knows himself to be Black, but he feared audiences would perceive him as too far from *real Black* to be legitimate if juxtaposed against Dyson. Ijeoma Oluo, being half Nigerian and raised by a white single mother in a white neighborhood, expressed similar feelings:

"...we felt that difference between the expectations of the type of Black we were supposed to be, and the type of Black we were—which was Black nerds raised by a white woman in a poor white neighborhood. And when middle school came around and suddenly there were a few dozen Black

kids—real Black kids—we compared outfits and attitudes and knew that we, my brother and I, just didn't measure up. I stayed invisible to both Black and white kids while my brother was teased mercilessly for 'acting white' with his love of jazz music."

In the 2015 film *DOPE*, Forest Whitaker describes how the Black nerds are constantly at risk of being ridiculed by their Compton peers for liking "white shit," such as skateboards, manga, and Donald Glover. Glover's 2010 *Comedy Central* set actually includes a joke about his first day at a white high school: when Glover is unable to tell the white kids which sneakers and rap songs are cool because he—in his own words—prefers the "soulful stylings" of The Cranberries to hip hop, the white kids beat him up for failing their expectations. The joke was pulled from life: in his early interviews, Glover frequently discussed being beat up and called homophobic slurs for dressing and acting white in high school.

According to the strictures of *real Black*, the *Blackest* you can be is a dark-skinned, poverty-raised, adherent of the Black subculture that achieved its current form after being filtered through the urban ghettos of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, and California during the 1980s and early 1990s. If you waver on the first two, you better project the third. Both of Glover's parents worked; his father was a veteran and a postman while his mother was a daycare provider. The family rounded out standard middle-class bona fides with a strict religious faith and years spent fostering troubled youth. When given the chance to produce a passion project, Glover chose to make *Atlanta*. Discussing the show's success, Glover said, "as a Black person, you have to sell the Black culture to succeed." *Atlanta* draws heavily on poverty, policing, prison, violence, rap, and the culture of the Black poor. It's not the environment Glover grew up in or the culture he practiced in high school or during his 20s, or 30s, but it *is* the one he sold to gain two Emmys and sold again to get a Grammy for *This is America*. It represents quite a reversal: from getting beat up by white audiences to being awarded by them.

ANSWERS TO CROSSWORD from page 33

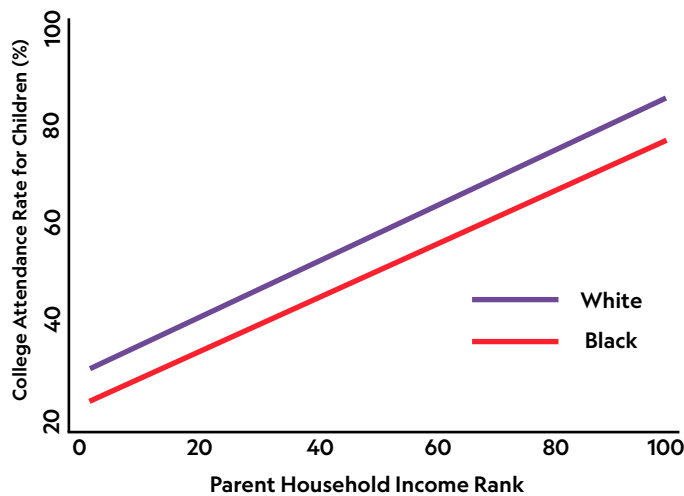
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IN BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS, KIDS SCRUTINIZE IDENTITY ruthlessly, a process conveyed accurately in the Kendrick Lamar chorus: "fuck who you know, where you from, my nigga? Where your grandma stay, huh, my nigga?" But—as seen with Glover—once you're an adult operating in the public eye, people assume a history of poverty for Black skin. Any Black person can claim it, becoming *real Black* in the process, and there are personal and economic incentives for doing so (did I mention Glover's Golden Globes?) In his 2018 special *Equanimity*, Dave Chappelle encapsulated the process:

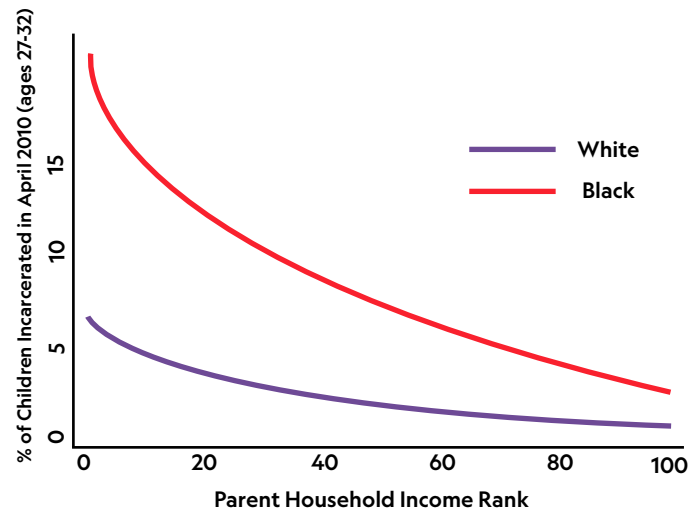
"You know, when I was growing up, I was probably about eight years old, and at the time, we were living in Silver Spring. Yeah. Yes. Common misconception about me and DC, a lot of people think I'm from the 'hood.' That's not true. But I never bothered to correct anybody... because I wanted the streets to embrace me. As a matter of fact, I kept it up as a ruse. Like sometimes I'll hang out with rappers like Nas and them, and these motherfuckers start talking about the projects. 'Yo, it was wild in the PJs, yo.' And I'll be like, 'Word, nigga, word.' But I don't know. I have no idea."

In 1978, sociologist William Julius Wilson published his seminal work on the interactions between class structure and race entitled *The*

College Attendance Rates (males)



Incarceration (males)



SOURCE: *Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States*

Declining Significance of Race. Examining Black income mobility before and after the 1960s, Wilson found that the majority of Black families that had been living in poverty at the onset of civil rights remained in poverty years after its conclusion. The children of these families, the first poor Black children to live the majority of their lives post-civil rights, also remained in poverty. Wilson argued that civil rights had yielded measurable economic benefits for Black Americans in the aggregate, but those gains were concentrated upon the Black middle- and upper- classes. Government jobs and universities had to abide by civil rights legislation and affirmative action policies, but they were not legally obligated to admit the Black poor, so they chose not to, and instead overrepresented the Black middle- and upper- classes to meet their quotas.

Wilson himself grew up Black and poor in rural Pennsylvania during the last decades of Jim Crow. His father was a coal miner and a steel worker who died of lung disease at the age of thirty-nine, leaving Mrs. Wilson to support six children on a combination of welfare and whatever she could earn cleaning houses. Coming out of a degree of poverty that can scarcely be imagined, Wilson obtained a PhD and a teaching position at the University of Chicago. Six years later, Wilson delivered *The Declining Significance of Race* to an audience of Black and white academics who, being college educated, were almost entirely from the middle- and upper- classes. They rebuked him. As Wilson put it in 1980:

“Critics were so preoccupied with what I had to say about the improving conditions of the Black middle class that they virtually ignored my more important arguments about the deteriorating conditions of the Black underclass. The view was often expressed that since all Blacks are suffering, there is no need to single out the Black poor...”

In 2017, the Harvard-based economist Raj Chetty published a study examining the effect of higher education on the economic mobility of 48 million children born between 1980 to 1991, capturing in his sample nearly all the children born during that period. From 1999-2013, Chetty found only 3% of the students admitted to Harvard came from

poverty. Despite the exclusion of the Black poor, Harvard achieved near perfect or greater than perfect Black representation throughout the 2010s: Black Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population, and they were 14.7% of the freshman admitted to the university last year.

Harvard achieved its diversity goals by overrepresenting the Black middle- and upper- classes. Henry Louis Gates Jr., director of African and African American studies at Harvard, has estimated that as many as two-thirds of the Black students at Harvard are first or second-generation immigrants from Africa or the West Indies, the wealthiest and most educated subgroup of Black Americans, and the one from which Kamala Harris and Barack Obama derive.

The situation at Harvard should be compared to Chetty’s findings regarding college attendance and incarceration among 28 million children born between 1978-1983: The chart on the left shows a generation of poor Black children rarely attending college, while the chart on the right shows the same class of children rapidly imprisoned by the age of 32. Placed side by side, they offer a mirror image of disparity and privilege: you can trace the increase in opportunity and the decrease in oppression as the income of Black families rises.

IGNORING CLASS DIVISIONS IN BLACK AMERICA OVER the last 40 years has allowed the benefits of racial progress to be concentrated upon the Black middle- and upper- classes while the Black poor have largely been excluded. Popular culture embodies the problem in the same way higher education does, which is a problem because inequity is always a problem. However, the centrality of popular culture to America’s understanding of Black people, and the fact that popular culture contains within itself all the best platforms for sharing stories about ourselves, imbues the situation with a particularly bleak and sinister air.

When the context is white people, we tend to be conscious not just of the influence that pop cultural objects have (movies, shows, etc.) over our understanding of the world but of the unchecked influence this can yield to creators; being permitted to fictionalize experiences

which neither the audience nor the creators have direct knowledge of (so long as there is a budget and a market for it) is a tremendous power. Awareness of at least the *possibility* for abusing this power is one of the only sources of accountability that exists for popular culture. *The Florida Project*, a 2017 drama written largely from the point of view of three children living with their poor and transient families in motels just outside of Disney World, is one of the most poignant depictions of childhood poverty that I have seen. When DCF agents came to take the 6-year-old protagonist, Moonee, away from her mother, I experienced the first and only panic attack of my life. Despite all the truth I saw not just in that scene but throughout the film, it was written and directed by Sean Baker, someone who has never had those experiences. As *Vanity Fair* writer Cassie De Costa puts it, “Baker isn’t a poor child...He’s a young, college-educated white male film director.” Costa’s appraisal of the film was rather different than mine; she wrote: “it seems that all of these characters are on screen because they’re interesting...not because Baker has genuine emotional insight on them or their circumstances.”

It is worth mentioning that Costa is a Black woman educated at Yale and the Ecole Normale Supérieure (a French Ivy, basically). Although possible, it is highly unlikely that Costa’s life has prepared her any more than Baker’s has when it comes to recognizing authentic “emotional insight” into the experience of being poor. Neither one has likely lived that life. But the simple fact that Baker does not share the class of his subject opens his work to criticism, including from a (perhaps) similarly privileged critic. This kind of suspicion could be protective of all pop culture’s subjects, but it tends to be unevenly applied. A Black creator born and raised in the middle class can take from any aspect of the Black poor’s existence without risking charges of voyeurism, appropriation, or predation. It is an overwhelmingly common abuse of social power given how much of Black popular culture traffics in depictions of the Black poor (think Glover and *Atlanta*). But Black creatives are seen as so fully entitled to the suffering of the Black poor that we do not even recognize popular culture made by the Black poor as special or, at a minimum, unusual. *Moonlight* is one of a minuscule number of successful Black films that not only depicts Black poverty, but was directed and written by Black men who grew up in poverty. That degree of authenticity should offer some distinction within the field of Black art, but people will compare *Moonlight* to other depictions of Black poverty without even mentioning the poverty of its creators as relevant to the appraisal of authenticity or representation. It is as if all Black creators are presumed to have equal insight.

The rarity of a film like *Moonlight* emphasizes what’s wrong with policies that aim to diversify race but not class. When HBO began its Access program in 2014, race, gender, and ethnicity were the only dimensions of diversity considered: poverty was not included as a dimension (and still is not).⁴ BFI, which provided the BAFTA diversity guidelines, included “lower socioeconomic status” as desirable for employment but not a priority; it was *optional* to hire someone from a lower socioeconomic background, and BAFTA left it up to the filmmakers to provide their own justification for who was of lower socioeconomic status rather than deferring to any government thresholds regarding

poverty. That was six years ago. Last year, the Academy Awards enacted diversity standards of their own: “poverty,” “low-income,” and “lower socioeconomic status” are not mentioned as dimensions of diversity.

THERE IS A REAL NEED TO DIVERSIFY POP CULTURE, but it has to happen on more than one axis of oppression. As it stands, popular culture has been prioritized as a site heavily in need of racial change: it is the first and often only industry we expect to respond immediately to the oppression of the Black poor. That these efforts at diversification have not resulted in the Black poor gaining the opportunity to represent themselves in popular culture is a gross perversion of the stated goals of representation. Worst of all, we seem to be gaining in complacency with the status quo. Ibram X. Kendi, the prevailing Black consciousness of white liberals, gave popular culture *as is* his official sanction in February of this year, writing: “We are living in the time of a new renaissance—what we are calling the Black Renaissance—the third great cultural revival of Black Americans.” Kendi names nearly every Black creator mentioned in this piece but only to cite their existence in popular culture as proof of a race-wide achievement. The exclusion of the Black poor is never mentioned.⁵ The day before issuing that rosy pronouncement, Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (PhD, Princeton) published *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019*. According to the publisher, Random House:

“...this collection of diverse pieces from ninety different minds, reflecting ninety different perspectives, fundamentally deconstructs the idea that Africans in America are a monolith—instead it unlocks the startling range of experiences and ideas that have always existed within the community of Blackness.”


Out of 92 different Black writers (counting Kendi and Blain), 91 have bachelor’s degrees, 49 attended elite colleges, and 62 are college faculty. You might not be able to sell a community history of Black America without the continued suffering of the Black poor, but you can apparently write the history of the “Black community” without more than one or two of them.

Though obviously class-blind and constrained by racist stereotypes regarding poverty and Black identity, some portion of the racial progress that has occurred in popular culture over the last decade has been motivated, I hope, by a genuine empathy for the Black poor. There is still time to use that energy to direct popular culture towards policies that recognize class within race. But this will require that the privilege of acting as public representatives for all Black people be taken away from the Black middle- and upper- classes. Black Americans fortunate enough to be born outside of poverty need to establish identities that do not depend on erasing class differences or falsifying connections to poor Black oppression. And white Americans will need to accept Black identities not based in poverty as perfectly “real” too—just not authoritative on Black poverty. ✚

5. Technically, Kendi does mention “classism” but in an utterly perfunctory way. It appears towards the end of a list of things he feels “the Black Renaissance” is—somehow—fighting against. “[W]e are telling America to tone down its anti-Black racism,” he writes, “and its sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism and nativism; and all the ways those isms intersect; and all their violence.” It’s a pretty weak treatment, and you can be certain most readers will assume he means the “classism” of white America only.

4. HBO recently downgraded its ambitions further, moving from requiring Access applicants to be “diverse” to requiring nothing and stating instead only that such applicants are “highly encouraged to apply.”

The PERSISTENCE *of* ROYALTY

by BRIANNA RENNIX 
NATHAN J. ROBINSON

*I*N 1969, THE BRITISH monarchy was in a spot of trouble. Revolutionary movements had sprung up around the world. Traditional authority was being questioned. London had gone from stuffy to “swinging.” Journalist Malcolm Muggeridge had commented a few years prior that “the English are getting bored with their monarchy,” and young people “regard the Queen as the arch-square.” “We were getting so boring,” said one of the Queen’s Private Secretaries. There was no explicit, imminent threat to the Crown, but a general anxiety about the future was hovering in the air, and figures in the Palace felt it couldn’t hurt to shore up the monarch’s legitimacy. Britain needed reminding of why, in the midst of progressive social tendencies, it ought to continue venerating its Royal Family. As a PR move, the Queen therefore agreed to be filmed for a BBC documentary. The 90-minute





special, called *Royal Family*, followed Elizabeth, Prince Philip, and other members of the House of Windsor as they went about their daily business. The tone is neither laudatory nor critical, and it is mostly a mundane, matter-of-fact depiction of royal life. The family has a barbecue. Prince Charles goes water-skiing. The Queen picks out some dresses and answers correspondence. She goes to a shop to buy young Prince Edward a candy bar. She meets President Nixon, hands out medals, tours a factory, unveils a sculpture, presides over a garden party, and rides a hovercraft. One courtier said that the film was meant to show that royal life “isn’t all gilt coaches and Rolls-Royces, balls and banquets and champagne.” Indeed, the Queen and her family represent themselves very well. They seem like fairly regular people who work hard at their duties. There is little trace of the snootiness associated with the Windsors. The Queen comes across as elegant, diligent, and likable.

The documentary attracted a huge audience when it first aired. Hundreds of millions of people around the world saw it. Depicting the royals as relatable, ordinary folk might seem to be humbling, but the film implicitly justifies the monarchy by portraying the Queen’s work as useful. Nothing embarrassing about the family was exposed, except that the Queen does indeed appear to use “one” as a first-person pronoun in casual conversation. The Queen was reportedly “delighted” with the film when she first saw it. One (sorry) would therefore think the documentary had been a spectacular success on all counts.

But the film was *not* a success. On the contrary, while the initial reception was positive, and it was hailed as “the latest example of the British dynasty’s miraculous ability to reinvent itself,” the royals quickly regretted their participation. The Queen soon banned the film entirely, and it turns out that this kind of royal interdict actually carries some weight. The documentary has not been aired in the country for 40 years and is

not available on YouTube or streaming services. (It was recently leaked and can be found in some corners of the internet.)

Why did the Queen suppress a perfectly positive portrayal? One answer may be found in the warning that David Attenborough—the beloved nature documentary host who was then serving as BBC controller—gave to the *Royal Family*’s filmmaker, which, although it smacks of amateur anthropology, nevertheless has a certain explanatory power. “You’re killing the monarchy with this film you’re making,” Attenborough said. “The whole institution depends on mystique and the tribal chief in his hut. If any member of the tribe ever sees inside the hut then the whole system of tribal chieftdom is damaged and the tribe eventually disintegrates.”

