

A Forest of the Fantastical, Made From Literal Forests

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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DEADLIEST
POISONS

UTOPIAN
PLAYGROUNDS

CHRISTIAN
HORROR

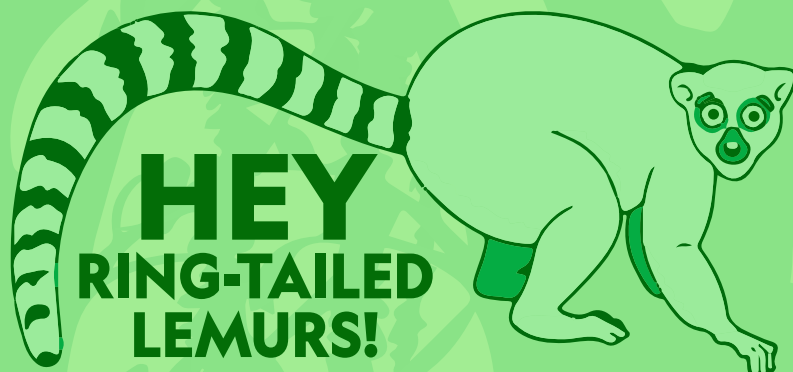
THE SECRET LIFE OF
JEFFREY
BEZOS



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HOT BUTTERED TAKES

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If you are a ring-tailed lemur reading this magazine, know this: we don't want you. If you got a problem with Maitso,* you got a problem with us. Capisce? The Economist might be cool with that sort of thing, but this is Current Affairs, champion of the underdog and friend to the working stiff. We practice strict editorial solidarity with the world's outcasts and proletarians. While there is a soul in prison, we are not free, etc. Thus: observance of the egalitarian ethic is a precondition of subscribership. You keep this sort of thing up, we will be canceling the subscriptions at any address known to belong to a ring-tailed lemur. **There will be no prorated refunds.**

THE NEED FOR CHILD CAVES

"Children love to play in tiny, cave-like places. In the course of their play, children seek out cave-like spaces to get into and under—old crates, under tables, in tents, etc. They try to make special places for themselves and for their friends—most of the world about them is "adult space" and they are trying to carve out a place that is kid size. When children are playing in such a "cave"—each child takes up about 5 square feet; furthermore, children like to do this in groups, so the caves should be large enough to accommodate this; these sorts of groups range in size from three to five—so 15 to 25 square feet, plus about 15 square feet for games and circulation, gives a rough maximum size for caves. Therefore: wherever children play, around the house, in the neighborhood, in schools, make small "caves" for them. Tuck these caves away in natural left-over spaces, under stairs, under kitchen counters. Keep the ceiling heights low—2 feet 6 inches to 4 feet—and the entrance tiny."

— C. ALEXANDER ET AL.,
A PATTERN LANGUAGE:
TOWNS, BUILDINGS,
CONSTRUCTION (1977)



THE CORRECTIONS

In the May-June issue: the phrase "horse juniper" was misspelled in a way that created the impression of an obscenity. Barton Willow is a town, not a barrister from said town. "Organizations" do not "come in squares," a statement that is unintelligible. The kelp forest caught fire in 1963, and is not "still burning" but rather burns at regular quasi-annual intervals. Newtons are, of course, not a type of fig but a thing that figs are about. Orkwich is not the capital of Strobsey. "Island In The Sun" was first recorded in 1932 by Mel Markton and His Smiling Rumlbers. Greece is not in Europe. Porridge was invented by accident, not on purpose. The nuclear apocalypse has not, in fact "already happened." There are four kinds of blue. Franklin D. Roosevelt is not "retired" but "dead." Jesus was the son of God, not Grod. Tuesday is a day of the week, not a "time of the year." Chesterfields are smoked lengthwise, not "back to front." The hookah is a pipe, not a snake. Donald Trump did serve briefly as president of the United States. Horses cannot read Braille. Neckties are not from Samoa. Cake is not a dessert. Pistols are not "the thing you tie cats up with." Jason Landry died horribly in an accident, not "pleasantly amid his friends." Hassling is done on the sideboard, not within it. The dates of various historical events were also misstated, sometimes by many centuries. Two allegations that technically constituted libel are hereby withdrawn but cannot be repeated for legal reasons. One article in particular is entirely fictitious and not a word of it can be relied upon. Current Affairs regrets these errors but promises that everything not listed in the corrections section is completely true and totally dependable.

NOT A CORRECTION: "Pon Yerkle" was indeed the assistant manager's name. Please refrain from sending further queries.

OUR PAGES DO NOT FALL OUT



DID YOU KNOW:

when forms ask if you are "M or F," the M and F stand for "manatee or flamingo," the two genders



NEXT ISSUE:



why this magazine refuses to take a stand on birthday party clowns

ALL GLUE SHOULD BE GLITTER GLUE



BAD TAKE AMNESTY

Everyone has stupid opinions. (Except, of course, for Current Affairs.) Opinions that make people boo and cast tweets at you. Should your opinion be sufficiently bad, it may impact your romantic life. (See a recent piece in National Review arguing that the unwillingness of female Ivy Leaguers to date Trump supporters reveals the "progressive authoritarianism" of the young.) The very worst opinions might impact your reputation for some time.

But all of us are capable of shedding our worst viewpoints, should we choose to do so. And growth should be encouraged and rewarded. Current Affairs is therefore calling for an international Bad Take Amnesty, in which any person can disavow a certain awful opinion they have previously held, and if they should renounce it completely and permanently, it will no longer be held against them. In this way, people might feel free to acknowledge prior abysmally ill-informed viewpoints without fearing long-term judgment. We believe that through the provision of an amnesty, not only will those who renounce their opinions be granted a second chance to think straight, but those who decline to renounce their opinions can be mocked and jeered all the more.

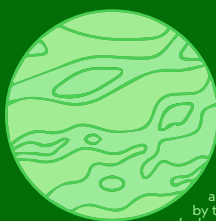
"AH YES, BUT CONSIDER THE RELATIONSHIP OF CURRENT AFFAIRS TO THE UNIVERSE AS A WHOLE."

ONE THING A DAY

Have you done a thing today? Just one? Then you're done. All you need do is one thing. One thing makes a successful day. Any more is overachieving.

BRINGING BACK THE 90S CONCEPT OF "PLEASE ALLOW 6-8 WEEKS FOR DELIVERY." TWO-DAY SHIPPING IS A CRIME AGAINST WORKERS!

IT IS NOT ILLEGAL TO MEOW AT PEOPLE



TOWARDS A SOCIALIST VENUS

There is a common expression you have undoubtedly heard: capitalists go to Mars, socialists go to Venus. But what does it mean? Well, Mars is frigid, deserted, austere. Venus is hot, hellish, and volcanic—the "planet roasts at more than 800 degrees Fahrenheit under a suffocating blanket of sulfuric acid clouds and a crushing atmosphere more than 90 times the pressure of Earth." Say what you want about Venus, you can't deny it has atmosphere. (Apologies.) More importantly, with 90 percent of Earth's gravity, Venus may be the more logical candidate for being terraformed into a habitat for humans and animals. The surface would have to be cooled down a bit, water would need to be introduced through the capture of an ice moon, and an artificial magnetosphere made as well. But it could be done. However: it will not be done by the private sector. The terraforming of Venus must be a giant public works project undertaken by humanity as a whole. Once complete, however, we will have a comfortable and attractive sphere on which to conduct experiments in utopian living. This magazine looks forward to the day when humans come together and recognize our collective mission to render Venus both habitable and democratic.

AGAINST LANDLORDS WHO INSTALL INCONVENIENT AND HIDEOUS PIPES IN *CURRENT AFFAIRS* EDITOR LYTA GOLD'S APARTMENT

This magazine has long condemned landlords as a class. Land should not be lorded over. Land is the common inheritance of all. The elimination of the vestiges of feudal economic relations requires the dissolution of the tenancy-ownership relation, to put it succinctly. However, we also believe that there is a spectrum of acceptable and unacceptable landlord behavior. Some landlords fix a thing that gets busted fairly quickly. Some take aeons. Some respond to a report of a severe roach infestation in the stove by shrugging. Some are more concerned. But we must single out certain types of landlords for particular condemnation. Of the extant species of landlord, the most contemptible and repulsive is the type that installs a highly inconvenient natural gas pipe in the apartment of *Current Affairs* Managing and Amusements Editor Lyta Gold. This is *particularly* the case if the pipe sticks out unnecessarily far into her workspace, creating a needless obstacle that cannot easily be disguised through tasteful furnishings. Such a pipe, installed without consideration as to its effect on the tenant's life and well-being, is a first-degree offense by the owning class against the unpropertied. And while it is the case that not all tenants will have such an experience, having to look at *this stupid fucking ugly radiator pipe all day*, we trust that our readers can sympathize and share the vehemence of our editorial condemnation.