“Killing the monarchy” by showing the Queen relaxing and having fun sounds like something of an overstatement. But when watching the documentary, it’s clear Attenborough was onto something. The Queen comes across as a completely average, even uninteresting person. But if the Queen is totally unexceptional, what does it mean for her to be the Queen? By going behind the scenes, *Royal Family* makes the pageantry and ceremony look artificial, and therefore cheap and absurd. What looks—and was seemingly intended to be—pro-monarchy is in fact quietly subversive. The film gets viewers dangerously close to asking questions like: “What does a monarch do? Why have one?” Even if the BBC’s answers are “quite a lot, and because she is an asset to everyone,” the questions are probably not ones the Queen would prefer be asked at all.

*M*ONARCHIES ARE, OF COURSE, STRANGE institutions. Some modern countries, like Saudi Arabia and a few other Gulf states, have monarchs that actually *govern*, in

the sense that their decrees have legal power and their will is directly executed in policy. In most other countries where monarchs occupy ceremonial or highly constitutionally-circumscribed roles, the usual justification for their existence is made through appeals to Tradition. Certainly, monarchy writ large is an ancient form of government, as far as we know. The first civilizations to transmit written records to us—in Sumer, Egypt, and the Indus Valley—talk about having kings. Of course, it's important to remind ourselves periodically that the entirety of *written* human history spans just about 7,000 years, whereas our species *Homo sapiens* has survived for a staggering 200,000 years. How human societies constituted themselves during those other 193 millennia, and how they conceptualized their leaders, is all pretty dim speculation. In broader historical terms, we really have no idea if kingship is a very old human idea, or a passing modern fad.

So what is this creature, the monarch? Usually, kingship combines some idea of hereditary succession with some notion of divinity—the king is sometimes imagined to be a god himself, to be the spouse of some god personifying the land or the people, or to otherwise exercise his rule by will of the heavens. In Europe, modern monarchies claim cultural and in some cases direct hereditary inheritance from the kings of the early Middle Ages, when the northerly territories of the western Roman empire were in the dynamic process of reconstituting themselves into new polities with different centers of governance. Many European royal houses, such as the Capetians and the Habsburgs, trace their roots back to the ninth-century emperor Charlemagne. The ninth-century king Alfred the Great is often popularly viewed as the first true “King of the English,” because he successfully staved off Viking incursions into his southwesterly kingdom of Wessex, and thus set the stage

for eventual political unification (under his grandson Æthelstan) of Wessex and the kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia, aka the geographical area now known as England. Over the centuries, European kingship increasingly came to be defined by succession through agnatic primogeniture—the passing of the crown to the eldest surviving son—and the notion of rule by “divine right,” meaning that kings were in some sense preordained and anointed by God. (There are exceptions to the agnatic primogeniture bit: for example, the Holy Roman Emperor was “elected,” although only by a small clique of eligible nobles voting amongst themselves, much like rich assholes choosing a golf club president. The mountain kingdom of Andorra, meanwhile, is a rare example of a “diarchy,” in which there are always *two* ruling monarchs—who are, bizarrely enough, the President of France and the Roman Catholic Bishop of Urgell. Sadly, the law does not require the president and the bishop to be married to each other.)

It's this notion of being *born into* kingship by a narrow path of pedigree, and also *chosen* for kingship by a higher power, that gives monarchy its special romance, built up by generations of folktales, fantasy novels, and Disney films. A divinely-ordained blood monarchy picks out a lone figure of destiny to be history's protagonist: the same impulse that makes us gravitate toward stories about Chosen Ones and Boys Who Lived is the one that piques our interest in kings. A lot of stories about kings—like the biblical King David, the legendary King Arthur, or the fictional King Aragorn—focus breathlessly on the time when they're still monarchs-in-waiting, teetering on the brink of public recognition, when their triumphant accession to the throne will be accompanied by miraculous feats and the fulfilment of prophecies. In real life, however, people who get close to monarchs often tend to regard them in a less mystic

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light. Kings, like any other kind of boss, would usually have to be simultaneously instructed and appeased by those who hoped for anything resembling competent governance. “Mirrors for princes” was a long-running genre of literature in which courtiers gave current and future rulers practical advice about how they should run their kingdom, because relying on God to show the king the right path wasn’t a bet anyone wanted to make. In one such early 13th-century work, *De principis instructione*, the cleric Gerald of Wales advised his reader on a range of characteristics the king was supposed to embody—from chastity to humility to prudence to bravery—and then spent a great deal of the rest of the book shitting on the late Henry II and his progeny, whom he believed had discriminated against him for a promotion because he was too Welsh. The personal life of kings was also a common subject of salacious speculation, long before the days when tabloid paparazzi were bursting into their vacation spots. In 18th-century France, the duchess de la Ferté reacted to the news that a bunch of noblemen had apparently held an orgy directly under Louis XV’s window at Versailles one night with a clickbait summation of the sexual orientation of every previous monarch in recent history: “in the history of the affairs of the kings, it has alternated one after the other: Henri II and Charles IX loved the women, and Henri III the boys; Henri IV loved the women; Louis XIII the boys, Louis XIV the women—and so at present the era of the boys has returned.”

NOT ONLY WAS THE PARTICULAR person designated as monarch by the laws of succession a person of ordinary human incompetence and horniness, the laws of succession, too, could be manipulated through old-fashioned human intrigues. Unloved kings or their undesirable heirs died in faked hunting accidents, vanished mysteriously from places of confinement, or were pressured to abdicate in the face of torture and death. As Christianity hived off into more and more varieties of Protestantism in the wake of the Reformation, religious arguments were increasingly used to reject candidates whom the rules of succession would otherwise have designated. In England, the idea that anyone with a stake in the matter truly believed that the monarch was specially chosen by God seems hard to sustain in light of the monarchy’s history. England’s nobility murdered quite a few of their monarchs by stealth, and others by law: most dramatically Charles I, executed for treason in 1649, whose attempts to call attention to the legal incoherency of his opponents’ position (“for the law of this land, I am no less confident, that no learned lawyer will affirm that an impeachment can lie against the King, they all going in his name: and one of their maxims is, that the King can do no wrong”) failed before the counterargument of the axe. England then restored the monarchy nine years later, only to panic when the laws of succession appeared poised to put another Catholic on the throne, at which point a bunch of nobles simply drove the king out of town, announced that he had “vacated” the throne, and invited his Protestant daughter and son-in-law to fill it instead. The law of the divine right of kings, it seems, is about as effective in practice as any other kind of know-your-rights presentation.

Over time, as European nobles began to organize themselves into bodies resembling legislatures, and then these legislatures were gradually transformed or violently overthrown to be replaced with more broadly elected legislatures, the difficulties of having a powerful leader chosen by birth—whose capabilities couldn’t be predicted and whose removal could be arduous to orchestrate—often seemed to outweigh the putative advantages of stability and predictability that agnatic succession was supposed to guarantee. Monarchical lawmaking prerogatives were absorbed by other governmental bodies, and many monarchies were transformed from absolute to “constitutional” monarchies, where the monarch had a *role* in government, but was not *the* government. With the growth of nationalist ideologies in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, the idea that a monarch was valuable less as a political leader unto himself and more as a unifying symbol of an enlightened nation-state began to gain currency, and newly-formed or recently-unified states tried to draw on the costumery of monarchy to create an illusion of historical continuity in the face of totally new political realities. When the many linguistically and culturally disparate regions of the Italian peninsula unified into a single nation-state in the late nineteenth century, Italian nationalists invited the king of the house of Savoy—which then ruled over the island of Sardinia and a bit of southern France—to come to Rome and assume the monarchy of the newly-declared kingdom of Italy; at the state funeral for Italy’s first king, Italian politicians self-consciously designed funerary rituals that had a historic “feel” despite having no actual historical precedents. The example of European monarchies was also a pattern that states in other parts of the world drew upon: Japanese ministers deliberately studied the pageantry of European monarchies as they sought to reinvent the role and ritual trappings of the emperor during the Meiji period, as part of a bid to engender a sense of national identity in Japan’s inhabitants and present Japan to the world as a modern imperial power.

Thus, in modern times, it seems clear that the monarch, as a person, isn’t someone naturally endowed with special ability or divine favor; and it’s also clear that the little aesthetic touches that make monarchy feel *ancient* and *sacred* are often a fairly thin veneer with little historical substance. Many European countries, some dramatically, some quietly, have dispensed with their monarchies for this reason, while others have retained them as a kind of nostalgic artifact to comfort or amuse the public. In this age of many defunct monarchies, there are also many kings-in-waiting, like Arthur or Aragorn, mournfully eyeing their vacant thrones. Ultraconservative royalists in France are split between whether the true king of France is rich guy #1 (Louis XX, Louis Alphonse de Bourbon), or rich guy #2 (Jean IV, the count of Paris). The heir to the throne of Portugal periodically goes to the press to defend bullfighting or blame the country’s economic decline on its radical decision to become a republic in 1910. The obsession with the glamor of lost monarchies also goes well beyond Europe. In 2019, the *New York Times* ran a popular story about a family that claimed to be the lost royals of the Indian kingdom of Oudh, and persuaded Indian government authorities to let them occupy a half-ruined 14th-century hunting lodge, where the family lived in a state of moldering grandeur until their deaths by illness and suicide. The difference between these tragic pretenders and the royal family of England, substantively speaking, is simply that the Windsors en-

Do You Have What It Takes to Be a British Royal?

by Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

The House of Windsor understands that many of you aspire to join ~~The Firm~~ our loving family. This quiz will quickly and accurately assess your potential to hold a title. Answer every question honestly and to the best of your ability. Extra points granted if you can identify which questions are based on real royal customs. Ready? Onward.



5. Would your countenance look lovely on a tea towel?

☐ Yes ☐ No



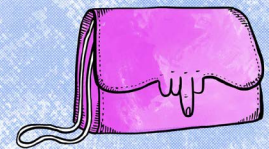
3. Can an elder in your family vouch for your virginity?

☐ Yes ☐ No



1. When sipping tea, your pinky finger should:

- A) Stick out.
- B) Be removed surgically.
- C) Curl in on itself like a baby shrimp.
- D) Point toward the lowest-ranking person in the room.



6. When the queen is done with a conversation, what does she do with her purse?

- A) Cries into it.
- B) Switches it from one hand to the other.
- C) Places it on her plate.
- D) Chews on it.



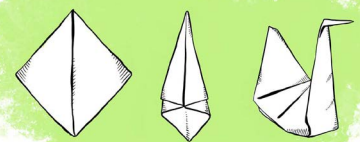
4. Do you have blue blood? *After* it leaves your body?

☐ Yes ☐ No

THAT COUCH WOULD LOOK SO POSH IN THE LIVING ROOM! JUST MOVE THE DILDO.

2. Have you used any of these words in the last week, and/or do you plan to in the future?

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> toilet | <input type="checkbox"/> posh |
| <input type="checkbox"/> pardon | <input type="checkbox"/> patio |
| <input type="checkbox"/> couch | <input type="checkbox"/> dildo |
| <input type="checkbox"/> living room | <input type="checkbox"/> perfume |



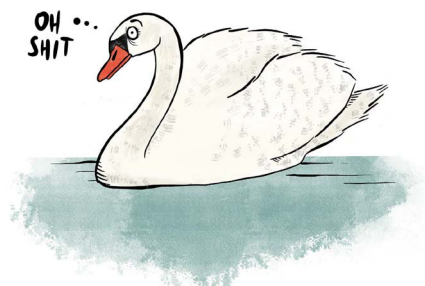
7. After a meal, your used napkin should be:

- A) Folded in half.
- B) Shaped into a swan.
- C) Discreetly swallowed by a butler.



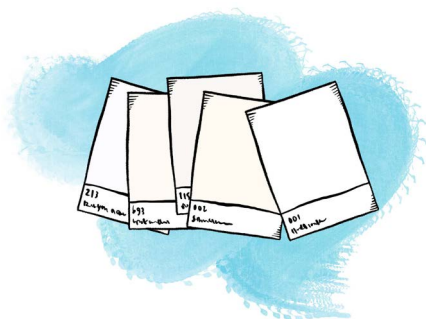
8. Have you ever shoveled food from a plate directly into your gaping mouth?

☐ Yes ☐ No



11. The cure for clinical depression is:

- A) Consuming the flesh of a mute swan.
- B) Calling 1-800-TOUGH-SHIT.
- C) Bagpipes.
- D) Locating The Institution, and telling "it" how you feel.



9. What is your favorite shade of baby?

- A) Windsor White
- B) Marshmallow Bisque
- C) Printer Paper
- D) Queen's Tooth
- E) Ethereal Oyster



12. Can you keep your chin parallel to the ground at all times, even while descending stairs or sleeping?

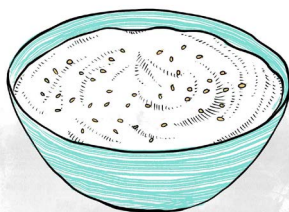
☐ Yes ☐ No



10. Would you gladly accept marital sex advice from:

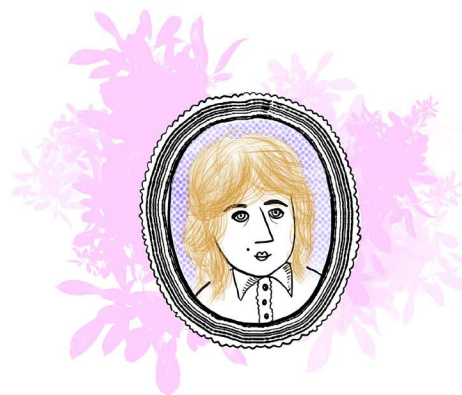
- ☐ Your mother-in-law.
- ☐ Your husband's current girlfriend.
- ☐ A long-haired skeleton holding an ancient scroll.

PLAIN, NONFAT YOGURT
WITH 42 SESAME SEEDS



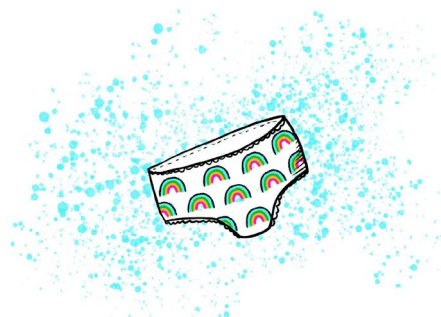
13. Think about what your grandmother has for breakfast every day. Now imagine that you have to eat that same breakfast for the rest of your life, or you will be executed. Does that idea upset you?

☐ Yes ☐ No



14. Do you mind if your husband still actively dates his ex-girlfriend?

☐ Yes ☐ No



15. Does the idea of someone putting on your underwear for you sound strangely appealing?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Score Time!

Your results are based entirely on question

13. If you answered "No," you've got what it takes to be a British royal. You should be exceedingly proud. **Bonus points** if you identified these true royal customs:

1. The pinky finger must be curled in, neither seen nor heard.
2. All but "dildo" are indeed forbidden.
3. Virginity is not required, but Lady Diana's uncle Lord Fermoy assured the press that she had "never had a lover." Gross!
6. It's true. When the queen is done chatting, she moves her handbag from one arm to the other, signalling her aides to come in and hang you.
7. Your napkin must be folded in half.
11. By ancient decree, the queen owns all unmarked mute swans swimming in open waters in the U.K.
12. Yes, royal ladies, keep that chin up.

joy a lavish public sinecure and vigorous merchandising.

Britain has clung to its monarchy even as many other European countries have abolished theirs. There are a few possible explanations for this. The most obvious is that the monarchy is a reminder of the time when Britannia ruled the waves and the sun never set upon its plundered colonial possessions. As British global power shriveled, the monarchy helped its people maintain the illusion that nothing had changed. The Queen is, after all, the head of the Commonwealth, meaning that 54 countries recognize her as having some kind of symbolic position of importance. The Commonwealth may do very little, but the fact that it is headed by the Queen does help Britain reassure itself that it has some special global leadership role. India may no longer be a colony, but the sting is taken out by the fact that it recognizes the Queen on paper as the head of some kind of abstract political unit that it is still a part of.

Britain has also built its “brand” around its monarchy, to the point where the British tourism industry sells the country partly as a kind of royalty-themed amusement park. London’s souvenir shops are full of commemorative plates, mugs, and spoons with pictures of various royals. The monarchy is part of that curious thing known as the National Identity: without a monarchy, there would be no Palace Guards, no Royal Mail—the country would be unrecognizable. Without royal weddings, royal babies, and royal scandals, the tabloid newspapers would have to struggle mightily to find new ways to avoid discussing issues of substantive importance.

BUT THE BRITISH MONARCHY HAS ALSO survived in part because of diligent PR efforts on the part of the royals themselves. In 1917, the family famously conducted a top-to-bottom rebranding effort to convince people that they were authentically British. Up until that point, they had been the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, founded by Edward VII, the son of the German Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, herself the heir to the originally German house of Hanover. But during World War I, it was awkward for the occupants of Buckingham Palace to be German aristocrats, and so overnight they swapped their name for the most British one they could think of. They became the House of Windsor, and stripped Kaiser Wilhelm II of his British titles (“cousin Willy” was still technically colonel-in-chief of the 1st Royal Dragoons even as the two countries’ troops were massacring each other in the fields of Flanders).

The trick worked, and it would not be the last effort the royals made at manipulating public opinion in their favor. Cambridge historian Piers Brendon says the family has “systematically sanitized the documentary past in their own interest.” In his book *And What Do You Do? What The Royal Family Doesn’t Want You To Know*, former Liberal Democrat MP Norman Baker shows that the family has had to carefully airbrush its history to remove or downplay parts that would make it seem shameful. For instance, its members’ fascist sympathies during World War II were far more extensive than is usually recognized—video footage released in 2015, over the objection of the Palace, shows the Queen Mother and the then 7-year-old Elizabeth learning the Nazi salute from Edward VIII. Edward,

who both ascended to the throne and abdicated it in 1936, was an outright Nazi sympathizer, saying it would be “a tragic thing for the world if Hitler were to be overthrown.” Historians have been stymied by the royals when they have attempted to probe into this matter: the noted scholar Karina Urbach says that the Royal Archives clammed up “when she started demanding any material involving details of the British monarchy’s dealings with Nazi Germany,” and that:

“I was ostracized by the Royal Archives because I wanted these papers... The [Monarchy] pretend to be an open [institution] by publishing children’s letters Queen Victoria wrote, and beautiful pictures of royal babies. The things they are feeding us are charming and sugary. But it covers up the fact that they are not giving us the real historical material.”

Strict British libel laws also help the royal family conceal facts from the public. When Kitty Kelley’s tell-all *The Royals* was released in 1997, it could not be published in the U.K., and online booksellers would not even mail copies to British addresses. The book presents the royals in an extremely unflattering light. Princess Margaret is described as an anti-Semite who was disgusted by *Schindler’s List* (“I don’t want to hear another word about Jews or the Holocaust”) and who once confronted columnist Ann Landers and demanded to know “Are you a Jew?” The Queen Mother is presented as an alcoholic and a racist. While Kelley was criticized for her lack of careful citations, many claims have been substantiated elsewhere. A sympathetic biographer confessed that the Queen Mother had said something so racist to him (“beware the blackamoors”) that he felt the need to suppress it during her lifetime to preserve her image. (She also admitted to having “some reservations about Jews.”) The boozing was well-known: by noon the Queen Mother “had her first drink of the day—a potent mix of two parts of the fortified wine Dubonnet to one part of gin... followed by red wine with lunch and, very occasionally, a glass of port to end it.” The Kelley book’s contents were suppressed with Stalinesque effectiveness. British journalists could write about the book’s existence, but they couldn’t say what was in it. In fact, many newspaper writers couldn’t even get ahold of copies.

There is plenty for the royals to want to keep quiet. Norman Baker shows that British taxpayers subsidize the royals more than they might think, and that “totted up, the true cost to the public purse stretches well beyond £300 million a year.” The public, he says, lacks a “full appreciation of just how much public money goes to the royals, and just how much they have enriched themselves from public money over the decades.” Monarchs do not pay inheritance taxes, meaning that when the Queen Mother died, a vast amount of wealth was passed down to Elizabeth that would otherwise have incurred an estimated £20 to 30 million in tax. The royals have “special privileges... that prevent proper public scrutiny of their wealth, such as sealed wills and personal correspondence closed for a lifetime.” Baker notes that “[s]ecrecy over the royal family’s wealth has been a constant feature down the years.” Much of the family’s wealth is likely hidden from public knowledge—the Panama Papers leaks in 2016 revealed that the Queen had an offshore investment portfolio with money in some dodgy enterprises.

The Queen began voluntarily paying taxes in 1992 to ward off criticism, but Baker points out that there are countless ways in which she and other royals enrich themselves at public expense. Grotesquely,

CURRENT AFFAIRS

THE
CHOICE OF
9 OUT OF 10
MERMAID
QUEENS



the royals also regularly plead poverty, with news stories about their impending “cash crises.” In 2016, an astonishing £370-million taxpayer-funded renovation of Buckingham Palace was approved, with little public debate over whether the billionaire queen deserved a giant new public subsidy during a time of austerity. Baker further documents the astonishing abuses of public money by some royals, including hundreds of thousands of pounds in unnecessary travel expenses. Prince Andrew, who had to step back from royal duties after the extent of his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein was revealed, spent £325,000 in a single year on helicopters and planes. (In 2019, the British public spent £15,000 just to fly him to a golf club.) Harry and Meghan cost British taxpayers nearly a quarter of a million pounds on their 2019 trip to Africa with baby Archie. Prince Charles has gone on foreign jaunts with a “doctor, a dresser, a valet, and a travelling yeoman,” and occasionally a support team of 18 people. Baker concludes that:

“The indisputable fact is that most members of the royal family have no compunction about using very expensive forms of transport when much cheaper alternatives are available, and no compunction about leaving a huge carbon footprint while lecturing others on the need to tackle climate change.”

IT’S SOMEWHAT STRANGE THAT THERE hasn’t been more outrage at the idea of taxpayers funding the travels of useless rich people—travels that seemingly include jaunts to visit Jeffrey Epstein and cavort with underage girls. Even though the monarchy is at best absurd and at worst abhorrent, there has been little push to actually get rid of it. Republicanism—that is, the belief that Britain should be a republic rather than a constitutional monarchy—has often been noisier in the past. Keir Hardie, the first leader of the Labour Party, said bluntly in a 1901 address to the House of Commons that “as a believer in Republican principles, I can see no use for a Royal Family.” But more recent Labour leaders tend to have reasoned that going after the monarchy is simply not worth the struggle. Jeremy Corbyn, a lifelong republican, said it was “not a battle that I am fighting” after becoming Labour leader.

There seems to be a general belief, even among leftists, that the monarchy does not do enough harm to be worth bothering about. Perhaps in principle there is no reason to have royalty in the 21st century. And there is a good argument to be made that having “God Save The Queen” as a national anthem is ridiculous—shouldn’t an anthem celebrate the country rather than a single rich lady? But, then again, how many anthems are sung with great attention paid to their meaning? Isn’t it all just nationalistic theater regardless?

There are aspects even of the somewhat-benign constitutional monarchic theater that are unpleasant to behold. When Theresa May met Prince William she was forced by the code of etiquette to curtsy to him, and as Baker asks, “Apart from piloting a helicopter and producing children, what has Prince William actually done? Certainly nothing that merits a degrading curtsy from one of our most senior politicians, a woman twice his age.” The Queen’s Christmas message, sometimes delivered “in front of a gold piano, gold fireguard, gold clock, and gold mirror,” is a reminder of the grotesque divide between life inside the palace and life for the British working class.

It remains to be seen just how much the British monarchy is being

held together by the present queen’s personal appeal. Far from becoming a Marie Antoinette figure, the BBC says that she “has been described as an ‘ultimate feminist,’ been the subject of endless lists titled things like ‘25 Reasons Why We Love the Queen’ and seen her outfits, hats, and even her brooches eagerly dissected by a new generation.” Her reputation has been seriously at risk only twice; the first when she was perceived to be indifferent and aloof in the wake of Princess Diana’s death, and the second when Prince Harry and Meghan Markle publicly accused the royal family of ostracizing Meghan to the point of engaging in outright racism. They did avoid direct criticism of the Queen herself, and whether Harry and Meghan’s break from the family will lastingly affect public opinion of it remains to be seen. But it *is* clear that when the Queen dies and the crown passes to Charles, the royals will lose their most formidable public relations asset. The Queen has managed to keep the monarchy from being seen as silly, a difficult task given that its silliness becomes more and more evident over time. The papers avoid whipping up public outrage over the fact that the British public are literally giving portions of their own paychecks to a family worth billions. And the public accepts the monarchy in part because it has become as much a part of cultural life as a nice cup of tea.

Perhaps one of the problems with getting rid of monarchies is that people have a natural craving for both familiar routines and exciting spectacles: we have been conditioned to view royalty as something that offers both predictable annual rituals and the occasional prospect of secondhand glamor and romance. It’s surely no accident that interest in the royal family always seems to peak whenever one of its members marries an attractive, charismatic spouse or gives birth to an adorable child. William James, in the famous essay “The Moral Equivalent of War,” voiced sympathy for pacifism, but suggested it was doomed until it could replicate the romantic and inspiring parts of militarism. “Military feelings,” he wrote, “are too deeply grounded to abdicate their place among our ideals until better substitutes are offered than the glory and shame that come to nations as well as to individuals from the ups and downs of politics and the vicissitudes of trade.” It’s perhaps also true that arguing vigorously for the abolition of monarchy feels politically futile when the spectacle of monarchy seems to offer some sense of pride and pleasure, however wildly overpriced, to some subset of the population, especially while the drudgery of modern life offers very few alternative flights for the imagination.

But there are other ways of giving people fun pageantry. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras has kings and queens, who reign for a day and whose job is to preside over a parade and a ball. A great deal of effort is put into making Mardi Gras grand and spectacular, and people can take pride in their costumes and feel special, but it features none of the downsides of actual monarchies. There are far better alternatives than just watching rich people on TV, but we need to think creatively about how to revive fun old traditions and come up with new ones, because any political project worth participating in must offer the kind of romance that draws people to tales about kings and queens. If that means wearing silly costumes and staging parades, so be it. But people need to have romance and fun and glamour—and deserve it more than just on special occasions. Even Americans are fascinated with royalty, and if the internal dramas of aristocrats are no longer the subject of our children’s stories, we will need new fairy tales. ✚



WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A FRASIER?

by Aisling McCrea

IT IS COMMON FOR PEOPLE TO POINT AT A PIECE OF abstract expressionism and say “My five year old could do that.” (So common, in fact, that art historian Susie Hodge wrote an apologetic for modern art called *Why Your Five Year Old Could Not Have Done That*.) The response by abstract expressionism’s defenders, especially when these conversations take place online or in print, is to insist that for many such works of art you need to *be there* to appreciate them. “Being there” can mean a kind of submission to the vibe: throwing away for a second your cynicism, allowing yourself to open a space in your mind and believe that there might be something to what is being presented. But it can also mean literally being in front of the work in person. Personally, I have found this helps clarify my relationship with some modern work labelled “high art” and not with some others; I feel nothing when I look at splodges by Ellsworth Kelly, but am fascinated by the splodges of Thomas Downing. Most clichéd of all, I feel hypnotized when I look at the paintings of Mark Rothko, an artist who profoundly affects many people but whose work is equally excoriated for being pretentious, childish, or a case of the emperor’s new clothes. I have no formal education in art criticism, and can’t speak on brushwork or texture or whatever. All I can tell you is looking at a Rothko always gives me a very specific feeling of looking out of a window, but every painting is a different window. Some of them are those weird high-up bathroom windows in bars late at night when you didn’t really feel like coming out, and some of them are hotel windows when you’re on the road and feel distinctly like you’re both nowhere and everywhere, and some of them are like looking through the window of an older relative’s house at Christmas. But I didn’t feel any of that until I saw them for myself.

Apart from everything else, this may be one of the insurmountable obstacles of visual art, and part of why it has a reputation for pretentiousness: the first thing you are told about it, in response to any skepticism, is that you must pay god knows how many dollars to get to some major city with a high cost of living and walk through the squeaky-shoe hallways of a space that tells you *you must appreciate this art. It will prove your sophistication. This is what grownups do.*

FRASIER (1993-2004) IS A SITCOM ABOUT THE LIFE of the wealthy aesthete Dr. Frasier Crane, a spinoff of the Boston-based sitcom *Cheers*. While *Cheers* centered around the down-to-earth clientele of a friendly neighborhood bar—where the stuffy and overeducated Dr. Crane was an anomaly—*Frasier* follows the life of its titular character as he leaves Boston for his hometown of Seattle, takes up a job as a radio personality, and tries to inveigle his way into local circles of cultural power—its wine clubs, its lavish fundraisers, its high society dinner parties. Along the way he is both helped and hindered by his brother Niles, an even more obsessive social climber who has married into money, and clashes with his no-nonsense ex-cop father.

The first season, as in many sitcoms, has an unsteady mood as the writers try to figure out the exact tone they’re going for; the show starts out a little slow, and the brothers’ adventures in snootiness are sidelined in favor of exploring the father-son relationship. However, after that, the show finds its niche as a well-tuned farce with an air of sophistication: Frasier or some other character misunderstands something, other characters go off into a room and hatch some scheme, some absurd situation is set up and we get to

see it all play out. One could imagine a similar show set amongst suburban housewives or fishermen in Alaska and it would still be great, but what makes *Frasier* memorable to a lot of people is the Crane brothers' adventures in the absurd world of Seattle aristocracy: the soirées thrown by stone-faced heiresses, the barbs traded over antique furniture, and Frasier's impossible apartment full of conversation pieces. (That's "impossible" both geographically and financially: a recent *GQ* article by Gabriella Paiella calculated that even a well-heeled professional like Frasier would not have been able to afford the down payment on his three-bedroom condo with its view of the Space Needle, let alone the mortgage). Some of the best episodes feature Frasier and Niles plotting and bickering over some absurd status symbol, such as who gets to be part of an exclusive club, or who has the higher IQ.

In between all this, they demonstrate their affinity for all things "high culture," unrestrained by faux humility or any fear of being labelled snobs; they dine almost exclusively at pricey French restaurants and openly sneer at beer drinkers and barbecue. In a way, this dates the show: the 21st century standards of "culturedness" demand eclecticism, and a profession of love not only for "high culture" but for things once considered mass-produced drivel. As *Frasier* was going off the air, TV was already morphing from the *idiot box* to the home of *prestige* entertainment. The popmism movement of the 2000s announced that pop music was as worthy of respect as any other genre, and music bloggers whose tastes were usually limited to Jesus and Mary Chain B-sides suddenly added one or two Alicia Keys tracks to their "best-of" lists, as evidence they weren't just grumpy old men who hated everything made after 1994. Food trucks became gourmet; everything *low* got *elevated*. In 2021, it would make very little sense for the Crane brothers to sneer at beer and barbecue, since that's exactly what the hottest restaurant in Seattle would probably serve.

Frasier is therefore a time capsule for a kind of "culturedness" that seems massively out of reach for most people. This is exactly why the jokes work, since *Frasier* is not a show about "high culture" but a show for a mainstream audience about characters who like "high culture." When Niles says he would go to a desert island with "*the coulbiac of salmon at Guy Savoy*, '*Vissi d'Arte*' from *Tosca*, and the *Côtes du Rhône Châteauneuf-du-Pape '47*," the joke is not that the audience has some intimate shared knowledge of these items, it is that these items sound very pompous and obscure. (A pompousness and obscurity that gets doubled down on when Frasier responds "...you are *SO* predictable.") The world of *Frasier* is thus a world of signifiers, where real artworks that have been venerated for decades if not hundreds of years amount to little more than a stand-in for "stuff a fancy guy would like which we assume you haven't seen." This does not augur well for what our society does with the art it considers its finest, and who exactly is allowed to view it.

Part of the inaccessibility of this fanciness stems from its expense. The Crane brothers' lives are full of events: in the episode *Dinner Party*, they have to search through their calendars for weeks to find an evening where they're both free, and all those theater outings must surely add up. Their homes are full of furniture and *objets d'art*

which they can examine at their own leisure, rather than taking the day off work to travel to a museum (not that they appear to work much anyway). Their preferred footwear is a certain kind of shoe made by an Italian craftsman who can only toil over one pair at a time (when he completes them, "*they ring the cathedral bells and the whole town celebrates.*") And they are exposed to new knowledge and experiences through their social connections, which cost enormous amounts of money to maintain.

My point here is not "this sitcom is unrealistic about finances"—I mean, jokes about the *Friends* apartment are as old as *Friends* itself—but that "culturedness" in *Frasier* is tied to a certain lifestyle. This is made explicit through an arc in the fifth and sixth seasons, when Niles divorces his wealthy wife and is briefly thrown into poverty (and by poverty, I mean "is forced to live on his therapist salary.") This change in circumstances ejects him not only from his social circles but from his interests as well: without money, he loses both his access to the world of fine art and the status it confers upon him. The episode *How To Bury A Millionaire* shows him truly heartbroken and lost, as he resorts to playing ping-pong with his neighbors at his cheap and tacky new residence. Even his things don't seem to join him in his new place; the things belong not to him, but to the other world, in which he cannot afford to remain.

IT'S OBVIOUS THAT PRETTY MUCH EVERYONE HAS the ability to appreciate some kind of art. Most people have at least a few songs or movies that they love. But our relationship to certain *kinds* of art is more alienated and uncertain, and it is exactly this that *Frasier* plays on. Compared to popular music, which is pumped through our society everywhere from department stores to clubs to hospital waiting areas, and which becomes a shibboleth and a shared passion from a young age, we are taught that certain kinds of art are something *apart* from everyday life; something a few people know about, if they have the resources and interest to pursue it, but not something everyone wants or needs to know about, and which can only be truly explored through occasional visits to its hallowed shrines. Almost anyone can listen to the greatest pop music of all time right now if they want, but the work of the greatest painters is scattered across the world's cities—often cities that are expensive to travel to or live in, even if the gallery itself is free—or cloistered in private collections. You can look at copies, of course, but is it the same thing to squint at Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* in a coffee-table book as it is to see all three hundred and seventy five square feet of it in the Louvre? We can read about why it's important, we can see from a copy that it's competently executed, we can even go on a "virtual tour" on the museum's website, but are we granted access to its true beauty unless we pay for a trip to Paris?