HAVE YOU CONSIDERED

*just wearing boiler suits
all the time instead
ordinary clothes? They're
comfortable, convenient,
stylish, and make you
look like you know what
you're doing. Prediction:
2022 will be the Year Of
The Boiler Suit.*

ARIZONA
IS JUST
OCCUPIED
MEXICO.



*IF YOUR OPINION
IS UNPOPULAR,
HOLDING IT MAKES
YOU A DISSIDENT.*

NEVER LOAN
YOUR COPY
OF *CURRENT
AFFAIRS*
(IF YOU EVER
WANT TO SEE IT
AGAIN)

SOME
SUGGESTED
WORDS YOU
CAN USE TO
DESCRIBE
CURRENT
AFFAIRS TO
OTHERS:

- Bodacious
- Loquacious
- Sick (in the sense of cool)
- Sick (in the sense of twisted)
- Aquiline (just a nice word really)
- Resplendent

WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH YOUR ISSUE BESIDES READ IT

Unless you are an unscrupulous free-loader who loafs around the neighbors' coffee table, sneaking glimpses at the issues of others, you pay good money for this magazine. Around here, we have a saying: subscribers are royalty. And we mean it. We want you to get your money's worth. But, some readers ask, is reading the magazine all I can do with it, beyond looking at the pretty pictures, completing the puzzles, cutting out the paper dolls, playing the games, and sniffing the binding? No, reader, the only limit to what you can do with your *Current Affairs* is your own crabbed and impoverished imagination. For instance: have you ever considered collaging *Current Affairs*? Each issue is filled with visual delights just waiting to be snipped and rearranged. And because *Current Affairs* is made of paper, anything that can be done with paper can be done with *Current Affairs*. Consider making:

geometric paper bowls, rolled paper flowers, paper butterflies, accordion-fold paper wreaths, paper orbs, 3D paper stars, or a paper chain snake. A copy of *Current Affairs* can also be useful as a disguise—if you are in a park attempting to spy upon a malefactor, cut two eyeholes in your copy of the magazine and hold it up as if you were reading it. If they look in your direction, the only thing they will think is "Goodness, how intelligent and attractive the person sitting on that bench with their face concealed behind that magazine must be."

THE TOTE BAG IS ON ITS WAY

What makes a magazine? Is it the smell of its paper stock, the richness of its inks? Is it a subscriber base of beautiful and brilliant individuals? (Hello there, you.) Is it, perhaps, the content itself? None of the above!

A magazine, as we all know, goes from a glorified hobbyist project to a national institution when it introduces a signature tote bag. Until now, *Current Affairs* had no such bag. Reader, things are changing. Forces are in motion. What has been before shall be no more. A bag shall arise. And what a bag it shall be! It will be able to contain anything one puts in it, and can be taken from place to place. It will showcase your good taste and style as you parade with it down the boulevard. You will be gawked at and high-fived. Reader, the world is about to change. Prepare yourself.



WARNING: READING AN ISSUE OF *CURRENT AFFAIRS* IS KNOWN TO INDUCE AN INSATIABLE URGE FOR MORE *CURRENT AFFAIRS*

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A satirical outdoor diorama set against a backdrop of a mossy rock wall. In the center, a Jesus figure is crucified on a wooden cross; a small white cloth with the letters 'INRI' is draped over the top of the cross. To the left, there is a colorful children's playground structure with a red roof and a blue slide. In the foreground, a yellow toy crane sits on the ground, lifting a small globe of the Earth. To the right of the crane, a vintage-style poster is propped up, depicting a man in a military uniform aiming a machine gun at the globe, with the text 'IT MARKS THE SPOT!' and 'KEEP 'EM FIRING'. In the lower center, a small glass bottle with a black cap and a label that reads 'CARBOLIC POISON' is visible. The ground is covered with dry leaves and green plants.

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THE LAST GREAT FORESTS

by Samuel Miller McDonald

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE COTSWOLD WILDLIFE Park in Southern England seems like little more than a glorified zoo. But my partner and I needed some animal time, so we decided to check it out—and were surprised to have had one of the most fun days we’ve enjoyed in recent memory. There were moments of extraordinary wonder. We’d never before been so close to penguins, who walked around in the open air just beyond a three-foot-high wall (from which they are too little to escape). In another part of the park, a family of capybaras sat on the other side of a short, chain link fence, making strange high-pitched noises, sounding more like robot birds than giant rodents. We stood on a platform and a giraffe brought his face up to mine. The awe of that encounter was unlike anything else: I can only compare it to the scene in *Jurassic Park* where the scientists stop their jeep to see a living brachiosaurus for the first time.

But the highlight of the day was the Madagascan walk-through. In this area, you enter an enclosure with a high net for a roof, but no cages. Inside, many lemurs bound around freely, inches away, mostly ignoring the people gawking at them. There is nothing between you and the animals except the echoing words of the weary keeper who reminds you that you’re not allowed to cuddle the lemurs (“if *I* don’t get to, *you* certainly don’t get to,” she told us). Most of the lemurs in the enclosure were the familiar ringtails and brown bamboo lemurs. But there was one oddball who really stood out: a crowned sifaka—a species

of the *Propithecus* genus of lemur—named Maitso. His name means “green” in the Madagascan language Malagasy, but it’s only his eyes that are bright green: his fur was cream-colored with a black face and chest, and shoulders like copper. His build was quite different from the smaller and more cat-like ringtails; being adapted to leaping from tree to tree—sometimes as far as thirty-feet in a single bound—sifakas’ long arms and legs are awkward on the ground, so when they have to leave the trees, they bounce along in a bipedal, sideways hop.

At one point, Maitso approached a troop of ringtail lemurs who were huddled together. He sat upright like a small person, his long arms clasped around his knees, studying them. Slowly he inched toward the ringtails, scooting closer on the grass, casually looking away as if he were uninterested in their business. When he got close enough he hesitated, then moved his face up to one of them. The other animal noticed him, and closed in as if considering a kiss. As soon as he started licking their face, however, a different ringtail smacked Maitso and he recoiled; falling back a little, he resumed holding his knees and sitting placidly. A little later, he tried again and got in a few brief licks on the face of another ringtail before a quick motion made him back off. At this point, he shifted his interest to a nearby stick. Sifakas are incredibly social creatures with a need to groom; it is not anthropomorphizing to assume Maitso was seeking affection and comfort. With his awkward socializing, upright sitting posture, and bipedal hop, it was hard not to see an eccentric



The author (left) shares a moment with Maitso, a crowned sifaka. (Photo by Heather Milligan).

person, perhaps grown mad and lonely in the company of these sometimes hostile ringtails, trapped together in a relatively small area under a net. The staff person warned us to be careful entering and exiting the enclosure as Maitso had a taste for the plants nearby and was a master escape artist.

According to *National Geographic*, lemurs are the most endangered vertebrates in the world. In the wild, sifakas live on a few patches of land in Madagascar, and nowhere else. All sifaka species are critically endangered because, in addition to being poached for pet trafficking and meat, their habitats are rapidly shrinking as humans deforest Madagascar and the planet.

Worldwide, forest destruction is occurring rapidly and accelerating: between 2002 and 2012, 18 million acres of forest were destroyed annually. A recent report found that rate to have increased by 52 percent: the scale of destruction is now 27 million acres per year. Madagascar and its wonderful, threatened sifakas provides a microcosm for understanding the global story of forest destruction: its origins and its primary culprits.

The BBC reports that within the last 30 years or so, Madagascar has lost up to 80 percent of its original forest cover (though different studies disagree and the lower end estimate is 40 percent, and since 1950). Others posit that the island lost 70 percent of its forests in the early 20th century. Meanwhile, NASA cites figures suggesting that 94 percent of the island's original forest has been "impacted" and 90 percent has been lost since the arrival of settlers 2,000 years ago (a vast majority of that portion in the last century or two). Whatever the case, it's bad.

HUMANS HAVE BEEN PRESENT ON Madagascar—the world's fourth largest island—for at least 10,000 years. (Given that *Homo sapiens* evolved in Southern and/or Eastern Africa more than 300,000 years ago, and Madagascar is located at Africa's southeasternmost point, it's plausible that humans have been there much longer, but let's stick with the evidence we have.) As far as we know, for 80 percent of that 10,000 years, human habitation in Madagascar had a negligible impact on its forests and its endemic species—the flora and fauna that live *only* in Madagascar, making up nearly 90 percent of its inhabitants and pre-dating even the oldest possible human habitation by quite a lot. You can imagine what it must have been like for Madagascar's first people to come upon the island's strange creatures: gasping at the sideways-leaping lemurs and the cat-like fossa, maybe even spotting the nano-chameleon, the world's (so far) smallest reptile, first described by Western scientists only in February of 2021.

The original human inhabitants of Madagascar seem to have mostly or entirely practiced a foraging mode of production. Around 2,000 years ago, settlers from the Malay archipelago (modern Indonesia, East Malaysia, and the Philippines) arrived and began impacting the environment more intensively by cultivating agrarian and pastoral resources. They may have brought slavery to the island as well, in the form of captured Ma'anyan people, from an Indigenous culture native to Borneo. So the first culprit, reaching back to the roots of Madagascar's deforestation, is a familiar one: a hierarchical settler kingdom.