And even when we go to galleries, our experience is mediated by the fact we are in public, not private. We can't dance in the art gallery, the way we might dance our ass off in our homes with our headphones on when nobody's around. (Well, you can if you don't mind getting told off by the docent, I suppose, but most people do mind, and can't.) We are conscious of the people around us,

the bossy silence, the rules—no flash photography, no eating, no touching. We are encouraged to have a respectful relationship with the art, the way you have a respectful relationship with your old-fashioned father-in-law, keeping always at arm's length. This doesn't prevent us from occasionally having a moment with art, and sometimes art can be just fun—the figures of Reubens and Goya often feel like they're punching their way out of the canvas, and Kuniyoshi has some excellent woodblock prints of frogs fighting each other. Nonetheless, most people struggle to get close to visual art—especially contemporary art, which frequently resists obvious displays of skill and is shrouded in its complex relationship to its reputation—and any other artform which society tells us there is a “correct” way to appreciate.

The philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote about this contrast between art that requires presence and art that is accessible to all in his most famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. One of Benjamin's insights is that forms of art resistant to mass production (e.g. paintings, hand-made Italian shoes) have qualities that easily reproduced art (e.g. a music album) can never have. In particular, it has *authenticity*, the status conferred by the knowledge that it really is the original version of something which we hold in high regard, and it also has *aura*, that irreplaceable feeling we get from being in its presence. *Aura* is what I feel in front of a Rothko. *Authenticity* is what people feel when they see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre after seeing it hundreds of times in other formats (though interestingly many struggle to feel its *aura* these days, as they must view it through bulletproof glass and the heads of dozens of fellow gawkers). There's an element of social construction to these qualities: if you'd somehow never heard of the Mona Lisa, would you be able to pick it out from a gallery of hundreds as the most important painting in the bunch? And galleries must surely add to the construction of *aura*, with their churchlike atmospheres. This makes it difficult, at times, to tell whether art has some intrinsic power, or whether the power we feel is a result of the status society's gatekeepers bestow on certain works.

The Marxist art critic John Berger, in his beloved TV series *Ways of Seeing* (1972), essentially repeated Benjamin's view, explaining how overexposure to copies of old paintings warps our ability to see them as they were supposed to be seen. But he also demystifies them, treating them not as magical creations existing purely for art's sake but as products of their time, often grounded in their material, almost banal context—usually the context of a bunch of rich people who wanted to show off. As an example, Berger takes a much-romanticized landscape by Gainsborough and characterizes it not as a study of nature, but a boast by the aristocratic couple who commissioned and sat for it, a Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, who see the beauty of their land as a representation of their importance; just another aesthetic object that they own. This obviously doesn't mean old art is bad. But it complicates the picture to add in the socio-economic context: that the valorization of beautiful things, things that can be transfixing, even transformative to many people, has always been tied up with status and possession—and possession necessitates exclusion.

AS WITH ANY OTHER SHOW IN THE AGE of tabbed browsing, it is tempting to pause *Frasier* mid-episode so you can Google references you don't get. In the case of most sitcoms, this means looking up obscure celebrities from the 1970s who were probably a big deal when the writers were young. In *Frasier*'s case, this means reading the plot of *La Traviata* and maybe watching a bit from Youtube. You don't *have* to do this, but you might convince yourself it's a way of getting cultural vegetables into your diet. (I hear what you're saying, bellowing to me from your Eames chair: “*Aisling, this is preposterous. Frasier is a comedy show, not a lecture series.*” Well, is *Frasier* a stupid way of understanding “high culture”? Yes. Is there a less stupid way? Arguably no. The arts world is full of arbitrariness and gatekeeping. You may as well get your knowledge from a TV series with a funny dog in it.) All the while, as you squint at a low-quality video of an orchestra pit, you might quietly think to yourself: *is there something I'm not getting? Is it wrong to be bored? Would it feel different if I were there?* But even if you see *La Traviata* in person, the questions might continue. *Am I enjoying this the right amount? Is there a book I should have read? If I knew more about the context, would I like it more? Is everyone just pretending? Or is it fine just not to like it?* “High culture” by definition is always weighed down by these mille-feuille layers of questions: whether such-and-such work is part of the “canon,” if its place is deserving, which translation is best, which version is best, whether one must see it live, whether one must read the notes, whether one must stand on one's head and watch the whole thing upside-down for the true experience to be granted by the arts gods. Sometimes our appreciation for a piece of canonized work can be instinctive and delightful, and often we're actually surprised. Perhaps this is an indictment of what the canon actually does to our relationships with art: it's not wrong for art to require effort to understand, but I'm not sure it should feel like so much work.

Frasier is a wonderful show. But it's also a document of the wall between the finest things our world produces—or rather, what centuries of wealthy people proffer as the finest things our world produces—and the vast majority of people. The Crane brothers' love of art appears to be genuine, although it's a love mediated by ego and classism. Even when their snooty friends are not around they sing and play piano, they strive to perfect their cordon bleu cooking, and they rhapsodize about turquoise inlay, giving their lives a richness that appears to bless them at times with pure happiness. Yet this happiness is facilitated by a ludicrous, never-ending pile of wealth, and the rigorous social training bestowed on them by decades of elite education and assiduous schmoozing. Most people's relationship with art is not quite so blessed. Financial and geographical hurdles, class relations, insecurities and social guessing games all work to turn culture into an ego trip for the rich and a minefield for everyone else. In *Frasier*, works of art become a joke, presumably not because the writers hate art, but because the art serves to show how unrelatable the Crane brothers can be. But wouldn't it be nice if we lived in a world that took art seriously? And wouldn't that entail everyone having access to art? ✚

the rich hippie's guide to happiness



Housing crisis got you “bummed”?

If you find yourself houseless, don't despair. You can build your own shelter out of upcycled billiard tables, artisanal twigs, and Goop© from Goop©.

Alternatively: Consider becoming one with the elements.



Depressed? Lacking energy?

Spiritual motivation can wax and wane, especially during these difficult times. If you find yourself struggling with dark thoughts, anger, or a fatalistic sense that the planet is doomed, take a break: spend a few days on your super-yacht.

Alternatively: No yacht of your own? Try a friend's!



Feeling “brain-drained”?

Even the most creative among us need to recharge now and then. If you still don't have a MentalMesh™ with turboport charging capacity, there are a number of quick, efficient ways to boost your brain juices. Consider your household employees: they're probably walking around with an excess amount of cranial fluid. Drain it at once to improve both your creative capacity and their mental health.

Alternatively: For a naturalistic approach that doesn't require a brain-stent and restraints, consider topping off with your employees' blood rather than their brain fluid. According to Dr. Liz Batori of the Wallachia Clinic, “Traditional remedies often carry a lot of wisdom.”

Crushed? Canceled? Overwhelmed? Done in by the barrage of infor- mation and events?

The mob comes for everyone eventually. Whether you're being attacked by trolls on social media or by the native population of the island you bought for a very reasonable price, it doesn't matter: everyone deserves a place where they feel safe. Maybe the masses are upset about some offhand remark, a controversial political stance, or the mysterious disappearance of the young people who have gone to serve in your villa: in any case, you owe it to yourself to detox and log off. Try locking your phone and tablet in your safe room. If that doesn't work, festoon your barricades with hurricane fencing and robot murder dogs. What's really important is that you take some time and space for yourself. Stop trying to do everything for other people!

Alternatively: Have you considered burning it all down? "Fire," said a horned and naked spiritual guru I either met or imagined at Burning Man, "is Planet Earth's most natural cleanser."



Wellness concerns? Gnawing pit in your stomach?

Hunger is a real struggle when dieting, or when you've been hustling from gig to gig with no time for caloric intake. Feed your sense of accomplishment by reflecting on the benefits of intermittent fasting.

Alternatively: Tamp down that contentious sense of eating-disfulfilment with an infusion of honey, agave, and fermented cordisia juice. Don't skimp on this: get real cordisia berries, and grind them to paste by hand. Your health matters!

Stressed? Suspicious? Even—as some have begun to say—paranoid?

There's a quick way to ensure that the people around you can be trusted. Download a rating app of your choice—we recommend Friendlet and Numeró— and encourage everybody to download it into their mandatory friendship bracelet. Once they have a rating app, you'll be able to inform them in real time just how much you like and trust them. That should keep everyone on their toes.

Alternatively: For exceptionally difficult entourages, consider poison.



WANTED



HIS GRACE, THE DUKE OF ANKH, COMMANDER SIR
SAMUEL "SAM" VIMES
FOR THE CRIMES OF
ALLOWING NON-HUMANS TO JOIN THE CITY WATCH
& IGNORING PETTY CRIMES

WANTED



BERT SPANGLER
A.K.A.
MOIST VON LIPWIG
FOR USURPING THE FREE MARKET THROUGH
PUBLIC WORKS, PRACTICING MODERN MONETARY
THEORY, & MAKING THE POST OFFICE EFFICIENT

WANTED



**OTTO
VON CHRIEK**
FOR IGNORING VAMPIRIC TRADITION &
HELPING TO FOUND THE FREE PRESS

WANTED



ESMERELDA
"GRANNY" WEATHERWAX
FOR SUBVERTING THE PATRIARCHY, IGNORING
POLITICAL BORDERS, ENCOURAGING GIRLS TO BE
EDUCATED, NEVER MARRY

WANTED



GREEBO
FOR TWO COUNTS OF VAMPIRICIDE,
IMPERSONATING A HUMAN,
& THREATENING ALL ANIMAL LIFE

WANTED



GYTHA
"NANNY" OGG
FOR THE CRIMES OF DANCING, SWEARING IN THE
PRESENCE OF WOMEN, TALKING BACK IN
PUBLIC

WANTED



DEATH
A.K.A.
BILL DOG
FOR REGICIDE, BAD PUN
& MURDER OF A CUR

WANTED



TIFFANY ACHING
FOR USURPING THE PATRIARCHY, POSSESSING THE
BODIES OF ANIMALS, SEEING WHAT IS ACTUAL

WANTED



**CHEERY
LITTLEBOTTOM**

FOR THE CRIMES OF IGNORING DWARVEN
TRADITION BY: RECOGNIZING HER GENDER,
DRESSING LIKE A WOMAN, NOT LIKING GOLD,
SUPPORTING THE CAMPAIGN FOR EQUAL HEIGHTS

DISCWORLD PUSHED ME LEFT

by Steven Young

IT TOOK HANNAH ARENDT TWO BOOKS AND 800 or so pages to describe the origins of totalitarianism and the banality of evil. Terry Pratchett did it in 326 words when describing the workplace culture of the religious torture chambers in his book *Small Gods*. Karl Marx spent many chapters in *Capital* describing how the rich fleece the poor; Pratchett boiled much of that down into the 169-word “Boots’ Theory of Socioeconomic Unfairness” in *Men At Arms*. By using humor to poke fun at the world that he created, Terry Pratchett made many progressive and leftist ideas accessible, explainable, and shareable. And his Discworld series helped move my political outlook leftward in a way that not many other things could.

I grew up conservative in the way that many middle-class suburban religious white kids are conservative. (“We’re fine, right? Everyone *else* must be fine, then. If not, it’s their fault.”) My father was a career Army officer and my mother had been in the Army during Vietnam. As adults, they both joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). That’s why I served a mission for two years in Brazil (for my Church), and why I joined the Marine Corps, serving my country (I thought, lol) for 12 years. You would think that being a religious colonizer, and a veteran in the “War on Terror” would have cemented my conservativeness, but the most important thing I inherited from my parents is silliness. I am a very silly person, and am more strongly influenced by funny things (comedy, light-hearted fiction) than serious things (pundits, war). Conservative comedy, I realized as I matured, wasn’t particularly funny or clever, since it consisted mostly of racism and bullying. In watching, listening to, and reading comedians who critiqued society and its institutions, rather than just mocking people, I began to see the weak points in my inherited conservative views. Then I found the Discworld, and was changed forever.

Terry Pratchett’s 41-novel *Discworld* series describes a place of barbarian heroes and hapless academics, brave witches and cowardly Wizards, silly kings and evil fairy godmothers. There are magical flying dragons, and domesticated swamp dragons with a propensity for inadvertent self-immolation. You’ll also find plenty of politics, as well as war, inventions, grifting, intrigue, love, danger, and DEATH. (On the Disc, Death is no mere abstraction, but an anthropomorphic personification with a voice like “*the lid of a sarcophagus slamming*,” who is really quite likeable.) Perhaps more than anything else, the Discworld has humor. Every page is full of puns and other wordplay, clever rejoinders, and silly situations. Pratchett’s stories are often laugh-out-loud funny and at the same time incredibly insightful, often by using a silly situation to show

the inherent silliness of many things in our world.

In his book *The Truth*, about the invention of the newspaper, Pratchett writes that “*People like to be told what they already know... They get uncomfortable when you tell them new things... They like to know that, say, a dog will bite a man. That is what dogs do. They don’t want to know that a man bites a dog, because the world is not supposed to happen like that. In short, what people think they want is news, but what they really crave is olds.*” Pratchett often gets the reader to think about “the news” by referencing “the olds,” re-telling classic stories from a different perspective to challenge their established values. For example, in *Witches Abroad* (Discworld #12, Witches #3), the young witch Magrat Garlick is given a magic wand, and told that she is to act as fairy godmother for a young woman named Emberella, an obvious play on Cinderella (both in name and, as we find out, in the story). After many adventures on the way to find Emberella, Magrat discovers that there is another fairy godmother who is “helping” Emberella by trying to force her into marrying a handsome “Prince” (who had until very recently been a frog, and still thinks he is one). The book hinges on Magrat and her fellow witches competing with this other fairy godmother by trying to help Emberella figure out if marrying the handsome prince is what she really wants. The entire story, in fact, is premised on what happens when powerful people (in this case, powerful magic users) try to impose their idealistic stories onto the lives of others.

Pratchett’s 41 novels are dense with literary references, and are hilariously critical of just about anything one could be critical of. I do not have enough space to give the incredibly broad scope of the characters and places of the Discworld the discussion they deserve, so I will focus for now on the biggest city on the Disc: Ankh-Morpork. That’s right, “*Ankh-Morpork! Pearl of cities! This is not a completely accurate description, of course—it was not round and shiny—but even its worst enemies would agree that if you had to liken Ankh-Morpork to anything, then it might as well be a piece of rubbish covered with the diseased secretions of a dying mollusc.*” Ankh-Morpork can be likened to immediately-pre-industrialization New York City and London, and many of the problems in the stories arise from the growing industrialization of the Discworld—such as urban blight, policing, corruption, organized crime, innovation, monopolies, and lack of funding for public services.

The government of Ankh-Morpork can be described as libertarian, more or less. The city of millions is ruled over by the Patrician, whose role is, as he understands it, to ensure that everything works. “*Ankh-Morpork had dallied with many forms of government and had ended up with that form of democracy known as One Man, One*

Vote,” Pratchett writes in *Mort*. “*The Patrician was the Man; he had the Vote*.” The Patrician, Havelock Vetinari, doesn’t rule Ankh-Morpork with an iron fist: he just lets everyone go about their business, and then rigidly holds them accountable. That said, his real power comes from his ability to influence people by sheer foresight and incredibly detailed planning. In fact it was Vetinari himself who instituted a new type of “justice” system. He legalized the Guild of Thieves:

“Crime was always with us, he reasoned, and therefore, if you were going to have crime, it at least should be organized crime...[I]n exchange for the winding down of the Watch, the [Thieves Guild] agreed, while trying to keep their faces straight, to keep crime levels to a level to be determined annually. That way, everyone could plan ahead... and part of the uncertainty had been removed from the chaos that is life.”

I can imagine certain libertarians trying to explain how paying a predetermined amount to the Thieves Guild in exchange for a receipt and future protection is different from paying taxes, but you and I both recognize that that argument would be nonsense. By taking the concept of “organized crime” literally, Pratchett exposes the baselessness of the libertarian idea that freedom can be found through just legalizing everything and resolving all conflicts through contracts. Arrangements like these don’t make people any safer, and no matter what, they still result in powerful entities charging citizens money for protection.

The societies in Discworld are pre-industrial, as I said, with some later going through industrialization, and for that reason there is little governmental regulation of housing, industry, commerce, and the environment. The water in Ankh-Morpork is described as having a “thick texture,” “too stiff to drink, too runny to plough” and smelling like “several armies had used it first as a urinal and then as a sepulcher.” Any urban planner will tell you that environmental deg-

radation, among other things, leads to urban blight: Ankh-Morpork is squalid and dangerous. As Pratchett writes in *Pyramids*, there “*was not a lot that could be done to make Morpork a worse place. A direct hit by a meteorite would count as gentrification*.” For all the danger and organized crime, “*murder was in fact a fairly uncommon event in Ankh-Morpork, but there were a lot of suicides. Walking in the night-time alleyways of The Shades was suicide. Asking for a short in a dwarf bar was suicide. Saying ‘Got rocks in your head?’ to a troll was suicide. You could commit suicide very easily, if you weren’t careful*.” There’s a sly joke in here about crime statistics, and how technical terminology can be used and misused to tell a certain story. Relatedly, the Assassins Guild* in Ankh-Morpork doesn’t commit “murder”; instead they merely “inhume” their victims, but they keep detailed records of their work and come down very hard on unlicensed inhumations. The state of policing in the United States is so horrible that perhaps, if we had a strong Assassins Guild, it would be an improvement; sure, murder would be officially legal, but in the guild system it’s costly to hire an assassin and costly to *be* an unlicensed assassin, whereas in the United States the police often do the assassinating themselves. At least in Ankh-Morpork the Assassins Guild school provides one of the best and well-rounded educations on the Disc, with scholarships for need-based students. This is partly out of *noblesse oblige*, but mostly because the experienced assassins know how important it is to keep an eye on youngsters with an aptitude for the profession. (Yes, to some degree this sounds like the current school bully-to-cop pipeline, but at least Pratchett’s assassins are held accountable.)

Criminals in Ankh-Morpork are often just referred to as ‘entrepreneurs,’ and at the start of the Discworld series, the city doesn’t have much in the way of a law enforcement system. Due to Vetinari’s re-organization of the Guilds into self-enforcing crime causing and prevention, an official law enforcement body was seen as superfluous. For that reason, early in the Discworld series the Night Watch has only three very ineffective police officers. To leftists like me this may sound great, but—as discussed above, Ankh-Morpork’s methods of criminal self-enforcement coupled with unregulated markets makes for a pretty terrible place to live. The three officers of the Night Watch—Captain Sam Vimes, Sergeant Fred Colon, and Corporal Nobby Nobbs—have three different takes on policing (all of which might be called a sort of “anti-policing.”) In *Making Money*, Pratchett writes that “*Colon and Nobby had lived a long time in a dangerous occupation and they knew how not to be dead. To wit, by arriving when the bad guys had got away*.” Sergeant Colon was the type of policeman who would say that “*trying to keep down crime in Ankh-Morpork was like trying to keep down salt in the sea...*” and would avoid having to interact with criminals by proactively guarding very notable city locations because “*[o]ne day someone was bound to try to steal the Brass Bridge, and then they’d find Sergeant Colon right there waiting for them. In the meantime, it offered a quiet place out of the wind where he could have a relaxing smoke and probably not see anything that would upset him*.” Corporal Nobbs, however, is the kind of person who joins armies to loot corpses.

* Motto: “NOL MORTIFI, SINE LVCRE” (no killing without pay)



He's often the main suspect in any unlicensed minor theft around town, stemming from his preferred method of police work (testing doorknobs to see if houses are locked, and going into the unlocked homes to make sure no thieves are there.) Slightly less risk-averse than Sergeant Colon, Corporal Nobbs would never fight fair:

"Corporal Nobbs," [Vimes] rasped, "why are you kicking people when they're down?"

"Safest way, sir," said Nobby.

When we meet Captain Vimes in *Guards! Guards!* (Discworld #8, City Watch #1), he's a somewhat functional alcoholic who stumbles through the city avoiding crime as much as possible, and trying to keep Colon and Nobbs from getting into dangerous situations. Over the course of his arc, we learn that Vimes is driven to drink because of past trauma, plus the ongoing and somewhat banal trauma caused by the internal tension that he experiences as an ersatz peace officer who is constantly confronted with the fact that he is mostly powerless to protect those who need protecting and that most of the harm caused to the city and its inhabitants is technically "legal." In short, to the extent that Vimes can be considered a "good cop," it's because he comes to the realization that the status quo of organized and legalized criminal syndicates fueled by unregulated libertarian capitalism doesn't help people, and he pushes back somewhat significantly against that status quo.

That being said, in later books the Night Watch is expanded (as one of the more prominent efforts in Ankh-Morpork to officially reflect the diverse social makeup of the city). It becomes the City Watch, and Vimes is promoted, becoming a part of the aristocracy. This is all a bit neat—it just so happens that Ankh-Morpork's libertarian problems can be solved by more policing, and Vimes is rewarded for his efforts. However, despite Vimes' increased station, and the increased power of the City Watch he commands, he remains mostly grounded and functions as a traitor to his new class. This is likely because of the lessons he learned during his years of living on the lower rungs of society, probably the most famous of which is:

Captain Samuel Vimes' "Boots" theory of socioeconomic unfairness.

"The reason that the rich were so rich, Vimes reasoned, was because they managed to spend less money.

Take boots, for example. He earned thirty-eight dollars a month plus allowances. A really good pair of leather boots cost fifty dollars. But an affordable pair of boots, which were sort of OK for a season or two and then leaked like hell when the cardboard gave out, cost about ten dollars. Those were the kind of boots Vimes always bought, and wore until the soles were so thin that he could tell where he was in Ankh-Morpork on a foggy night by the feel of the cobbles.

But the thing was that good boots lasted for years and years. A man who could afford fifty dollars had a pair of boots that'd still be keeping his feet dry in ten years' time, while the poor man who could only afford cheap boots would have spent a hundred dollars on boots in the same time and would still have wet feet."

Though there are flaws to Vimes' theory (mostly because there are many additional reasons why the rich are so much richer than the poor), his theory is very understandable, and can lead readers

to ask deeper economic questions about labor, value, and planned obsolescence. It doesn't seem like many leftist academics have incorporated Vimes' Boots theory into their writings, but the internet is full of people who read the Boots theory and immediately find that it describes their lived experience. As many of us have seen, the internecine online leftist debate over "reading theory" vs. "not being a fucking nerd" often does not lead to much progress when it comes to spreading awareness of left ideas. It is my opinion that a very readable, understandable, and funny version of "theory," like the one Pratchett wrote, allows for more people to understand—or become interested in or familiar with—leftist theories than would otherwise be the case. I know that during my post-Marine Corps life, Pratchett's humor was integral for my discovery of progressive ideals.

HERE ARE SUBTLER LEFT TOUCHES IN PRATCHETT'S work as well: while many stories do focus on high-level political actors or those on the front lines of conflict, his writing also considers the lives of ordinary working people. The personification of Death, rarely dealing with kings and potentates, spends time working as a farm hand, interacting with children (who, like magic users, can see him because they "can see what's really there"), playing rock and roll, and trying to discover the meaning of life... and death. The witches, as powerful magic users, do interact with various political leaders, but it's very clear that they gain their power and experience from helping farmers and shepherds deal with the everyday, practical issues that are part of life in a pre-industrial society. Another subseries focuses on the senior faculty of Unseen University—a bunch of old wizards with tenure—but every story illustrates the blinkered stupidity of these senior faculty members, and how useless they are without the help of their support staff.

Though Pratchett often writes stories about the inherent goodness of most people, he is also interested in the ways in which anybody can become a collaborator with evil. Perhaps the best example of this comes in *Small Gods*, in which the country of Omnia launches a "Quisition" [inquisition] complete with torture pits. The cellar of the Quisition is not, at first glance, a wildly evil workplace: *"There were no jolly little signs saying: You Don't Have To Be Pitilessly Sadistic To Work Here But It Helps!!!"* But take a look at their coffee breaks: *"The inquisitors stopped work twice a day for coffee. Their mugs, which each man had brought from home, were grouped around the kettle on the hearth of the central furnace which incidentally heated the irons and knives."* This is such a small, perfect image of evil: the inquisitors heating their coffee and their torture tools on the same hearth. Pratchett further describes their environment:

"...there were the postcards on the wall. It was traditional that, when an inquisitor went on holiday, he'd send back a crudely coloured woodcut of the local view with some suitably jolly and risqué message on the back. And there was the pinned-up tearful letter from Inquisitor First Class Ishmale "Pop" Quoom, thanking all the lads for collecting no fewer than seventy-eight obols for his retirement present and the

lovely bunch of flowers for Mrs. Quoom, indicating that he'd always remember his days in No. 3 pit, and was looking forward to coming in and helping out any time they were short-handed."

Pratchett could, of course, be describing any office break room. The casual and friendly quality stands in horrid contrast to the actual work of the inquisitors. On this point, Pratchett is unsparing: *"...there are hardly any excesses of the most crazed psychopath that cannot easily be duplicated by a normal, kindly family man who just comes in to work every day and has a job to do."*

Reading this, as a former soldier in the U.S.'s imperial military, and as a member of a generally conservative religion with a strict hierarchy, this passage (and *Small Gods* in total) helped me recognize the part I had played in evil. I am still a member of my church, but do my best to push back against the banal and even friendly aspects that push people to accept evil results without question. Recently, I led the teenage boys in our local congregation in reading *Small Gods* together, with profound results: these fellows understood the underlying themes perfectly. It was very heartening to witness young people realize how humor can be a part of discussing serious topics, and how easily one can be co-opted to do harm by a seemingly inevitable and even friendly-seeming organization. It should be noted, that this experience did not (from what I could tell) cause these young men to question their faith, or to immediately start sinning (hormones will likely do most of that work), but it allowed them the space to question the parts of our organized religion that merit questioning.

T EASING OUT ALL THE THEMATIC COMPLEXITY of Pratchett would take an entire magazine by itself, but it's worth looking at his approach to gender. There's *Monstrous Regiment*, in which (spoiler) nearly every seemingly-male soldier in the army turns out to be a woman in disguise, and a very competent woman at that. (Incidentally, Pratchett does a surprisingly good job of describing the nitty-gritty specifics faced by a frontline soldier that are otherwise almost never mentioned in literature.) Other novels revolve around the experiences of Tiffany Aching, a young witch who must navigate adolescence, gender roles, feminism, rural life, and incursions by very nasty creatures; and she does it all while subverting traditional fantasy stories' treatment of women and sexuality.

Tiffany's stories—and that of the other witches—are presented in sharp contrast to those of the wizards. These tenured academics live in a gender-segregated university that admits only men (with one eventual exception); they are celibate, and show no interest in the women who clean up after them. For example, in *Unseen Academicals*, the Archchancellor Ridcully realizes he *"had never thought of the maids in the singular. They were all...servants. He was polite to them, and smiled when appropriate. He assumed they sometimes did other things than fetch and carry, and sometimes went off to get married and sometimes just...went off. Up until now though, he'd never really thought that they might think, let alone what they thought about."* Women's labor may go unseen in the Unseen University, but the narrative ensures that you see it. Additionally, the

absurdity of the university and the relative impotence of the wizards' magic is constantly contrasted against the witch-style of magic that is largely about creating life and being useful. For example, while the witch Nanny Ogg is the matriarch of a large family, has had a host of husbands (which is not seen as particularly scandalous), loves singing dirty songs, and has published an adult-themed cookbook, the wizards of Unseen University have to keep the magical tome *Ge Forge's Compenydym of Sex Majick* *"in a vat of ice in a room all by itself and there's a strict rule that it can only be read by wizards who are over eighty and, if possible, dead."* There are multiple interactions between the wizards with their supposedly-high minded form of academic magic and the witches with their supposedly-homespun form of rural magic, which end up as pointed critiques both of gender and the hierarchical forms of educational systems. In most of the *Discworld* books, both wizards and witches believe that magic *should* be gendered; in *Equal Rites* (Discworld #3, Witches #1), the wizard Treatle states that *"Witchcraft is Nature's way of allowing women access to the magical fluxes, but you must remember that it is not high magic...High magic requires clarity of thought, you see, and women's talents do not lie in that direction."* At the same time, Granny Weatherwax agrees, saying *"if women were meant to be wizards, they'd be able to grow long white beards...wizardry is not the way to use magic, do you hear, it's nothing but lights and fire and meddling with power."*

That said, the witches do a much better job of questioning the existing hierarchy and challenging their social status than the wizards. In *A Hat Full of Sky* (Discworld #32, Tiffany Aching #2), Pratchett describes the nature of the witches' non-hierarchy (while also illustrating the power of a determined individual) when he writes that *"witches are equal. [They] don't have things like head witches. That's quite against the spirit of witchcraft...Besides, Mistress Weatherwax would never allow that sort of thing."* Though Granny Weatherwax is likely powerful enough to run roughshod over the Disc, she seems to be of the same mind as Tiffany Aching's grandmother, who said *"Them as can do has to do for them as can't. And someone has to speak up for them as has no voices,"* a rather different ethic than that exhibited by the wizards, who gain rank by killing older wizards. In *"Change the Story, Change the World': Gendered Magic and Educational Ideology in Terry Pratchett's Discworld"* L. Kaitlin Williams points out that *"the witches' subversive educational ideology not only undermines the wizard' repressive educational ideology, but also...takes on a threateningly rebellious quality capable of toppling the hegemonic and hierarchical structures of Discworld."*

This is well-illustrated in *The Wee Free Men* (Discworld #30, Tiffany Aching #1), where Tiffany Aching seeks out more formal witch training and is told to *"go to a high place near here, climb to the top, open your eyes...and then open your eyes again,"* the lesson being that witches learn from experiencing the world as it really is, rather than taking tests and attending lectures. This self-education, based in lived experience and self-knowledge, helps her defeat her enemy, the more logic and reason-based Queen of Fairyland who tries to tempt and trick her with realistic dreams. Tiffany's less-than-formal education also makes her a natural ally of the mysterious and magical Nac Mac Feegle "pictsies" with their anti-authoritarian rallying

cry (in a Scottish-ish accent) of “*Nae king! Nae quin! Nae laird! Nae Master! We willna be fooled again!*”

But the most subversive part of Discworld—or possibly the least, depending on your perspective—may be the Industrial Revolution Series, featuring the novels *Moving Pictures*, *The Truth*, *Monstrous Regiment*, *Going Postal*, *Making Money*, and *Raising Steam*, which cover issues such as the free press, minority rights, support groups, industrialization, mechanization, government services, trains, recycling, and telecommunication. Three of the books center around Moist von Lipwig, a former conman who changes his stars (somewhat reluctantly) and helps found or resurrect some of Ankh-Morpork’s public institutions. In *Going Postal*, Lipwig is tasked with saving the city post office when Reacher Gilt (a brutal steampunk pirate who clearly inspired Jeffrey Bezos) tries to drive it into ruins (via murder and monopoly) in order to force everyone to use his new visual telegraph system. Moist manages to save the post office while working through civil rights issues and confronting the complexities of incorporating new technology and automation into a changing world. He also gives us a glimpse as to why he’s an ideal person to usher in a new style of banking when he stops to think about the concept of money:

“Money is not even a thing, it is not even a process. It is a kind of a shared dream. We dream that a small disc of common metal is worth the price of a substantial meal. Once you wake up from that dream, you can swim in a sea of money.”

If this sounds a bit like the principles underlying Modern Monetary Theory, you’ll love the sequel *Making Money*, in which Moist is tasked with saving the city bank. Specifically, he is tasked with taking the bank over from the people who had previously been running it, and who, among other class warfare tactics, wouldn’t let poor people bank because they felt that “*a brigand for a father was something to keep quiet about, but a slave-taking pirate for a great-great-great-grandfather was something to boast of.*” In addition, they had come to understand that “*the best way to make money out of poor people is by keeping them poor.*” Moist saves the bank, and likely the city, when he comes to two important realizations. First, that many people of Ankh-Morpork do not trust the banks (likely because of the dismissive attitude bankers held [hold?] toward the poor), but they do believe in the overall progress of their city. Second, he notices that many people of Ankh-Morpork have begun using postage stamps (which Moist invented in *Going Postal*) as currency. Combining these two insights, he realizes that the city’s money does not need to be backed by gold, and begins making new money that is backed by the city itself (and further determined by the value of the bodies of the city’s inactive golem slaves/workers, which is just a whole other mess). If this doesn’t sound like an especially profound reform, you would be right. Ankh-Morpork remains a city with terrible living conditions, terrible water, and extreme inequality. *Making Money* is the only Discworld book with an economist in it, and it has predictable results.