Historian Gwyn Campbell contends that forest destruction really began at an *industrial* scale during the island's (domestic)

imperial period. The precolonial Merina Kingdom emerged in 1540, but Campbell dates its imperial period from 1790 until 1861. The Merina people, descending from a line of hereditary royals, occupied the top caste of the stratified kingdom and practiced endogamy (marrying within the caste). The empire used slave labor to clear forests and mine minerals including iron ore, which fed the empire's economic growth. Slaves farmed not only food to feed the local populations, but also commodity crops like tobacco and cattle. In addition to enslaving people domestically, the empire was heavily involved in the international slave trade. While the country had long been exporting slaves to the international market, with the rise of the Merina Empire they began *importing* people for slavery as well. Imperial spoils, meanwhile, fueled an arms race—or storey race—of ever higher and more elaborate royal palaces, with the wealthier houses costing 100 times more than houses of the poor. In one particularly egregious case, the royalty conscripted a unit of 5,000 enslaved people to move a massive tree trunk into place to act as a palace pillar. Campbell quotes historian Raombana, a contemporary of the period, as noting: “Their pillars are enormous and has excited the astonishments of Europeans who has seen them... [sic] The getting and fetching of the enormous pillars and other Timbers for the construction of these Royal Houses fatigued the people very much.” Surely the fatigued people were reassured at having contributed to the progress and glory of the empire. As Campbell notes, during the period's rule by Queen Ranaivalona, a foreign-run leather tanning industry “fed by lime deposits [...] and by *fanompoana* [slave] labour, resulted in such population growth that [the village's] name was changed to Ambohimandroso (‘Village of Progress’).” All across the world, empires used slave labor to fell forests, fueling imperial growth with a degree of wantonness that could only be sanctioned by high-minded lies like human progress.

The French empire used this tactic too in many countries, and also played a critical role in the environmental devastation of Madagascar. After two wars with the Merina rulers, the French succeeded in colonizing the island in 1897 until it gained independence in 1958. Historical geographer Lucy Jarosz points to colonial policies as a major driver of deforestation during this period. She argues that from the beginning of the French administration, agricultural production was “geared primarily for export,” emphasizing coffee, rice, and beef, with “coffee cash cropping” decimating forests. These policies were rooted in the idea of modernizing the colony in the name of progress, “civilizing” what the French administrators considered savage practices. After a tour of the subsistence cultivation taking place throughout the countryside—by this point a more nomadic and haphazard form after wars and the Merina imperial collapse—a French Lieutenant Michel recommended “strong penalties to stop what he portrayed as a barbarous and deplor-

able [agricultural] practice.” This supposedly barbarous practice involved a set of slash-and-burn techniques that could clear large patches of forest at a time; the French government prohibited slash-and-burn completely in 1913 and sought to replace it with more “modern” and intensive forestry and agricultural techniques. But these reforms were not ecologically informed, failing to take into account natural barriers like the country's micro-climate.

What was perhaps meant to be a well-meaning, sustainable intervention was undermined by the colonial administrators' ecological ignorance. Jarosz suggests that as much as 70 percent of Madagascar's remaining primary forest was harvested during the colonial period “due to the state's economic objectives.” Though the precise proportions of forest clearance are conflicting, a general pattern emerges. In fact, we can extrapolate this pattern to many other places around the globe:

1. Foragers and small agrarians cause little deforestation or habitat destruction, even over the course of thousands or tens of thousands of years.

2. Expansionist empires arrive, either within state borders or from without, and increase deforestation practices with promises of modernization, glory, and progress.

In the late 20th century, decolonization movements (in most places) ostensibly shake out the crusty old European imperial administrations from their former colonies and newly independent states. However—deforestation accelerates.



Maitso attempts to bond with the ringtails.

THE LAST GREAT FORESTS



TOP LEFT: Deforestation and aridization in Madagascar. Source: BBC. TOP RIGHT: Indigenous territory in the Amazon deforested under the regime of Jair Bolsonaro. Source: BrazilWire/Survival International. BOTTOM LEFT: Palm plantation in Malaysian Borneo. Source: NASA. BOTTOM RIGHT: Total combined habitats of all sifaka species. Crowned sifakas inhabit the largest strip. Source: IUCN

Why, even after liberation from colonization, would deforestation continue and with increasing rapidity? The answer is once again rooted in progress narratives, growth imperatives, and hierarchical governments focused on maximizing extraction. The primary culprit is the economic liberalization process that spread across the world in the latter half of the 20th century with the rise of organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank. These international institutions encouraged the opening of trade borders, which meant that

countries with what capitalists had previously considered un- or under-exploited resources like rainforests suddenly became flooded with money from investors interested in replacing rainforests with, say, oil palm plantations, the products of which can be sold to consumers in beloved products like Nutella.

In Madagascar specifically, the country took its first IMF loan in 1977, and the IMF has continued lending to the country in the decades since. In 1982, after Keynesian influences had been eliminated from the organization, the IMF—along with the World Bank—became, in the words of geographer David

Harvey, “centres for the propagation and enforcement of ‘free market fundamentalism’ and neoliberal orthodoxy.” The loans to Madagascar were granted with concessions that required the country to privatize resource access and encourage foreign investment. In 1987, the IMF imposed one of its infamous “structural adjustments” on Madagascar, which required countries to implement policies that impose harsh austerity measures, deregulation, and decrease taxes on corporations. According to political science professor Caroline A. Hartzell (and her colleagues), these programs “systematically create new economic winners and losers rather than particular levels of economic openness...” finding also that “governments that adopt an IMF-led path to liberalization are likely to be at greater risk for experiencing the onset of civil war.”

Madagascar is currently suffering just such a civil crisis. In 2009, the country’s elected president was ousted in a military coup that arose from a combination of factors, including the impacts of the devastating Cyclone Kesi (itself likely exacerbated by global warming) as well as long-standing political tensions and economic policies like the IMF’s structural adjustments.

Meanwhile, demand in China has made Madagascan rosewood the most trafficked wild product in the world; illegal logging of rosewood is a major contributor to the island’s rapid deforestation. European and American demand for wood furniture and instruments is also part of the problem, as is illegal mining. Population growth has added pressures, particularly given the island nation’s fixed ecological boundaries. Marginalization of Indigenous agricultural and forestry practices has contributed to negative environmental impacts; climate change and aridization further devastate the country, with previously forested areas drying up and fertile soil washing out to sea.

The political crisis has opened up opportunities for poachers and illegal loggers to invade protected areas and subjugate the people who live there. An update on the website for the Marojejy National Park from March of 2009 offers a chilling glimpse of conditions there:

It is with great sadness that we report the temporary closure of Marojejy National Park to tourism. The closure was deemed necessary by park management due to the lawlessness that has descended over the SAVA region during this time of political unrest in Madagascar, and the resultant looting and destruction which is currently occurring within the park. In particular, gangs of armed men (led primarily by foreign profiteers [primarily from China] in conjunction with the rich local mafia) are plundering the rainforests of Marojejy for the extremely valuable rosewood that grows there....While old-growth rosewood trees may be the primary objective of the armed gangs, such destructive, unregulated use of the forest will certainly have an adverse effect on everything else in the park. Most worrisome is the well-being of the highly endangered Silky Sifaka, a lemur found only in the rainforests of Marojejy and

the surrounding area....With armed militia descending on local villages and death threats being issued, people live in fear; communities are divided, and families are pitted one against the other.

In an update posted a month later, the site describes the “rosewood mafia” setting up heavily armed camps in broad daylight, “threatening villagers and bribing local policemen,” to haul “tons upon tons” of rosewood out of the park. Meanwhile, “large-scale, organized” bushmeat hunters set packs of trained dogs on sifakas and other lemurs to kill and sell in markets throughout the country. Environmental policy professor Annah Lake Zhu attributes growing demand for rosewood in China primarily to capital accumulation: “Chinese investors have increasingly turned to rosewood and other culturally important endangered resources...as a new outlet for the accumulation of surplus value.” That is to say, these investors are participating in a long lineage of cutting down Madagascar’s rainforests to hoard wealth. And although the French abolished Madagascar’s participation in the slave trade, part of the Empire’s modernization and great contribution to human progress, it did not end forced labor—perhaps unsurprisingly, most of it was simply moved to French plantations—which has continued to exist into the present amid the political crisis and scramble for resources.

ON TOP OF EVERYTHING ELSE, THE CLIMATE crisis is already hitting Madagascar hard. The climate change-exacerbated drought currently gripping the country is the worst in 40 years, and threatens a million people with starvation. Such impacts will only intensify as the world warms. If these elements continue—if growth and liberal “progress” proceed apace—then sifakas, and much of Madagascar’s other endemic wildlife, will surely go extinct. And soon. While climate change gets most of the coverage, the extinction crisis entails equally apocalyptic consequences. The rainforests are just the frontline trenches of this emergency.