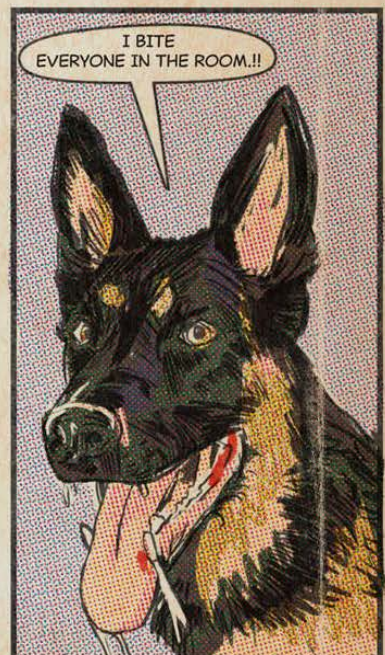
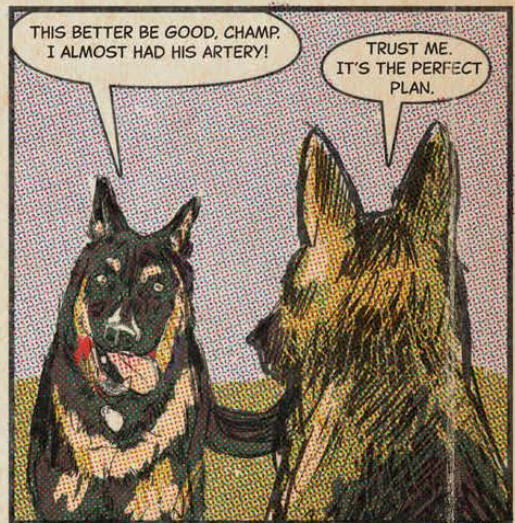
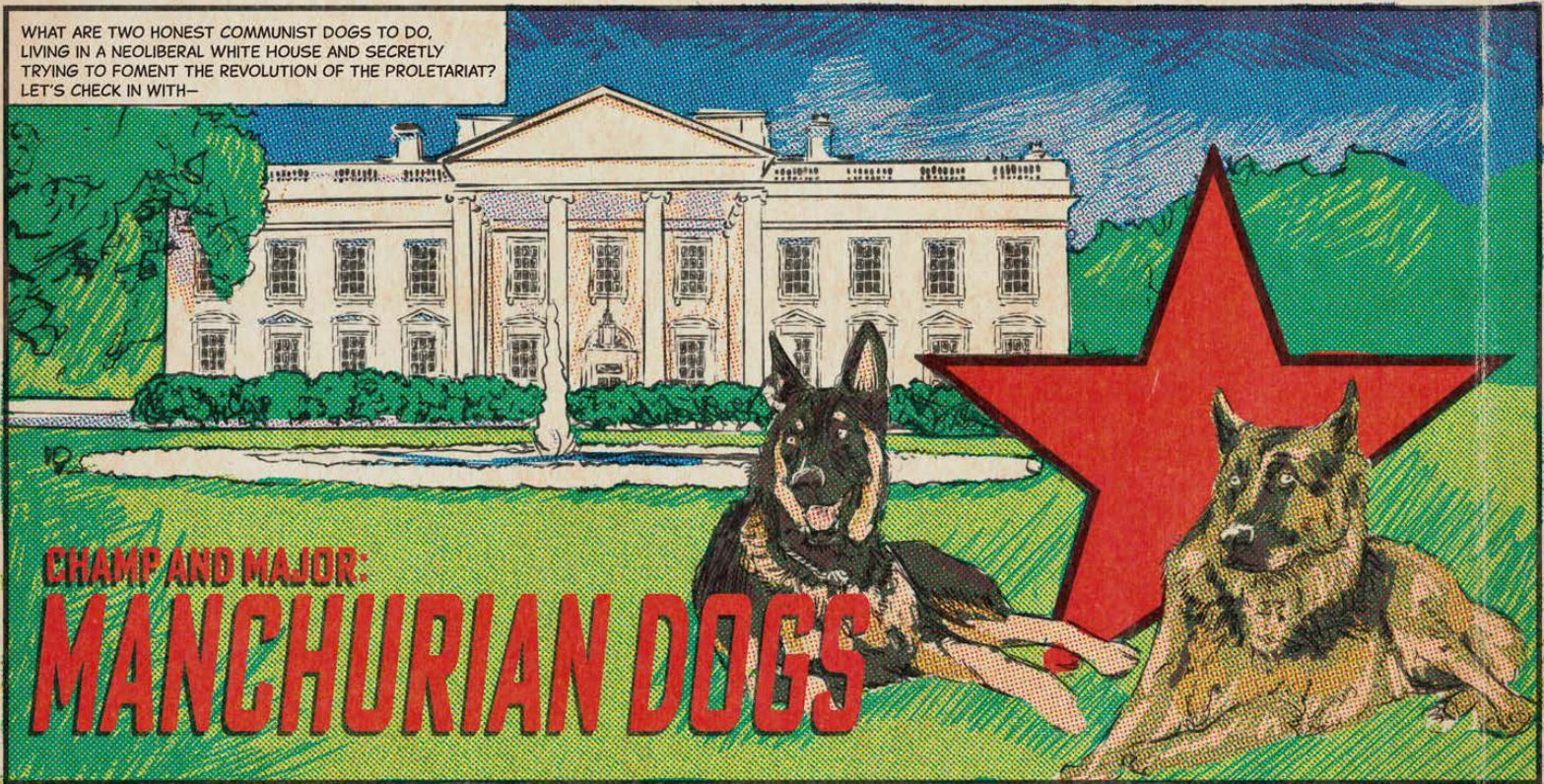
The neoliberal blindness at the end of *Making Money* is not the only flaw in Pratchett’s Discworld. Despite its breadth of subjects, it is very much a product of a Briton (Pratchett’s full name is actually Sir Terence David John Pratchett OBE), a fact which is reflected in

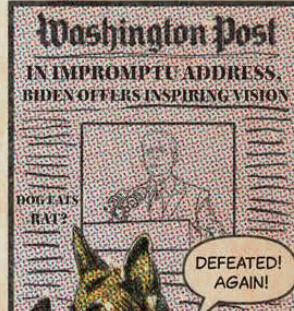
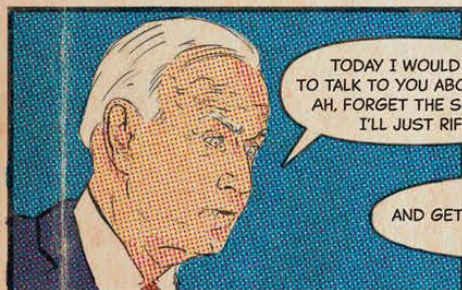
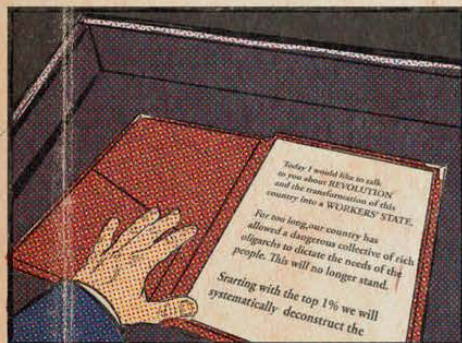
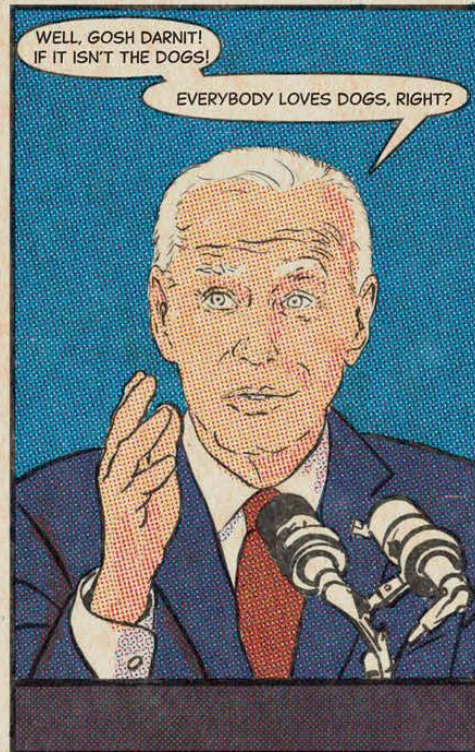
the way that he writes about Fourecks, the Discworld stand-in for Australia, not being a finished continent. Pratchett often uses physical caricature to make great plays on words, and for the most part he makes jokes about everyone, but sometimes it can dip into the realm of body-shaming; for example, there’s quite a lot in *Making Money* about the villainess being fat and ugly. Sometimes, Pratchett’s love stories can be a bit rote, as if it is the woman’s duty to let the man woo her, and although many of Pratchett’s women characters are quite empowered, this can sometimes take a form similar to the CIA’s new ad promoting case officers who refuse to “internalize misguided patriarchal ideas of what a woman can, or should, be” while shaking hands with Gina Haspel. And because Pratchett’s books are humorous, they are sometimes seen as low brow or “light reading” that justifies “robbing readers of the true delights of ambitious fiction.” That may be true, but it should be noted that light or humorous reading can often be used to tell stories that don’t otherwise get told. That said, the effectiveness of Pratchett’s prose may be limited by the fact that oftentimes the people least likely to want to read a silly story are the people who most likely need to experience something from a different perspective.

READING PRATCHETT IS A DELIGHT, AND NOT just because he uses minute details of the lived experiences of working people and incredible humor to turn accepted stories on their heads. Fun is important for its own sake. I’ve read most of the Discworld books several times and am constantly astounded that nearly every single page has jokes and puns on it. You’ll laugh, but you may also shed tears of melancholic camaraderie, as I did when reading *Night Watch* which features much of Vimes’ heartbreaking backstory. But don’t take my word for it; as Terry Pratchett’s Moist von Lipwig would say “*I wouldn’t trust me if I was you. But I would if I was me.*” ✦



WHAT ARE TWO HONEST COMMUNIST DOGS TO DO,
LIVING IN A NEOLIBERAL WHITE HOUSE AND SECRETLY
TRYING TO FOMENT THE REVOLUTION OF THE PROLETARIAT?
LET'S CHECK IN WITH—







MINDING THE LAWN

by Alex Korsunsky

THE UNITED STATES HAS A LOT OF LAWNS. A 2015 study found that American lawns take up an area bigger than the state of Georgia, and three times the acreage of any other irrigated crop. This may not seem immediately concerning—lawns are nice! Kids play on them! What a lovely departure from capitalist utilitarianism, to dedicate so much room to something fun and beautiful! Well, not exactly. First of all, think of the neighborhood you know best: how often, really, do you see kids playing on the lawn? Or adults sunbathing, or anyone doing anything but mowing? The answer, of course, is almost never, at least on most lawns, and especially not the fiddly little side yards, and the strips of dog urinal between street and sidewalk, and the decorative sweeps in front of big apartment developments and corporate office parks.

But still: so what? They may be unused, but lawns are made of plants, isn't that good? Unfortunately, lawns have very little in common with any healthy ecosystem. As Paul Robbins points out in his book, *Lawn People*, even the scrappiest and most degraded ecosystems are constantly growing and changing, involving many species tied together in complex relationships of both competition and collaboration. Lawns are the opposite: a monoculture, mowed, re-seeded, and pesticide-nuked so they can't grow into anything more diverse or productive. By most ordinary measures of environmental services—providing habitat, absorbing and cleaning runoff, combating the urban heat island effect—they may be

better than pavement, but not by much. And of course, whereas prairies are self-sustaining and don't require anything but sun and rain, lawns demand irrigation, fertilizing, gas-powered mowers, interminable labor, and astonishing volumes of pesticide. They're like little patches of Iowa industrial monoculture in every front yard—without any of factory farming's redeeming qualities, like feeding people.

At this point, I want to assure you that I'm no big-city snob sneering down at the suburbs. I like big yards and quiet and biking down empty streets at night. Lawns are worth critiquing not because they're culturally white-bread, but because they are a convenient symptom of the way we build our cities and society: individualistic, effortfully wasteful, and cut off from the natural world.

PICTURE THE AVERAGE AMERICAN SUBURB FROM above—it doesn't matter which one because they're almost all the same. This repeating grid of houses surrounded by lawns surrounded by roads didn't just happen. Premodern cities don't look this way; neither do unplanned or informal settlements. Through most of history, people generally built buildings and cities to suit their needs and preferences and the local environment. Usually this meant dense urban areas, with every scrap of land used for some purpose, resulting in walkable, lively, and interesting cities. Where land was kept open, it was usually because people wanted a market or a plaza or a park.

In less dense peri-urban or rural areas, people kept vegetable gardens and pastures, but they rarely troubled themselves to maintain unused space with a particular appearance—they just let it grow fallow, and soon they had a useful woodlot, a berry patch, or a meadow for grazing their livestock. Intentionally, laboriously holding open a bunch of unused space just for decoration is a relatively novel concept.

The lawn as a widespread feature of landscape design was born with capitalism. When the English gentry enclosed the commons, spurred on by a boom in wool prices, they replaced a populated landscape of small settlements and farms with wide-open sweeps of pasture. The pastures surrounding manor houses were eventually stripped of their productive purpose, and the labor-intensive lawn became a status symbol, an embodiment of wealth, and the distillation of a pastoral ideal without any of the unpleasantness of actual farm work. Later, lawns were imported to the United States, first to the homes of the wealthy and prestigious public parks, and finally, in their reduced form, as the ubiquitous front lawn. This is why we hold on to the lawn: it might be useless, expensive, and drenched in toxic chemicals, but it's a symbol of class status and an agreed-upon aesthetic that suggests verdancy is virtuous, but only when kept tidy.

But lawns have also been directly imposed by government policy. American suburbia is the result of New Deal and post-war efforts to promote a particular vision of the white middle class family, and it's maintained by zoning rules meant to protect property values by keeping out perceived undesirables. Both laws and lenders are baffled by and hostile to cooperative ownership schemes. All these factors help ensure a modular, repetitive pattern of residential building, and prevent more creative and planned use of spaces (such as, for example, clustering homes closely together to create a larger park-like area on the rest of the block). And, of course, municipal ordinances and neighborhood associations often have the power to fine or otherwise punish people who fail to maintain a lawn that is suitably tidy.

Rules for land use can be good; I'm glad to have farmland preserved, and that someone is making sure my neighbor doesn't build an oil refinery or an abattoir next door. But not all land use regulations are useful, and it so happens that the ones that predominate in the United States tend to be oriented towards maintaining property values (and, more or less implicitly, segregation). They also tend to be focused on the separation of functions: residential here, commercial there; single-family here, multi-family there.

This tidy separation of functions, however, tends not to be a great way of building systems that work for the people who actually use them. It might make sense on the map to have all the jobs downtown, the houses in the suburbs, and the shops in strip malls (plus, general rules are easier for both developers and governments than site-specific evaluations to decide whether new proposed uses are appropriate and meet neighborhood needs.) In practice, however, these separations result in socially atomized residential areas, dreary central business districts, and traffic and ugliness everywhere in between. In the building of U.S. residential areas, legibility has meant a modular system based on the individual house, surrounded by an individual lawn, and replicated over and over and over.

MAYBE SUBURBS SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN BUILT and the sensible goal would be to increase city density, but right now about half of Americans—including large and growing numbers of poor people and people

of color—live in suburbs, and tearing them all down at once to replace with townhouses and cottage clusters and apartments seems neither realistic nor like a wise use of resources. Likewise, we've got an awful lot of enormous front lawns and highway medians that are simply too expansive, or inconveniently located, or just outright unpleasant to be reasonably converted into parks or vegetable gardens. So, granted that we're stuck for the time being with an awful lot of our unfortunately-built landscape, what do we do? How do we make it more sociable, more cooperative, and more ecologically beneficial?

There is a solution, partly rooted in the practice of gardening—but not gardening in the sense of fussy flowerbeds, topiary, and potted herbs. This solution is known as permaculture.

A portmanteau of “permanent agriculture” or “permanent culture,” depending who you ask, permaculture was invented in 1970s Australia by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren as a set of ethical design principles drawn from ecology and various indigenous agroforestry practices. According to Holmgren, it promises: “earth care, people care, fair share.” At its simplest, permaculture tells you to “garden like a forest,” which may sound mystical but just means that we should design things to mimic nature: diverse, interconnected, mutually-reinforcing, self-regulating, and thriving on neglect. Nobody needs to tend a forest, but it's abundant all the same.

Unlike the uniform, repeating blocks of sameness that are the basis for lawns—and, by extension, for our residential areas—a permaculture point of view encourages us to think of our world in concentric rings, rippling outward from the places we live and most often frequent. These busy, central places are where we should put the things that need the most care and attention—delicate basil plants, for example—and also the things that we hope to actively enjoy, like rose gardens and lawns and other places to gather and socialize. (Grass is not illegal in this scheme—it's just something to be used for a purpose rather than as a default.) And that space between the fence and the garage, or along the far side of the house, or all the places one is unlikely to kick around a ball or have a picnic? Plant some fruit trees or blackberries, throw down some mint or sage, and forget it's there until the harvest. That strip of grass along the busy highway, loud and scary and choked with exhaust? Scatter wildflower seeds and let the bees have it.

Of course, it's easy to stop here, with a few planting suggestions, and the result is therefore often underwhelming. Permaculture in practice has often meant an unusually-shaped herb bed, a lumpy adobe bench, and some theoretically edible serviceberry bushes. There are probably more permaculture teachers than farmers, and it can often turn into a kind of gentle survivalism: hippie stuff, mostly harmless, slightly trivial. But good permaculture resists individualist and modular thinking, instead demanding interconnection and cooperation. Of course it can and should be beautiful—both because beautiful things are nice, and because people are less inclined to tear up and discard things that are beautiful.

Good design alone is not nearly enough. Applied apolitically and unjustly, even things that should be simple goods can support unjust systems and make unnecessary enemies: think of the bike lanes and transit lines that have become symbols and drivers of gentrification in many cities. Flowers and cherry trees are better than lawns—more beautiful, tastier, full of birds—but without larger sociopolitical changes they're still, in the end, just landscaping.

But while reinventing urban and suburban landscapes, and the sorts



of nature we create there, won't get rid of racist capitalism—just like suburban lawns didn't create it—the spaces and places that we build will always form the material and symbolic basis for society and human interaction. This is why Haussmann designed Paris' boulevards to thwart revolutionary barricades, why politicians build border walls that are not only cruel but also useless for their stated purposes, and imperialists forcibly resettle native populations. It's also why protestors tend to occupy plazas and tear down monuments. The built environment matters, for both destruction and creation. My point isn't "plant fruit trees and you're off the hook for politics"—it's that, in addition to marching and striking, we should also look for ways to build environments that support and entrench the sort of world we want to create, that remind us of our place in the more-than-human world, and make beauty and cooperation seem mundane and commonsense.

So what are those healthy socialist tendencies we might want to encourage in our landscape, and how does permaculture support them? One obvious point is that not only are lawns good for very little, but they turn gardening into a form of consumption, dependent on gas-powered mowers, herbicides, and low-wage immigrant labor—all relationships that can be boiled down to the market. By contrast, permaculture encourages abundance. If you've ever had a cucumber vine or apple tree, or been fortunate enough to live in a place where gardens are common, you'll know that overproduction is easy, at least in season, and neighbors quickly become eager, even desperate, to give away bags and bins full of good healthy excess. Encouraging this sort of bounty—and developing the neighborhood-level infrastructure to harvest, preserve, and redistribute it—provides an opportunity to begin to build up cooperative relationships and habits, and to move at least a portion of our consumption outside of market relations. And not a trivial amount of consumption either: during World War II, Victory Gardens produced 40 percent of all the vegetables consumed by Americans, and there's every reason to believe this figure could be matched or even exceeded today.

SHARING FOOD IS JUST ONE FORM of collaboration encouraged by a permaculture landscape. Where lawns act as blank space and buffers within a mosaic of individual properties, good permaculture seeks out connections. A very simple way to think about it is this: if everyone on the block has a plum tree, you're going to have too many plums

and make a mess of the sidewalk. But if you diversify together—a few houses with apples and pears, the rest figs, plums, and persimmons—then everyone can eat all summer and fall. But beyond coordinating production, permaculture encourages practitioners to think in terms of local needs and resources that may not align with property lines. Once we're picking each other's fruit, the rigidity of property lines begins to relax: your fallow side yard and mine blur together. Since everyone is sharing food, a neighbor or two might agree to run a compost system, or to further build out a shared garden. Tools are loaned, and at a certain point it's easier to just leave them out on a back porch or unlocked toolshed. Neighbors might agree to remove the fences from the inside of a block to form a modest lawn for kids to play away from the street, and so a shared gathering place is created, and the need for group decision-making that this entails. None of these behaviors are assured of course—they'll require effort, goodwill, and patience. This kind of work is easier for people who have spare time and aren't over-stressed by multiple jobs, and it won't cure racist neighbors of their bigotry. But on the other hand, it's a form of practical cooperation and mutual aid that's small enough and close enough to the ground that there isn't any ideological barrier to entry—it's an anarchist project even a Republican could enjoy. Furthermore, it's a model for how a change in the landscapes we expect and reproduce in our neighborhoods could be made to encourage prosocial behavior, and how we can begin to exercise the skills of local organization and mutual aid that many of us have forgotten.

EVERYTHING I'VE DESCRIBED above could be summed up as reducing atomization, encouraging cooperation and connection, and replacing purchased inputs with more nuanced and site-specific relationships. So far I've focused on doing that with your human neighbors, but permaculture is after all a way of gardening, and these are the same sorts of changes we need to make in our relationship with the non-human world if we hope to keep the Earth a beautiful and healthy place to live.

Permaculture gardens are often called "food forests," and like real forests they tend to look a little messy. While industrial farming has accustomed us to fields with straight rows of a single crop, this style of production reflects a particular history: one concerned with scalable cash crop production, usually dependent on ra-

cialized and dispossessed workers. In contrast to these plantation landscapes, traditional agriculture around the world has tended to involve profusion and diversity. You may have heard of Native American and Mesoamerican traditions of the “three sisters”: corn, beans (which climb up the corn stalks and fertilize the soil), and squash (a groundcover that suppresses weeds and conserves humidity). It’s less likely that you’re familiar with the Lacandon Maya fields of southern Mexico, where one might find 70-plus crops grown together, including basic staples, herbs, semi-wild medicinals, fruit trees, and more. Native peoples around the world once gardened like that, and some still do; even in the industrialized world, most small farms a century ago were diversified, producing many fruits and vegetables and animals for home consumption.

When practiced correctly, these systems can yield a product equivalent to industrial production, and far more sustainable—but it’s a diverse yield that’s hard to standardize and scale up. You can’t farm a food forest with GPS-guided tractors: the farmer needs to know every inch of her land, every tree and shrub and where they fit in the landscape. Industrial agriculture is, well, industrial; instead of balancing inter-species connections for pest control and fertility, ecology is simplified to a bare minimum, and replaced wherever possible with capital in the form of pesticides, herbicides, fossil-fuel powered machinery, and low-wage migrant workers deprived of land of their own. Permaculture, on the other hand, is all about relationships.

These relationships connect the gardener to the crops of course, but there are also the relationships between the plants themselves, and the various creatures that live among them. Permaculture positions gardeners as collaborators with many different kinds of life in a system that isn’t quite natural—it’s been designed, after all, to grow food for humans—but it’s one that, if successful, operates in a way quite similar to nature, with organisms developing in their own ways with minimal management. Rather than controlling and micromanaging, exerting huge amounts of money and energy to force crops and fields to produce, and blasting pests into oblivion—which poisons workers and consumers, and risks ecological collapse in the process—the permaculturist’s role is to assemble a collection of plants and animals suitable to each other and to their site, so that each, just by following its natural inclinations, contributes to a greater whole.

IF AGROINDUSTRY TREATS NATURE LIKE a factory, many of us city-dwellers alienate ourselves from nature in a different way. We tend to make it a paradise, something apart from our work and lives. Nature is the opposite of the city: it exists *out there*, voiced by David Attenborough and almost sacred. We imagine it as something to be preserved in parks or wilderness: it’s not a place for work or production. But if only Yosemite or what’s left of the Amazon are “Nature,” then lawns and farms and vacant lots are unworthy of the label. Anyplace we live becomes fallen and devalued, almost by definition.

But this perspective, though common, is wrong. After millennia of agriculture and landscape management, and now more than ever with climate change, there is no “natural world” that can be separated from human contact. Pristine does not exist. We live in the Anthropocene: the geologic age when humans have touched and altered everything on Earth. Our choice now is whether we want to create diverse environments full of complex relationships—to make space for other forms of life to thrive alongside us—or whether we want to keep pretending that nature is something separate, way off in the mountains, while we keep simplifying and dominating the landscapes in which we actually live.

That is the other reason why we should all engage in permaculture. Not just because it can reduce food-miles and carbon footprints and improve urban butterfly habitats and encourage neighborly cooperation, but because it requires us to think and act as ecological stewards and participants. It requires daily involvement in the life of the world around us. Not more work, necessarily—permaculture values laziness, encouraging us to create systems that manage themselves—but awareness, care, and consideration. It requires us to recognize that we live in community with our human and non-human neighbors, and invites us to make that shared community one of cooperation and abundance.

Does it all sound too good to be true, unrealistic, a dream of turning the clocks back to Eden? Remember: the suburbs as we know them today *did not exist* when my grandparents (and probably yours) were born. Suburbs—and with them, lawns and lawn people—were laboriously created by expansive and expensive public policies, and if we remade our residential landscape once within living memory then we can do it again. If that still feels daunting, think smaller for a moment. Think of those lawns, pesticide-bombed, weekly-mowed, HOA-enforced: one season’s neglect and they’re chaotic blooming meadows; a few years more, a forest. ✦

HOW TO GET STARTED

Abolish local ordinances that require lawns or certain lawn-care standards—especially those that fine violators!

Support regulations at all levels of government that encourage communal ownership models and make it easier for those projects to get financing, and discourage the worst forms of private suburban development.

Encourage local government and institutions to rethink the landscapes of their parks and campuses. Or don’t wait for permission—adopt abandoned land in your neighborhood.

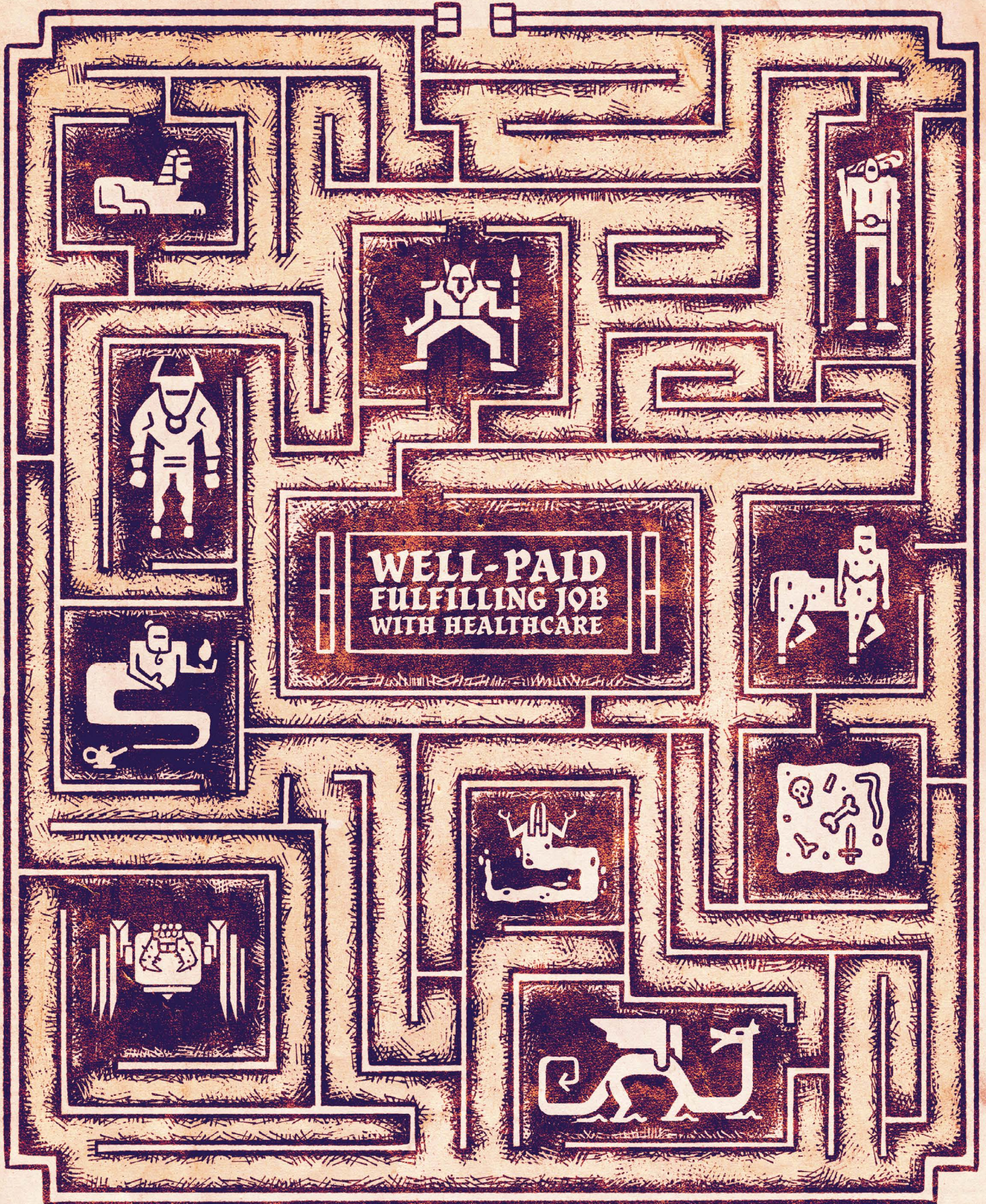
Garden! Plant fruit trees! Grow more than you need and share it with your neighbors! Take cuttings and start seeds, and share those with your neighbors too: once you get the ball rolling, you don’t need to buy anything at all.

Get to know your local agricultural extension service. Unfortunately these public institutions (housed at your state’s Land Grant university) have become subsidies for industrial agriculture, but they still offer free information and services to gardeners, ranging from planting advice to compost 101, food preservation safety, and information on native plants and ecology. Reorienting extension services towards community food needs will be an important step towards a more just and sustainable agricultural system.

Support local tool and seed libraries. If there isn’t one in your area, start one.

Learn about the history of community canneries. Start one in your neighborhood!

THE JOB SEARCH MAZE



The trials and tribulations of job hunting aren't quite fantasy, but finding a well-paid fulfilling job may as well be. Fight your way through the job search maze using the monster legend below to combat the infuriating guardians of the perfect job.

**THE UNREALISTIC
EXPERIENCE
TROLL**



**THE 'ROCKSTAR
GURU NINJA'
CENTAUR**



**THE BANSHEE OF
BEING PAID IN
EXPERIENCE**



**ARACHNE
THE WEAVER
OF UNPAID
INTERNSHIPS**



**THE 3 HOUR QUIZ
OR TASK DRAGON**



**THE MINOTAUR
OF BEING ON
CALL 24/7**



**THE PYRAMID
SCHEME SPHINX**



**THE CYCLOPS OF
REPEATING
YOUR CV IN THE
APPLICATION**



**THE GELATINOUS
CUBE OF THE 5
INTERVIEW
PROCESS**



**THE LOWBALL
SALARY GENIE**



**Hint: There is no solution to the job search maze. The system is flawed and there is no hope*



A TALE OF TWO ASTEROIDS

By Megan Milliken Biven

AT THE END OF 1997, 72 NATIONS SIGNED A non-binding and toothless Kyoto Protocol allegedly to avert the impending global catastrophe of climate change. Just a few months later, two back-to-back movies featuring asteroids hell-bent on destroying Earth graced theaters—*Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*. I haven't seen or thought of either film in years, but, in some Jungian recess of my mind, clips of each film have recently been surfacing.

At the time of my first screening, I was 13 years old and my Louisiana family was in one of those calm lulls between disasters. Two years prior, a spring deluge flooded my neighborhood along the Mississippi River. All through the night, neighbors with boats went house to house, checking on each other. Kids awoke to water lapping at their beds, and families with two-story houses made room for neighbors. From my youthful vantage, the adults seemed to have everything under control. Everyone was accounted for, pets were found safe, all of the houses were rebuilt, and toys were replaced. I cannot know exactly what I was thinking when I first watched these movies, but I suspect there was a general attitude that disasters were unavoidable and that the adults were just trying to do the best they could.

Of course, I had no real concept or awareness of the *other* adults: those with the power to design floodplain policy, and to anticipate and mitigate disaster. It would take years of direct experience with those people and sustained confrontation with the private actors that hamstringing those public institutions to discover a far more disquieting truth. The adults—those with power—were not doing all they could to keep us safe, and they were doing so on purpose.

With this revelation in mind, it was time to rewatch *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact*.

The (Far) Right Stuff

FIRST UP: *ARMAGEDDON*. OF THE 1990S DISASTER OEUVERE, *Armageddon* is frequently dismissed as the least serious of the bunch. But it provides a depiction of how American conservatives view both the world and themselves—it's a film for the "run it like a business!" contingent. Our journey begins with a meteor shower careening into New York City landmarks. It's a lot of boom, zow, and "argh!!!" The menacing meteor is the size of Texas and the forecasted impact will kill half the world's population immediately with the remaining survivors fated to die in a resulting ice age. Not a soul on Earth can hide from it. The threat is global and inescapable.

When prodded on how NASA could miss such a threat, Billy Bob Administrator responds with, "Well, our object collision budget's a million dollars, that allows us to track about 3 percent of the sky, and beg'n your pardon sir, but it's a big-ass sky." This is a rare pull-back-the-curtain moment on the

conservative and neoliberal project: the government is too underfunded to fulfill its purported missions. Our government and public institutions are unprepared. We are unable to protect ourselves.

So, who do you turn to when you've hollowed out government institutions into husks? Why, a successful businessman of course! In the case of *Armageddon*, Harry Stamper—whose name requires no quippy parody—is an oil-rigger-turned-oil-rig-owner played by Bruce Willis. NASA's Hail Mary to save the planet will require landing on the asteroid and drilling deep into its core to drop in an atomic bomb and blow it up. The in-house team has attempted to modify a patented Stamper drill design to no avail, so they bring in Stamper himself to get it right. This scene perpetuates a well-worn American myth—namely that the small American businessman is the true cradle of progress and innovation. (In *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths*, Dr. Mariana Mazzucato meticulously documents instances of this convenient lie over the last century, showing that the government has in fact funded the riskiest research and path-breaking types of innovation.) When Stamper assesses the resources—including the eight astronauts—that NASA has assembled, Bruce Willis is just me watching this movie: "This is the best you could do? That the government, the U.S. government can come up with? I mean you're NASA—these eight Boy Scouts up there are the world's hope?" Same, man, same. Everyone soon agrees that the astronauts will need the help of the best damn team of roustabouts and drillers to do the job, and Stamper's men have the right stuff.

Readers familiar with my previous writings on the oil and gas industry know that I have no doubts that American oil and gas workers can and will save the world. It is my faith in oil company owners, who routinely steal from their workers and reduce safety protocols to cut costs, that is less robust. But we're stuck with Mr. Stamper as the resolute and resigned hero of *Armageddon*, and he's the perfect extension of neocon mythmaking: the quintessential "job creator." It is to his grace, and his grace alone, that his employees owe their livelihoods and even their continued existence. Stamper ascended from mere worker to owner because of meritorious right and the strappiest boots. His workers are mere vassal beneficiaries.

In *Armageddon*, these workers are a hodgepodge of Michael-Bay-approved male archetypes: A.J. (Stamper's brash heir apparent and his daughter's love interest), Chick (compulsive gambler and absentee father), Rockhound (geologist with a statutory rape conviction), Max (large man), Oscar (spaced-out geologist), and Bear (he drives Harleys). When a military general lists the proposed crews' various infractions (wanted by a Russian mob debt collector, assault convictions, serious jail time, etc.), his concerns are dismissed because these guys are the best at what they do. As long as a man is good at his job, he retains value: he's redeemable. Grace, played by Liv Tyler, is the movie's sole female character, both daughter and employee of Stamper

with all of the reinforcing power dynamics those relationships entail. In the first and only example of collective bargaining ever carried out by off-shore American oil and gas workers, the crew offers a list of demands to the federal government (including never having to pay income taxes ever again), the riggers-turned-astronauts agree to a two week long spacecamp crash course. Montage and slapstick ensues.

They finally launch the two space shuttles, the *Freedom* (yup) and the *Independence* (uh huh). The space scenes in *Armageddon* are a lot of incomprehensible yelling and explosions. I may have fast forwarded some of it. The two shuttles dock with a Russian space station to refuel, and, of course, a fire breaks out and they must make a narrow escape. One of the shuttles is damaged by the asteroid's tail debris and crashes onto the asteroid. The crew lands further than the predetermined drill site and must drill instead through a tougher material. There are a lot of mistakes, a lot of near misses, and finally the very last chance to save it all. Western art loves to extol the individual, and it loves a last minute Hail Mary pass even more. Combine the two, and you've got Harry Stamper's sacrifice—staying behind on the asteroid to manually detonate the bomb and allowing the rest of the crew to escape. Earth is saved, and the businessman is our martyr. And the returning crew never have to pay taxes again.