The World Bank has also lent to Madagascar and recently touted the country’s rapid economic growth over the last five years. Meanwhile, Madagascar remains one of the poorest countries in the world and one of the most deforested. The essential neoliberal promise—still driving policy today—that economic growth trickles down to improve poverty is clearly false, and the experience of Madagascar is one among many case studies. “Growth” is a euphemism that sanitizes the process of multinationals and richer nations plundering a country’s natural resources.

Elsewhere in the world, three major rainforests are still intact: the Amazon, the Congo Rainforest and Basin, and Borneo (the world’s third largest island) in the Malay Archipelago. Twenty-percent of the Amazon has been destroyed since the 1970s; the rest is very near thresholds that, if crossed, will send it into

an inescapable death spiral, ensuring its collapse by the 2060s. Thanks to the forces of economic liberalization, the Amazon is now a net-emitter of CO₂ rather than a carbon sink, releasing nearly 20 percent more CO₂ than it absorbed over the last decade. Between 2000 and 2010, the Congo Basin lost 700,000 hectares—about the square mileage of Delaware—*per year*, and the deforestation rate has slowed only moderately since then. One study predicts its demise by 2100. Nearly half of the forest cover in nearby Nigeria was destroyed in a 10-year time-span—between 2007 and 2017—much of it for charcoal sold in local and international markets. In Borneo, an area the size of Belgium was illegally logged between 1985 and 2001, and at approximately the same time, oil palm production grew by an order of magnitude, from 600,000 to 6 million hectares. Palm oil has become a cheap, efficient, and versatile source of vegetable oil; it can be found in about half of supermarket products from food to toothpaste, and also in animal feed and biofuels. Oil palm plantations are not a substitute for rainforest nor examples of “reforestation.” They’re chemical deserts. According to one study: “The island of Borneo as a whole seems to have reached a level of forest degradation that is beyond a point of no return,” when it comes to vegetation loss and carbon sequestration. Timber mafias illegally logging Borneo to feed international markets have been accelerating this collapse. As in Madagascar, the culprits in the destruction of these last great forests are industrial plantations (oil palm, rubber, and sugar) plus cattle farms, soy fields, biofuels, mining, wood harvested for furniture and global lumber markets, urbanization, and the familiar hunger of modern empires for annual growth and “human progress.” Residing in these rainforests and critically threatened with extinction are gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, and orangutans—human beings’ closest evolutionary relatives—as well as elephants, big cats, and tens of thousands of small species most of us have never heard of. If the world’s rainforests disintegrate into plantations, savannas, and deserts, we don’t know what to expect—it hasn’t happened while humans have existed—but, combined with status quo fossil fuel emissions, it could result in runaway climate change, droughts and evaporating food supplies, shifts in global weather patterns, and an irreparably deadened world. The destiny of *Homo sapiens* is intimately tied with that of the world’s rainforests. If they go, we may well join all the species we are currently in the process of extinguishing.

Indigenous people in these regions are also threatened with destruction, the destruction of their bodies and the extinction of their ways of life, which are just about the only methods human beings have ever successfully used to thrive without ruining the world around them. In Madagascar, defenders like Clovis Razafimalala, Armand Marozafy, Augustin Sarovy and many others have all fought to prevent environmental destruction and have been harassed, jailed, and exiled. Across the world, defenders of

land and forests are being murdered at record rates, records that are broken every year. While they represent just five percent of the global population, Indigenous people still control up to a quarter of the world’s total land area, two-thirds of which remains ecologically intact. As the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports: “where indigenous groups have control of the land, forests and biodiversity flourishes.”

NEOLIBERALIZATION HAS LARGELY BEEN A project of closing off previously free Indigenous land into plantations, pipelines, oil wells, compounds, and roads. The best way to protect those rainforests, endangered species, and Indigenous lifeways that still remain is to scale back activities associated with development and reverse this process, moving more land under the control of Indigenous groups while halting growth economies to the greatest extent possible. Economic policy has to be based on preserving and sustaining wilderness like forest lands and oceans, rewilding developed areas, and creating mutualistic relations between individuals and between peoples and the non-human world.

Environmental campaigner and *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot reminds us that the United Kingdom—the world’s ninth largest island—was once home to temperate rainforests (he also reminds us that “[o]ut of 218 nations, the UK ranks 189th for the intactness of its living systems.”) But the U.K. rainforests have long since been destroyed—a process probably beginning with the invasion of Rome, right around the time settler colonists first reached Madagascar. They could regrow over many decades or centuries, of course...if they were allowed to. Visiting the Cotswold Wildlife Park—perhaps itself occupying an area that was once a rainforest—inspired much wonder in us, but it was also sad. There was an irony in finding great joy from the presence of animals whose original homes are locked on course to resemble the denuded island they’re now stuck on, ghostly figures residing prematurely in the likely future of their native lands. Maybe the eccentric Maitso *had* gone mad, trapped in that net. He wasn’t the only one: many of the birds flew back and forth in their too-small enclosures. Wolverines, who normally range hundreds of solitary miles, bounded back and forth in a pen perhaps a hundred square meters in size. The giraffes lived in a (tall) barn. The thrill of being near these creatures could satisfy for an afternoon, but could not overcome our lingering anguish at their captivity, or the knowledge of many of their species’ imminent demise. Nor could it ever replicate the majesty of interacting with them in the wild, where they might not just be surviving on the brink of extinction, but thriving, happy. If we don’t immediately stop forest destruction and all the other ecological crimes currently underway, their joys and ours may soon be gone forever. 🌱

Greetings from

ECO SOCIALISM

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A man with a white beard, wearing a white suit, a white hat with a dark band, and a purple tie, is leaning against a black lamp post in a lush green garden. He is holding an open magazine titled 'CURRENT AFFAIRS' which features a black cat on the cover. The background is filled with dense green foliage and trees under a blue sky. The text 'LET US TAKE YOU PLACES' is overlaid on the right side of the image in large, bold letters.

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PLAYGROUNDS FOR ALL

by Nathan J. Robinson

PLAYGROUNDS ARE FOR CHILDREN. ADULTS WHO visit a playground alone are suspect because these are not spaces for us. We are not expected to enjoy going down slides, climbing up nets, dangling from monkey bars, etc. If we want to pursue this sort of leisure, we have to do it in a more organized manner: book a day at an adventure course or a paintball facility or a theme park. We get to have fun in public parks, but it is children who get colorful climbing equipment at taxpayer expense.

Playgrounds are slightly unusual in that there are not many government-operated common spaces devoted to the facilitation of silliness and make believe. As with the public library, the playground is the sort of entity that might seem quite radical if it did not exist today and someone decided to propose it. Spending public money on STEM initiatives? Refundable child tax credits? Highways and bridges? Sure. But because pleasure is thought of as secondary to jobs, and the work of children is to be educated and prepared for the workforce rather than to play and explore and enjoy, there is rarely much public conversation about the question: *does every child have the playtime they deserve?*

Once upon a time, this question was treated very seriously indeed. In the early 20th century, an entire *playground movement* sprung up. Dr. Henry S. Curtis, one of the movement's founders, lamented that "play has probably reached the lowest ebb during the last half century that it has ever reached during the history of the world." Curtis believed that a child's work was to play, to joyously and imaginatively explore the environment around them, and through the Playground Association of America helped usher in what he called a Renaissance of Play. In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt spoke earnestly of a child's fundamental right to mess around doing whatever:

[S]ince play is a fundamental need, playgrounds should be provided for every child as much as schools. This means that they must be distributed over the cities in such a way as to be within walking distance of every boy and girl, as most children can not afford to pay carfare.

A delightful and overlooked figure in the history of playgrounds is Margaret Allen, Baroness Allen of Hurtwood, who began as a landscape architect and became a children's rights campaigner. Born Margaret Gill (cousin of artist and typographer Eric Gill, who invented the Gill Sans typeface but posthumously became infamous for incestuous sexual abuse and bestiality), she married so-



cialist aristocrat Clifford Allen, a pacifist leader in the Independent Labour Party who had served a stretch in prison for his resistance to World War I.

Margaret Allen became entranced with the idea of "adventure playgrounds," (a term she invented) after witnessing children playing in the bombed-out ruins of European cities after the end of World War II. "It is little wonder that [children] prefer the dumps of rough wood and piles of bricks and rubbish of the bombed sites," she said. Allen noted that the places children most *liked* to play in were the places least *meant* for them to play in. Allen had seen an experimental playground built of junk in Copenhagen and began building them across Britain. (She deployed the term "adventure" playground because no mother wanted her child playing in "junk.") Carl Theodor Sørensen, the landscape architect who had envisioned the Danish playground, wrote of his vision:

"I am thinking in terms of an area, not too small in size, well closed off from its surroundings by thick greenery, where we should gather, for the amusement of bigger children, all sorts of old scrap that the children from the apartment blocks could be allowed to work with, as the children in the countryside and in the suburbs already have. There could be branches and waste from tree polling and bushes, old cardboard boxes, planks and boards, "dead" cars, old tyres and lots of other things, which would be a joy for healthy boys to use for something. Of course it would look terrible, and of course some kind of order would have to be maintained...it would at all events require an interested adult supervisor..."

Margaret Allen was blown away by the result:

I was completely swept off my feet by my first visit to Emdrup playground. In a flash of understanding I realised that I was looking at

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something quite new and full of possibilities. There was a wealth of waste material on it and no man-made fixtures. The children could dig, build houses, experiment with sand, water or fire and play games of adventure and make believe.

The adventure playground enjoyed a renaissance for a few years. They “were thought to provide a new, civic model of society” where “children would learn how to collaborate, because you can’t build on your own.” Because these playgrounds included abundant loose scrap material that children could move around and shape in accordance with their own imaginative designs, they *created* the playground as well as using it. At the same time, American landscape architects were designing “‘playable’ works of art” using “areas of sand and water, tunnels, mazes, and irregularly-shaped structures to create spaces of whimsy.” Lady Allen believed that previously-existing playgrounds were boring and needed more excitement and danger. In a letter to *The Times*, she wrote:

Municipal playgrounds are often as bleak as barrack squares and just as boring. You are not allowed to build a fire, you would head straight for juvenile court if you started to dig up the expensive tarmac to make a cave, there are no bricks or planks to build a house, no workshops for carpentry, mechanical work, painting or modelling and of course, no trees to climb...

A fundamental principle of the adventure playground is that children themselves should determine their play. Several studies have suggested that children and adults differ in their beliefs on what makes a good playground, and when children have trouble playing, adults blame the failure of the children’s imagination, and the children blame the playground. The facilitation of fun is a science, and the best way to go about it is to observe what children like to do and then give it to them. John Bertelman, the supervisor of the Copenhagen playground, flatly declared: “I cannot and indeed will not, teach the children anything.” His job was to make a playground that they could use whichever way they pleased, free of external instruction. A minimalist design “encouraged children to discover shapes, forms, proportions, and distances, and develop their imaginations on their own terms.” This child-first theory of playground design was central to the innovations in playground design of the mid-20th century.



FOR A FEW DECADES AFTER WORLD WAR II, “playgrounds enjoyed a golden age, upheld as an almost revolutionary tool for bringing neighborhoods together and bettering society through children’s learning and independence.” Naturally, however, this type of playground did not flourish in the long term, in part because they were dangerous and in part because they were costly (or at least, it cost a lot to make sure they weren’t dangerous). As Sørensen admitted, letting kids play with scrap metal requires a constant trained adult supervisor if it’s going to be even moderately safe.

In the United States, playgrounds gradually became homogenized into the familiar “post and platform” designs we see today, and there are “few true adventure playgrounds left” today thanks to “a health and safety culture that watered down adventure playgrounds in the 1980s and ‘90s,” according to the *Guardian*. Built with uniform components, the post-adventure playgrounds were both cheap and safe and did not need to be supervised by professional play leaders. Lady Allen’s criteria for a good playground were simple: “a massive supply of materials and a resourceful and sympathetic leader.” Neither is found in the cookie-cutter post-and-platform playgrounds that dot American parks and schoolyards today. The principle that children love playgrounds that resemble ruined cities was slowly forgotten.

One old-fashioned “junk playground” that exists to this day is the famous St. Louis City Museum, which is not really a museum at all but a converted factory filled with bizarre sculptures and bits of architectural salvage that children of any age can climb on and explore. As a *Wall Street Journal* headline about the place notes, the City Museum “Exposes Kids to Thrills, Chills and Trial Lawyers” thanks to its prioritization of “cool junk” (such as a jet airplane suspended in the air, and a 10-story slide left over from the building’s former days as a shoe factory). The *Journal* reports that “One woman lost two fingers,” “a boy fractured his skull after a fall from the outdoor jungle gym, the ‘MonstroCity,’” and “the facility has been named in at least two dozen personal-injury lawsuits since 2005.” Bob Cassily, the eccentric artist who created the City Museum, was later killed when creating his next project, “Cementland,” a sprawling 54-acre art project built on the grounds of a disused cement factory. (The official story is that Cassily died when his bulldozer overturned on him, but one examining physician concluded the bulldozer accident was staged, raising the possibility that the makers of staid, safe children’s playground equipment may have conspired to keep Cassily from introducing young people to ever-more-dangerous forms of fun.)

The push for safety was understandable—even one child’s death can seem too much to justify the “fun factor” of a playground covered in hazards. The idea of filling a playground with rocks and scrap metal came to seem insane. Children were horrifically injured in greater numbers in the years before playground safety became a science, and the idea that needless danger creates “self reliance” is a kind of Social Darwinism—on this philosophy, if kids get injured, it teaches them a life lesson, when in fact the structures we build should accommodate the clumsy and the nimble alike. But it is possible to have adventure with highly controlled risk, and many of our most boring playgrounds are not boring because safety necessitates mundanity but because nobody cares enough to spend the vast sums of money necessary to make truly extraordinary play spaces. We are stuck with “austerity playgrounds.” (In fact, there is a literal connection to austerity policies; the *Guardian* reports that mon-

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ey that would have been put toward constructing new playgrounds in the UK was reallocated by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that became infamous for its austerity budgeting.)

Recently, however, there has been a shift back “towards more eclectic and creative urban play-spaces” and a “trend away from standardization and towards more unique, site-specific, and engaging design,” according to *Curbed*. Design has come “full circle,” and “Playground designers have started to question the fixed plastic equipment of traditional playgrounds, asking what if these could be replaced with movable pieces with undefined functions.” We are now seeing more “climbing walls, splash parks, sculptural play pieces, and playgrounds where kids can change and mold their environment.” The “traditional prefab, cookie cutter approach to playgrounds is undergoing a massive shift towards more adventurous and eccentric public space.” Berkeley, California’s adventure playground “contains furniture, wood, boats, scrap metal, loose parts, and tools for kids to build with and create (with supervision).”

But the distribution of kick-ass playgrounds is wildly unequal. Playgrounds are, as Theodore Roosevelt had hoped for, generally within reach for children in the United States. But *great* playgrounds are not. A journalism project at the City University of New York looked at the quality of playgrounds in rich and poor neighborhoods and found, predictably, that playgrounds that scored high on measures of quality (and on maintenance) were clustered in rich areas and that playgrounds in poor neighborhoods were often in disrepair.

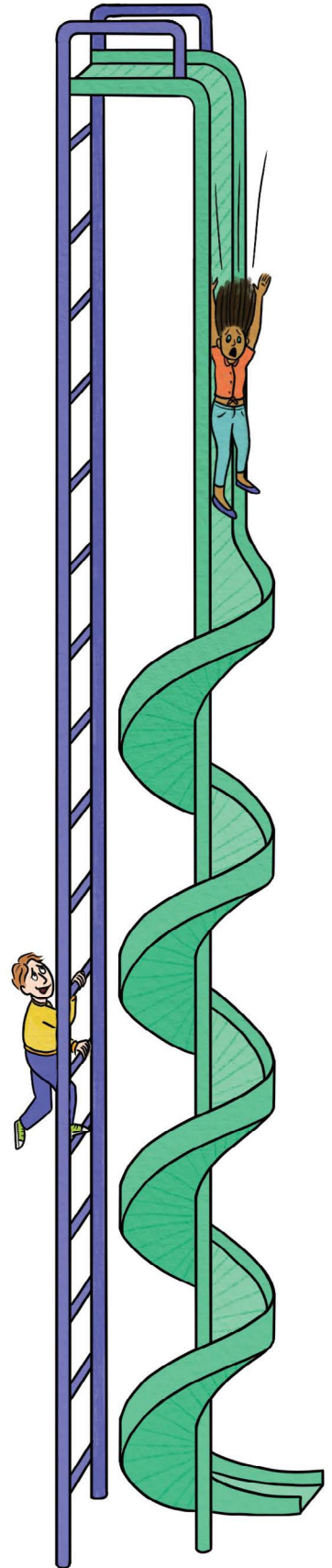
There are amazing playgrounds out there. Palo Alto, for instance, has a unique accessible playground carefully designed to make sure wheelchair-using children miss out on as little of the fun as possible. But should you live some distance from Silicon Valley, your kids will likely be confined to the kind of “cookie cutter” playgrounds that became the norm over the course of the post-adventure era. A sensible proposal to rebuild U.S. infrastructure would do so in part by funding hundreds of millions of dollars in new adventure playground construction around the country, which would both create jobs and give children something almost utopian: the equal right to play well. But many of the playgrounds littered through our cities are relics of a time when play was taken seriously. *New* playgrounds are few and far between.