Deeply Impacted

IF *ARMAGEDDON* TEACHES US TO LOOK TO THE HORATIO ALGER protagonists of private industry for salvation, *Deep Impact* says that what we need are better résumés. Specifically, we need competent and sober adults ready to make the difficult and adult choices (aka, the way in which progressives, moderates, neoliberals, corporatists, and careerists tend to view the world. Often heralded as the more scientific and serious of the two films, *Deep Impact* doesn't take long to reveal the immediate and cruel limits of the moderate's public imagination.

We experience the journey through three characters: ambitious news anchor Jenny Lerner (Téa Leoni), super-smart tween hero Leo Beiderman (Elijah Wood), and aging astronaut Captain Spurgeon "Fish" Tanner (seriously, played by Robert Duvall). The movie begins with a decidedly Spielbergian intro: Leo is with his school astronomy class gazing into the night sky, exchanging banter over an anomaly seen through their telescope's lens. Surprise! That's no star. The amateur's sighting is sent to an astronomer who recognizes that the unknown object is an asteroid on a path to collide with Earth, but the astronomer dies in a car crash before he can deliver the apocalyptic news.

The story flashes forward a full year later to anchorwoman Lerner clumsily exposing a conspiracy to conceal public awareness of the impending "Extinction Level Event (E.L.E.)" asteroid careening towards Earth. The United States and other Earth governments have known about the asteroid for a full year, but elected to not share the news with the general global population. Morgan Freeman plays the president—the oft-referenced "favorite movie president"—and his is precisely the voice you'd want to hear delivering the Extinction Level Event news. He's reassuring and kind, but also firm and pragmatic. While the package of the message is comforting, the content and meaning are decidedly less so: "Our society will go on as normal, work will go on, you will pay your bills...Life will go on." Holy smokes, if that doesn't sound like 2021 in one glib directive! As the entire planet is supposed to digest the news that they face imminent extinction, President Morgan Freeman scolds the average American, "Keep working and pay your bills!"

Meanwhile, the plan to save the planet is even less inspiring. President Morgan Freeman explains that for the past year, the United States has been working on a NASA mission, the Messiah (sigh), to deliver a nuclear payload to blow up the asteroid. One rocket. One crew. One chance. The richest

and mightiest nation in history has ever known facing the biggest existential threat humanity has ever encountered—and one rocket, and one crew is all they could muster. Woof. Why not twenty rockets? Twenty crews? Where's any global coordination in the face of a global extinction?

Where conservatives exalt the businessman, liberals are no less susceptible to the fetishization of the individual, particularly the American executive—in this case, the President. With \$14 billion spent on the unrelenting and neverending 2020 Presidential election, it is no wonder we imbue so much meaning and potential in the office. As the official talisman for our collective political energy, it also renders our own political selves inert and incapable of meaningful critique: "He's trying. Give him time."

Piloting the Messiah is Captain Fish, the eldest member of an elite NASA crew charged with delivering a nuclear payload directly onto the asteroid within a seven-hour window. The mission goes to shit pretty quickly and instead of vaporizing the asteroid, they saw it into two distinct projectiles hurtling towards Earth. The smaller rock is projected to destroy the entire eastern seaboard with a 700-mile wave. The larger comet will hit Western Canada, sending debris into the sky, blocking out the sun and destroying all plant life in four weeks and all animal life in a few months.

President Morgan Freeman delivers the bad news and the backup plan: in the soft limestone of Missouri, the United States military has been preparing an immense network of caves where a million people can survive for two years. The new America will preserve its best and brightest, choosing 200,000 scientists, engineers, and teachers. 800,000 Americans will be randomly chosen via a national lottery. Based on the 1997 total population, every man, woman, and child had only a .28 percent chance of being chosen and surviving. Those numbers only slightly improve due to cutting off a tail end of the distribution and disqualifying Americans over the age of 50, which seems frighteningly realistic in the wake of the collective decision to let the elderly succumb to the coronavirus for the sake of the economy.

IN THE "FICTIONAL" WORLD OF *DEEP IMPACT*, THE GREATEST minds, the top brass in the Department of the Defense, Congressional Committee staff, and every wonk available got together and spent more time, thought, and energy not on *how* to save the world, but *who* could be saved. Imagine if you will, having an entire year to prepare for a crisis and the most you can come up with is a taxonomy on *who* gets to board the life rafts instead of *making* more liferafts.

So most Americans are not deserving, and they are going to die in a fiery blast. Tween Leo Beiderman and anchorwoman Jenny Lerner are both chosen for the Missouri caves (because meritocracy), but remain ambivalent about it. Both of Lerner's parents are above the age of 50 and Leo's neighborhood sweetheart (and her family) did not make the list. What's the good of meritocracy if it condemns everyone you know and love to a terrible fate? Elijah Wood's tween hero fulfills every young girl's fantasies (mine) by hatching a plan to save his neighbor through a good old teen marriage. The two teens marry and hope the marriage document will be sufficient to save both families. When the day finally arrives to collect the chosen few and transport them to the caves, Leo's new child bride and family (complete with infant sibling) are not on the list. Leo is forced to leave his new wife and board the bus.

Meanwhile, the astronauts are still up in space! The defeated astronauts are headed back to Earth, but with one remaining nuclear payload on board. Robert Duvall and the other astronauts agree that they can deliver the payload personally to the larger of the two asteroid fragments and give Earth a fighting chance. The astronauts say their goodbyes to their respective families and in yet another literal martyrdom, the crew sacrifices themselves to de-

stroy the larger of the two projectiles.

That still leaves the smaller asteroid and its 700-mile wave to worry about. For some unfathomable reason, people have remained at their jobs until the very last minute. In perhaps the most succinct portrayal of the rewards of careerism, the remaining cogs of MSNBC sit around a table drawing straws with a mother and toddler for who can board the last helicopter out. These are the spoils of a complicit media apparatus that can't even muster the smallest of backbones to question the lackluster government response. Jenny Lerner has a guaranteed seat, but in a moment of searing morality, she forces the mother and child onto the last helicopter. Then she makes her way to her own condemned parent who is waiting for the wave on an abandoned Atlantic beach. All of the trappings of her former ambitions, career, and status are ephemeral and will leave no real trace.

Leo arrives in Missouri to a crowd desperately trying to shove children into the saved's arms. Again, we are confronted with the cruelty of this world's means-testing—a .28 percent chance to live for those not deemed worthy according to their level of "human capital." Leo surveys the scene and decides to rescue his wife instead. He manages to get himself a little motorcycle and somehow intercepts his child bride and her family stranded on a deadlocked interstate. Her mom hands over the infant sibling and it's a race to get to high ground as the 700-foot wave crashes inland. It's a tense scramble, but somehow the two children and the infant survive. They stand upon a hill, gazing out onto a world fundamentally changed. Leo's journey is perhaps the best parable for the choices we currently face. What good is our individual accomplishments, our immediate family's relative safety, and our good fortune, if it means destruction and loss for everyone else?

At the end, President Morgan Freeman stands in front of a busted-looking Capitol to give another "inspiring" speech. "Millions were lost," he intones in his beautiful voice. "Countless more left homeless. But the water receded. Cities fall, but they are rebuilt. And heroes die and we will remember them." Cold comfort, dude.

Prophetic Projectiles

IF EITHER OF THESE MOVIES FEEL FAMILIAR, THEY SHOULD. In 2016, the media was already reporting on how underfunded, understaffed, and ill-prepared federal and state governments were for a pandemic. While the CDC provides guidance, research, and resources, the states themselves are responsible for frontline epidemiology and surveillance, screening, treatment, technical assistance, training, and laboratory services. It is state and local public health workers who have to figure out how to get IV fluids and intubators to local hospitals. There is a necessary logic to delegating power and responsibilities to local authorities; we do not have CDC offices in every state nor do we have federal hospitals and personnel in every locale (although we could). Instead, a federal administrative body promulgates rules and delegates to the states. This arrangement is known as "cooperative federalism" and it is actually how a good deal of American governance is arranged. Clean Water and Air Acts, unemployment insurance, education, you name it.

For states, though, money is an immediate constraint. Unlike the federal government, states do not simply print money, nor do they run deficits to fund what is essentially national policy. To understand why requires a bit of a history lesson.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, American state and local governments faced chronic underfunding and rising prices because of spending in support of the American invasion in Vietnam. Interest rates were hiked to obscure wartime expenditures, which increased inflation, which then plagued state and local governments. Between 1962-1968, the interest rates paid on capital expenditures for water and sewerage facilities, schools, public housing,

roads, and other social investment almost doubled. In late 1968, more than \$1.6 billion of municipal bond offerings were unsuccessful because no bids (or no acceptable bids) were received. The quality of government services suffered and government payrolls began to shrink. In the United States, just three bond rating agencies determine state governments' credit worthiness, and in effort to raise those scores, many states amended their constitutions with "balanced budget amendments." These requirements prohibit states from spending more than they collect in revenue and prohibit states from carrying deficits into the following fiscal year. State balanced budget requirements vary in design and implementation, but the net effect is the same: it turns routine governance—as well as routine provision of public goods and services, paying teachers and firefighters, flood protection and road salting—into highly rationed and politicized terrains.

THIS ARTIFICIAL SCARCITY IS A PERFECT PRETENSE for government privatization zealots. Indeed, throughout the early 2000s, ghoul-led statehouses looted public budgets, doling out public dollars to corporations and their wealthiest residents. For instance, when outgoing Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco left office in 2007, there was a \$1.1 billion surplus in the Louisiana Treasury. Incoming governor Bobby Jindal convened a special session of the Louisiana legislature to oversee a full package of business giveaways. In the brief span of two months, the \$1.1 billion surplus in the Louisiana treasury was pillaged in the form of subsidies to certain types of businesses and tax credits that would benefit the already wealthy. Louisiana's ruling class—a group of individuals that consists of half of one percent of the Louisiana population, but own at least 80 percent of all its wealth—were the largest beneficiaries of this public looting.

With manufactured deficits and constitutional balanced budget amendments, state legislatures have a pretense to cut social welfare programs and public employees en masse. Between the beginning of Jindal's two terms in 2008 and his departure in 2016, his administration cut the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals staff from 12,340 to just 5,813. In that same timeframe, Jindal and his legislative henchman privatized or closed all 10 public hospitals across the state. There was not one public town hall or public review process to discuss whether privatizing Louisiana's public hospitals would improve access to or the quality of healthcare. This type of bait and switch happened across the nation. Between 2008 and 2014, states fired 50,000 state and local health officials. Your frontline epidemiologists and public health workers vanished in a few budget cycles.

When you have fewer people to do a job that requires people, the quality of that service declines. And as quality declines, faith and trust in the institution also declines. Because the general public does not trust the public institution, they have low expectations for it, and they do not want to fund or staff it. And so the corrosive cycle begins anew. This is the neoliberal project: starve public institutions, watch them fail, and supply the rhetoric. Government is bad. Government is inept.

So who do you turn to? Businessmen and businesses, of course. From the very beginning of the pandemic, the Trump Administration sought to emphasize private-public partnerships and government outsourcing. Helicopters full of dollars were dumped on private corporations for everything from exclusive contracting with pharmacy chains for testing, defense analytics companies for tracing, and liberal patent arrangements to pharmaceutical companies for vaccines that were entirely developed by and paid for by the United State government. These policies were designed to siphon as much value from the crisis as possible while projecting the appearance of compe-

tency. But to frame this as a quirk of the Trump Administration and this particular moment ignores the long con.

The Great Rewatch

A YEAR AGO, INTERNATIONAL NEWS OUTLETS CHRONICLED THE American pandemic plight, declaring that the “U.S. global reputation hit rock-bottom over Trump’s coronavirus response.” As an American living in a European country, people often expressed pity regarding my homeland’s scattered response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the end, Donald J. Trump may have thought that the body count could be forgotten by many, and the shortfalls of the private healthcare system overlooked—if he could deliver the vaccine. Trump’s last minute save would have erased a lot of bad will and guaranteed him in the minds of many as the savior of the pandemic. He could be Harry Stamper (without the self sacrifice).

Trump’s cynical calculations were mostly correct, but the last-minute save happened a few minutes too late to matter for his personal ambitions. Today, my host country cannot access enough of the limited number of vaccine doses, and now I routinely hear from Europeans how impressed they are with America’s vaccine rollout. Indeed, an April *Atlantic* headline reads, “What America’s Vaccination Campaign Proves to the World: The U.S. stumbled early in the pandemic, but the vaccine rollout could reboot the country’s image,” and a *USA Today* headline reveals that “U.S. vaccine rollout envied in Canada.”

Now, it’s the Democrats who can bask in the glow of the heroic save. (Former President Trump is not standing for the stolen valor, asserting that the vaccine should be referred exclusively as the “Trumpcine.”)

But it’s President Joe Biden, with steadily increasing approval ratings, who will get final credit. Nevermind that following a year where 29 percent of Americans lost their healthcare coverage, Democratic leadership continues to not pass the broadly-supported Medicare for All. Nevermind that after a year when medical professionals risked their lives and were pushed to their limits in a desperate fight to save as many patients as possible in an already looted healthcare system, Democratic leadership could have created truly free higher public education to increase the medical ranks and forgiven all college debt of which half is born by medical school graduates. Nevermind that as Americans line up for vaccines, global Covid variants are gradually pushing us towards the possibility of simultaneous global pandemics, and Democratic leadership has dragged their feet on revoking monopolistic intellectual property laws to vaccinate the world. Nevermind, because bask they must. They saved the day, so who cares about tomorrow?

We Can Try and Save Everyone. We Must.

REFLECTING ON *DEEP IMPACT* AND *ARMAGEDDON* IN MY DARKER moments, I can’t help but think these films were intentional psy-ops to condition us into accepting political inaction and massive body counts in the coming years. I don’t really mean that, of course, and I don’t think either film intended to offer serious critiques of our political establishment. However, they do provide a useful lens. Coming back to these movies 24 years later, I realized these films were just describing the world as it was.

A lot has happened since the first time I watched these 1990s disaster blockbusters. Primarily, lots of disasters. Following Hurricane Katrina, the late Dr. Ezra Boyd (my former mentor and friend) carried out the grim task of tallying and documenting all of the deaths due to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. He divided deaths into three categories: (i) direct flood deaths, (ii) emergency circumstances deaths, and (iii) evacuation/displacement deaths. Each death could be traced to a particular public failure: whether it be failure to maintain and inspect federal levees or the complete

absence of government rescue and response. The disaster was man-made and these deaths were preventable. The adults—those in power—were not doing all they could, and people died painful and horrible deaths because of that willful abdication.

To re-quote President Morgan Freeman again, but in the context of Hurricane Katrina: “Countless more left homeless. But the water receded. Cities fall, but they are rebuilt. And heroes die and we will remember them.” What did we do to prepare for the next asteroid/pandemic/hurricane/climate change? In between my two years of graduate school for public policy, I worked for a summer at New Orleans’ City Hall in its Hazard Mitigation Office, which is an office set up to function as the local piece of a cooperative federalist program—FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Assistance Grant Program (HMGP). If a property had flooded more than two times in a ten year period, it was eligible to apply for a federal grant to elevate it higher or even relocate. My office educated eligible homeowners about the grant program and I performed cost-benefit analysis of properties: did the value of the home justify the six-figure grant to elevate the home? (If you think this might privilege high income neighborhoods, you are absolutely correct!) Shortly after distributing eligibility letters, New Orleanians began trickling into our office to return completed forms demonstrating their interest. But it soon became clear that neighbors and coworkers had copied the letters and were filling them out for their non-eligible homes. These homes had only flooded ONCE! Gasp. These people were trying to commit “fraud” (*i.e.* realistically assess their risk and try to participate in a program to mitigate that risk despite not meeting the somewhat arbitrary criteria for the program) and protect their homes!

Because the FEMA HMGP is a piecemeal program that relies on voluntary participation and local municipalities packaging into applications, its results have been mixed. The application process is cumbersome and clumsy, which necessitates the provision of third-party firms to help homeowners navigate the application process. A bulk of the program’s administrative costs are determining whether applicants are in fact eligible (e.g. rationing). If and when homeowners are finally awarded the federal funds, they have to find a reputable company to elevate their home and—fingers crossed—not destroy their home in the elevation process.

A few years later, I visited a friend in Rotterdam. As a low-lying river delta slipping into the North Sea, the Netherlands is no stranger to flooding. While crossing canal after canal, I asked my friend how much she spent on flood insurance. She looked at me like I was a certified asshole. “We pay taxes for flood protection.” Oh, right. The Dutch devote considerable resources, talent, and planning to flood protection. Intentional zoning minimizes the number of communities and people in hazard’s way. We can do that too: we can save everybody. We can build more liferafts. Public policy, governance, and government must be in service of all, because the water is rising. We spotted this asteroid a very long time ago: a few nuclear bombs won’t help us.

The art of an era—intentionally or not—tends to be revelatory of the common ideas of that time. And since the market- and profit-driven power structures, and the ideologies that justify them, still very much direct the world in which we currently live, the insights of *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* persist. We can see how shortsighted it is to underfund public institutions charged with our safety. We can see how cynical and evil it is for our political leaders to turn our and our children’s survival into a lottery. What good is a government, a job, or a society that supplicates in the face of the asteroid and condemns most people to suffering? These movies were telegraphed in my subconscious like a big S.O.S. because I and everyone on this planet are living these dramatic beats in real time. We are being triaged. We are being sacrificed. And for what? For whom? The global pandemic still rages and the escalating chaos of global climate change has just begun. ✦

GIANT SQUID



LOOK AT IT!

LOOK AT IT!

LOOK AT IT!

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