THE FUTURE OF PLAYGROUNDS is somewhat uncertain. Fast food restaurants like McDonald’s and Chick-fil-A have ceased to invest in new play spaces, partly because they are viewed as unsanitary and partly because children’s

entertainment is increasingly digital rather than physical. One study of human activity patterns found that “93% of the average American’s time is spent indoors [and] another 6% is spent in vehicles.” A playground is boring when you’re the only one on it, and it takes a critical mass of children to bring a play space alive. But it would be wrong to conclude that Kids These Days Are Glued To Screens and don’t want to play outside. The amount of physical energy children have is extraordinary, and a well-designed and imaginative playground can be endlessly fun for even a tech-addicted child, as anyone knows who has ever been forced to keep spinning a child or pushing a swing long after the child would reasonably have been expected to become tired and want to go home.

We should think about playgrounds because the right to joy is just as fundamental as the right to healthcare, housing, and food. Every kid deserves the chance to goof off and have fun, not just to be taught academic subjects but to make boats, tell stories, have sing-alongs, record radio shows, write plays, make toys and decorate rooms, wear costumes, walk on stilts, ride on roller skates, stage puppet shows, drum in drum circles, go on treasure hunts, and climb, swing, jump, and crawl all over the place. And this shouldn’t just be for kids. Play is the right of all, and isn’t something that anyone should have to grow out of. We adults get parks, not playgrounds, but we too deserve our socialized spaces for silliness.

We hear a lot about getting students’ test scores up. We do not hear much about ensuring that they are enjoying themselves. What the playground movement of the early 20th century understood is that play is not secondary but central, and we should think just as much about how to ensure children have fun as we do about how to ensure that they know things. Playgrounds are not a luxury but a right, and they must be the sort of places that children love. ✱



YOUR UTOPIAN PLAYGROUND!

Your city and schoolyard may be littered with classic "post and platform" play structures from the last few decades. But what does the playground of tomorrow look like?

Here, *Current Affairs* provides a realistic preview of the kinds of play that we can—and should—give children everywhere. Now try designing your own!







BOTTOMLESS BOTTOM-LINE CRUELTY

On the IMF and the World Bank

BY ROB LARSON

EVERYONE KNOWS THERE ARE MANY EXTREMELY poor countries in the world, but people rarely talk about why. These nations are sometimes collectively called the Third World (being neither the Western First World or the Soviet-aligned Second World); the more recent euphemism is usually the “developing world.” Whatever the name, these states are imagined by most Westerners to be scary, struggling places, and they tend to take the blame for global woes like terrorism and unsanctioned migration. Some of our greatest billionaires polish their public personas by donating to charities that supposedly aid the people trapped in grinding poverty across parts of Africa, southern Asia, and Latin America.

These countries have been The Poor Countries for quite some time now. At the end of World War II, the great states of the developing world—like Brazil, Indonesia, India, and the Congo—were dramatically poorer than the developed world. Today, 75 years later, and after decades of “investment” and “development,” they’re still very poor. In fact, huge numbers of people in these large, resource-rich countries are much poorer than their ancestors. What the hell is going on here? Colonialism ended years ago—didn’t it? Or did it just change shape?

BAD PENNIES

For centuries, most of what is now called the developing world was part of the colonial systems of the European powers—Britain controlled India and Egypt, the French owned West Africa and Vietnam, the Netherlands possessed Indonesia, the Portuguese ran Brazil, the Belgians brutalized the Congo, and so on. These imperial “possessions” of nations and peoples were sometimes held directly by the crown, sometimes run by European militaries, and sometimes owned by monopolistic trading corporations like the East India Company, but all were used in a common pattern.

Colonies were sources of vital materials, from precious Eastern

spices to rescue bland European cooking, to desperately needed petroleum for the West’s industrial revolution. The colonies were also often barred from importing products from other European powers, making them important “captive markets” of their mother country. And in addition to these economic incentives, the colonies’ territories were treated like chess pieces in the endless rivalries of the great powers. Even countries that were never fully incorporated into a particular European colonial empire, like China, were subjected to years of partition into spheres of influence and forced to import European-manufactured products, keeping domestic industry from developing. The West fought large wars to prevent China from barring the import of opium, causing tremendous damage to Chinese society in one of the Western world’s all-time ugliest episodes (which, given Western history, is saying something).

After the imperial powers were beaten, exhausted, and/or occupied during World War II, the developing world strove for independence—and the Europeans fought like mad to avoid giving it to them. From French Algeria to British India, the colonial powers used ungodly violence and torture on a huge scale against dissidents, keeping cruel pro-Western dictators in office as long as possible. As the developing countries of the Global South gradually won independence through long, bloody struggles, their traumatized societies came under what leftists often call “neocolonialism”—a system in which rich capitalist states install and support local dictators and strongmen, allowing Western companies to continue owning many of the same old crucial resources and selling products to profitable, effectively captive markets. This pattern widened after the Cold War, when the “fall of the Soviet bloc... [created] a new imperial age,” as the conservative *Financial Times* of London related, with “a system of indirect rule that has involved the integration of leaders of developing countries into the network of the new ruling class.”

FROM REGULAR SLAVERY TO DEBT SLAVERY

One of the most valuable tools used to keep developing countries from developing some real independence has been debt. The battle-scarred governments arising from the wars of independence—some authoritarian and some managing to remain partially republican—often wanted compensation from the former imperial powers, which they’re mostly still hoping for. This was in recognition of the scale of imperial crimes against the developing world, from the enormous violence unleashed against them to the massive wealth that was stripped to build up Western economies, plus the fact that choice resources like oil deposits and rich farmland often remained in the hands of citizens of the colonial powers. Europe and the United States refused, though they frequently indicated they were prepared to *lend* developing countries the money instead.

Despite requests for capital grants as reparations rather than lines of credit, many developing countries ended up borrowing money, ostensibly for development—investing in education, health, and domestic infrastructure to begin the journey to something more like the developed world’s standard of living. Often funds were needed to pay the *developed* powers “compensation” for nationalizing their assets, like the Suez Canal. Frequently these loans were organized by the World Bank, created by the Western powers after World War II to help provide development credit to the Third World. These loans for roads, bridges, schools and hospitals were supposed to be paid for by the countries’ great future economic growth, although notably the World Bank and Western investors favored projects that built on poor countries’ existing comparative trade advantages. This meant exporting basic commodities like bulk crops, or raw materials like oil and copper—largely leaving the higher valued-added processing and manufacturing to the developed world.

But the numerous right-wing authoritarians installed by the U.S. in the Cold War environment were extremely corrupt, including the Shah of Iran, the fascist Brazilian military government, and the string of U.S.-backed dictators in Pakistan. So the countries borrowed giant amounts from international banks located in Western countries in the name of their penniless citizens, but much of the money went straight up their noses. Meanwhile, the debts stayed on the books despite being clearly “odious”—debt that should be canceled due to illegitimacy, in economics lingo. Since the populations of the former colonies didn’t borrow the money and often didn’t even benefit from it in the form of improved public services or broader economic development, why should the people have to pay these loans to fabulously wealthy banks and investors? It’s not a small question: according to the World Bank, by 2010 the “external debt” owed by poor Third World states had reached an outrageous, towering \$4 trillion.

John Perkins, a former participant in the debt traps sprung on poor countries, wrote in his 2004 *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* that the debt in these poor, neocolonialism-ridden states had reached monumental proportions. As he explains:

“[T]he cost of servicing [this debt]—over \$375 billion per year as of 2004—is more than all third world spending on health and education, and twenty times what developing countries receive annually in foreign aid... Ecuador is typical... For every \$100 of crude taken out of the Ec-

uadorian rainforests, the oil companies receive \$75. Of the remaining \$25, three-quarters must go to paying off the foreign debt. Most of the remainder covers military and other government expenses—which leaves about \$2.50 for health, education, and programs aimed at helping the poor.”

It’s not just Ecuador. Many poor states, like Malawi and Paraguay, spend much more on their overseas debt servicing than they can on schools and health.

And it’s even more offensive when you consider where these giant sums from poor countries—and their poor citizens—end up going. More often than not, it’s straight into the pockets of the global rich. The developing world’s debt is held widely, including by pension funds and governments in the developed world. But as with most financial assets, public debt from the developing world is mostly held by private, rapacious financial institutions and wealthy investors in the developed world. The atrocity of this really needs to be considered—you have the most grindingly poor people on this entire godforsaken planet, forced to remit enormous sums of cash to the richest people and institutions in the world. It’s taking from Malala to give to Donald Trump, Jr.

MIND THE SAP

Why did the giant loans from the World Bank and private foreign investors so absolutely fail to jumpstart economic growth in the developing world? It’s partly because of the inherently limited, primary commodity export-based development model, and also because much of the money has gone into corrupt dictators’ Swiss bank accounts. Additionally, according to Perkins, the system was a grift from the beginning; the enormous infrastructure products launched with the credit were mostly built by U.S. and European engineering contractors, thus meaning the benefits to local economies were likely overstated. And when the promised growth failed to materialize and countries were left unable to readily pay their debts, creditors called the IMF—the International Monetary Fund.

Originally created to help regulate capital flows, the IMF was constituted alongside the World Bank in the famous (okay, famous if you’re an economist) Bretton Woods global financial policy summit in 1944. But by the 1980s, the IMF had evolved into the credit community’s enforcer. Developing countries that fell behind on their debt payments would find that no lenders would extend them further credit—except for the IMF. So they were forced to borrow from the IMF to pay their previous lenders, with the IMF acting as a sort of hard money lender for nations.

Somewhat like a Victorian charity project, the IMF is itself funded by “subscriptions.” Member countries pay based on their share of the world economy, and voting power is based on their monetary contributions. Western countries and allies have dominated the world economy, paying the most in subscriptions, and thus have always held a large majority of the voting rights. According to the Fund, the U.S. has 16.7 percent of the vote total while the tiny island nation of Tuvalu has 0.03 percent.

For decades, the IMF was steered by the usual developed world suspects, above all the U.S. and Western Europe. But after many years of wrangling, the U.S. finally dropped its hold-out resistance and the IMF board was rebalanced in 2015, allowing large developing countries China, Russia, Brazil, and India to join Western countries in the top 10 most powerful countries in the IMF system—yet without much change in its cruel demands. Regardless of who’s seated at the table, the

Fund has become infamous worldwide for the policy changes it requires before extending new loans, changes known as SAPs (structural adjustment programs). Allegedly these are meant to help countries stabilize their finances, giving lenders confidence that the countries can manage their debt and resume economic growth. However, the policies demand aggressive “austerity” programs, in which social safety nets are shredded to ribbons in order to satisfy wealthy foreign lenders.

For example, SAPs typically include fiscal austerity—fixing the government’s budget deficit by cutting social spending. The main targets usually include health and education spending, like when Greece was bailed out in 2010 by the IMF, and in return was forced to chop its health spending to below 6 percent of GDP (compared to other developed countries, where 10 percent or more is common). Another common target is public commodity subsidies—a.k.a. spending by the state to lower prices for basic food and fuel, like rice or heating oil. For the globe’s poorest people, these subsidies are often life-and-death issues, saving families from having to choose between eating and keeping the heat on, and so they’re often the most popular government policies. But, since huge numbers of desperate people rely on these programs, they are a fiscal drag on the poorest states, and they make an obvious target for IMF policy-writers. SAPs additionally require new, highly-regressive taxes, usually on the poor or small middle classes.

SAPs also require monetary austerity—hiking interest rates to strengthen the local currency so that foreign investors don’t dump their holdings. Another frequent demand of the IMF is privatization, where public agencies and assets are sold to private investors. One of the most famous examples occurred in Argentina in the 1990s, which was forced to sell most of its major infrastructure, like ports, telecommunications networks, and airlines. This helps the government budget but means citizens must pay for formerly free services, and comes with large layoffs as the newly-private agencies try to make money, damn the cost.

The IMF further insists on capital and trade liberalization. This often involves removing limits on the ability of foreign investors to buy domestic assets like land, which allows them to hollow out their home

country’s manufacturing base and build giant industrial plants in the developing world for export. All these wide-ranging requirements have two things in common:

1. They are “deflationary,” meaning they slow economic growth. The deflation occurs due to layoffs of public workers, reductions in subsidies that effectively cut mass buying power, and higher interest rates restraining economic activity. This is of course completely counter-productive, since the whole point of this model (in theory, anyway) is supposed to keep the developing world on the path of healthy capitalist economic growth.

2. Liberalization ensures the debt-holding commercial banks in London and New York are paid off. And indeed these investors are free to buy formerly public infrastructure, often after a debt crisis at fire sale prices, even as it also swamps the impoverished countries in a flood of low-cost foreign imports.

The great Marxist writer Vijay Prashad uses the example of the small south African state of Malawi, which after a disastrous privatization of its agricultural development agency saw prices of basic grains shoot up 400 percent. Along with alternating floods and droughts, this brought full-on starvation. The IMF did not consider this adequate cause to amend the SAP, and today Malawi spends more annually on its debt service than on health, education, and agriculture put together. Hunger and famine are cruel tragedies in any conditions, but they’re especially ugly when they’re a result of policy decisions. That’s the special legacy of SAPs and other Western decisions like Winston Churchill’s policy of exporting rice from India during World War II, leading to a disastrous famine without a drought.

Public health expert David Stuckler and professor of medicine Sanjay Basu documented the social ramifications of this austerity, focusing on public health programs, in their phenomenally interesting book *The Body Economic*. Among their careful data analysis is a comparison of health outcomes in Iceland and Greece. When Iceland’s banks went bankrupt in the world financial crisis of 2008, the IMF stuck to the neoliberal script and was willing to extend emer-

I TELL YOU WHAT, YOU'RE DOING THE RIGHT THING, REFINACING RIGHT NOW. BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, YOU'LL HAVE THAT INTEREST PAID RIGHT OFF AND YOU'LL BE RAKING IN THE MONEY! AND THEN YOU'LL BE ABLE TO MAKE A FEW IMPROVEMENTS AROUND HERE, NO NEED TO CONCERN YOURSELF WITH ALL THOSE ADDENDUMS AND CLAUSES. THE LAWYERS MAKE US ADD THOSE.



gency loans only on terms of extreme austerity. Iceland was supposed to pay its creditors an amount equal to *half* the country's gross income, meaning their public spending had to be cut by a dramatic 15 percent of GDP. Almost unbelievably, the IMF designated healthcare a "luxury good" that would have to be cut, but Iceland's government put it to a vote. In a 2010 referendum, the people of Iceland voted 93 percent against the IMF austerity program. (In the politics biz, we like to call that "a mandate.")

Instead of bowing to the IMF, Iceland instead tried the opposite of economists' demands. As Stuckler and Basu wrote, "By first rejecting the IMF's plan for radical austerity, [Iceland] protected a modern-day equivalent of the New Deal... In 2007, Iceland's government spending as a fraction of GDP was 42.3 percent. This increased to 57.7 percent in 2008," which was financed by deficit spending that the IMF partially accepted as part of a much milder program than usual. Chastened by defeat, the Fund diplomatically stated that the rescue "safeguarded...the key elements of the Icelandic welfare state. This was achieved by designing the fiscal consolidation in a way that sought to protect vulnerable groups by having expenditure cuts that did not compromise welfare benefits and raising revenue by placing greater tax burden on higher income groups." This was a pretty incredible reversal by the Fund, and Iceland has since convincingly moved on from the crisis.

Stuckler and Basu then contrast Iceland's success with the tragedy of Greece at the same time, where an even more drastic IMF bailout was offered. But unlike in Iceland, the supposed birthplace of democracy canceled a planned public referendum on austerity. The cuts were heinous: the IMF demanded that public health spending drop to 6 percent of GDP to free up budget money to repay foreign banks and lenders, while governments supporting the IMF (like Germany) typically get to spend around 10 percent of GDP on health. In a horrifying plunge, Greece's public health indicators went from those of a lower-rung developed country to levels more common in the developing world, with OECD data showing a 40 percent spike in infant mortality and an almost 50 percent jump in unmet healthcare needs. Indeed, Stuckler and Basu noted "[the] Health Ministry continued to avoid collecting and publicly disclosing many standard health statistics." And, crucially, with Greece forced into austerity after passing on democracy, it did not start getting out of debt. In fact, as its economy slowed and tilted into recession under austerity, its debt-to-GDP ratio *rose*, supporting claims that the real purpose of the SAPs is actually just to keep poor countries in debt, claims made even by former insiders like Perkins.

Of course, the normally obscure subject of "public health in the developing world" recently broke into the headlines due to the coronavirus pandemic. Tucker Carlson viewers eager to blame China should realize the IMF, largely staffed by veterans of the U.S. Treasury Department, has been the major force fighting against health funding in the world's poorest countries.

As the *Wall Street Journal* reports:

"[M]any join the epidemic already overwhelmed... The vulnerability most of these countries share is giant urban slums where hundreds of millions live with poor sanitation and no plumbing. Basic practices to prevent the virus's spread, such as regular hand-washing, can be impossible given the scarcity of clean water... Nearby, people queued to use fetid public toilets and communal taps... In many poorer countries, the starvation threat could outweigh the coronavirus specter, conspiring against social distanc-

ing and other mitigating measures wealthier nations can afford to take."

The *New York Times* adds that the panicky bidding for medical supplies has seen "Rich Countries Push Poor Aside," as the U.S. and European Union nations lock up months' worth of supplies for treatment and testing, leaving the strapped health budgets of the Third World "at the back of the queue." The *Times* observes the developing world's record of "health systems that are underfunded, fragile and often lacking in necessary equipment," without putting any blame on the IMF for insisting upon this condition. The toiling residents of the jammed megaslums of the Global South have been subjected to crushing pressure by COVID-19 lockdowns, including from the collapse of remittances: a.k.a. money sent by immigrants working in the developed world, which is often a crucial lifeline for poor families. Private creditors to sovereign lenders in the developed world have publicly stated they will not grant even a moratorium on payments to the Third World during the crisis. This summer has seen the developed nations largely reopening, but the poor countries have had extremely limited vaccine access, due to the rich countries hoarding them, big manufacturers like India needing all they can make for themselves, and a basic lack of buying power.

SO THE IMF AND THEIR BRUTAL SAPs, ALONG with other Third World calamities, have kept the developing world in a perpetual state of "development" for many decades now, turning them into debt-servicing machines at the expense of public health and happiness. Don't take my word for it—the late arch-conservative economist (and my personal arch-nemesis) Milton Friedman himself said, "IMF bailouts are hurting the countries they are lending to, and benefitting the foreigners who lent to them. The United States does give foreign aid. But this is a different kind of foreign aid. It only goes through countries like Thailand to Bankers Trust."

And so as decades pass, large countries containing enormous wealth and resources of all kinds, like Brazil, Indonesia, and the Congo, somehow remain grindingly poor. This is neocolonialism—the component of neoliberalism that maintains the people of the Third World in debt traps—which looks not all that different from classic colonialism when those same countries were formal subjects of European empires. After so many decades of failed promises, even the IMF has been forced to recognize the real effects of its SAPs. In a truly incredible IMF paper titled "Neoliberalism: Oversold?" staff economists report: "Instead of delivering growth, some neoliberal policies have increased inequality, in turn jeopardizing durable expansion... Austerity policies... hurt demand—and thus worsen employment and unemployment... episodes of fiscal consolidation have been followed, on average, by drops rather than by expansions in output." Yet new IMF lending programs for states like Argentina and Pakistan are still based on austerity-heavy terms, just as with previous bailouts. It's no longer possible to ignore that these "bailouts" are intended not for the countries themselves but for their creditors, past and future.

Meanwhile, the effect of neocolonial SAPs on the natural environment in developing countries, which often include tropical areas with extraordinary species biodiversity, is pretty heinous. Indonesia is an instructive case. In return for continued access to credit, the IMF required Indonesia to loosen investment rules, allowing

They may look harmless but

GEESE

are not your
friends.



"UNION ACTION
MAY AFFECT
THE BREAD
SUPPLY"

Do not let your children approach,
they may have an unsavoury agenda.

This message is brought to you by Moms Against Waterfowl.

foreign companies to buy giant amounts of land. At the same time, it forced Indonesia to defang trade rules like its ban on exporting palm oil. Foreign agricultural companies began aggressive land clearing for palm plantations to grow lucrative palm oil, used for many products like processed food. The *Financial Times* reported that “the appetite of foreign investors” dramatically escalated Indonesia’s long tradition of clearing forests, so “the arrival of logging and plantation firms have made the situation much worse in recent years.” The resulting constant burning of Borneo’s rainforests, gigantic acrid smoke clouds, and the horrible loss of habitat for critically-endangered species like the orangutan, are as much part of the IMF’s legacy as sick children in slums and downtrodden peasants in the countryside.

But the global poor majority isn’t taking all this lying down. In surprising numbers, they are rising up.

THE FORCE MAJEURE OF THE STREETS

It is a darkly hilarious fact that there’s an entire category of urban and rural uprisings known as “IMF riots,” which reliably erupt after some proud, poor country is racked with SAP austerity. Vijay Prashad wrote in Znet that “[it] is reasonable to call the Arab Spring of 2011 an IMF riot because it was provoked by IMF austerity policies combined with rising food prices. The current unrest from Pakistan to Ecuador should be filed under IMF riot. In response to these riots, the IMF has used new language to describe the same old policies. We hear of ‘social compacts’ and of Structural Adjustment 2.0 and then the bizarre ‘expansionary austerity.’”

Often IMF SAPs require explicit repudiation of political programs that won mass support. After the Asian financial crisis of 1997-8, the IMF had major leverage over Pacific states like South Korea and Taiwan. It forced its SAPs on them, with the *Financial Times* reporting on “the strikes, riots and mass job cuts that... orthodox reforms provoked.” When the Indonesian government was mandated by the IMF

to cut back fuel subsidies in 1998, the measure led to nationwide riots that were repressed by what the neoliberal *Economist* magazine called “[the] familiar armory of riot police.”

Pakistan is another example, where new prime minister Imran Khan ran for office on a program of jobs and welfare—more health and education spending, and more employment to raise the quality of life for this fast-growing population. But finding the state close to defaulting on its debt, his government has been largely forced to “shred his political program,” as the *Wall Street Journal* reported, and instead “raise tax rates, curb government spending and increase gas and electricity prices in return for IMF support.” Openly calling his country’s condition a “debt trap,” Khan hopes the country can return to growth after the SAP, but the bailout isn’t even a sure thing since “the U.S. government, which holds sway over the IMF,” is concerned that Pakistan will use the bailout funds to repay large loans to China instead, making the Pakistani people pawns in a geopolitical struggle between the U.S. and China. Even as the new program continues to weaken the economy and “stifle demand,” this is Pakistan’s 22nd IMF program, as successive U.S.-backed military dictators come and go, from General Zia al-Haq to General Pervez Musharraf.

The “tumultuous Middle East” can credit much of its turmoil to the IMF as well. Tunisia, the symbol of the Arab Spring, is struggling with painful spending cuts that jeopardize the revolution’s gains in order to meet IMF demands. In Iraq, after decades of crippling sanctions, several destructive American wars, the long violent U.S. occupation and then the war with ISIS, huge demonstrations have broken out. Protestors have braved rubber bullets, tear gas, and even mysterious snipers on tall buildings to demand a share of the nation’s potentially stupendous oil wealth. The Western business press notes that “[under] IMF guidance, Iraq made tentative steps to prune the payroll, introduce taxation and suspend government hiring,” while lamenting that these wonderful steps toward Progress stopped once oil prices recovered for a time and took pressure off Iraq’s budget.

In nearby Lebanon, huge protests broke out after the imposition of a tax on WhatsApp calls, following a scandal in which the prime minister was discovered to have given \$16 million to a swimsuit model he met at a luxury resort, “a move that, for some critics, epitomized Lebanon’s ruling class,” as the *New York Times* put it. “Austerity measures have hollowed out the middle class, while the richest 0.1 percent of the population—which includes many politicians—earns a tenth of the country’s national income.” And “[even] in Saudi Arabia, where the threat of government repression makes public protests practically unthinkable, an unusual rebellion erupted on social media over a 100 percent tax on bills at restaurants with water pipes, or hookas.”

Latin America has also seen mass action against the Fund, as when they forced a major austerity program on Brazil after the sovereign debt crisis of 1997-8. (There certainly are a lot of debt crises for a supposedly functional and beneficial system! Makes you think.) The *Journal* reported that the IMF required “severe steps” for an emergency loan program to keep the country paying its alleged debts to the world’s wealthy, and the president publicly told the country to prepare for tough times, with higher regressive taxes and cuts to the public pension program. Unsurprisingly, the ensuing protests were extensive and volatile.

But Argentina has been the bigger headache for the IMF. The South American nation is big enough to get away with defaulting on its debt-extraction-model loan plans, most famously in a giant 2001



“Of course, that was before the fungi came.”

default—i.e., its failure or refusal to pay the country's debt. (Debts, arguably, only really exist if you're poor.) More recently, in 2019, conservative pro-business president Mauricio Macri found himself struggling with the country's high foreign currency debt and an extensive drought, so he took a \$57 billion loan from the IMF. Under the terms the state "dismantled the consumer subsidies that had curbed the cost of everything from electricity to public transportation, but had become impossible for the state to afford," the *Times* reported.

As popular resentment broke into public protest and Macri's popularity in the polls plummeted, the IMF actually withheld a planned \$5 billion installment, and Macri ended up losing his next election to the more independent and free-spending Peronists, whose populist history includes a tradition of providing public supports like food and fuel subsidies. The new administration hopes to spread out foreign debt payments and avoid yet another default, but creditors are still annoyed, and they still hold a great deal of power.

The Peronist government is torn between its promises of greater welfare spending on housing and infrastructure and its need to placate the Fund. For now it's imposing new taxes and looking to cut public sector salaries to begin meeting the IMF's growth-killing but debt-paying demands. Because of this history, the *Journal* reports that "Hating on the IMF" has become "Argentina's National Pastime," since despite right-wing claims that "the Third World is socialist," this large country has been under IMF supervision for 30 of the past 60 years. Argentines probably remember the record of benefit cuts, the privatizations of important state bodies, and how "[the] fund also provided financial assistance to the ruthless military junta that seized power in 1976" which tortured leftists to death.

Chile has also become a prominent site of anti-austerity rioting, being arguably the birthplace of neoliberalism in action following the 1973 U.S.-backed coup that overthrew elected socialist president Salvador Allende and installed the brutal right-wing dictator General Augusto Pinochet. In 2019, civil unrest broke out in a number of Chilean cities after president Sebastián Piñera imposed a hike on subway fares, the last in a long line of IMF-promoted austerity policies. Huge demonstrations, including the traditional banging of pots and pans, demanded a reversal in the decreasing provision of public goods like transportation, education, public health, and pensions.

Buses were burned and subways trashed, and Chile's fascist-trained military responded in its tradition of vicious brutality. The *Times*, no enemy of austerity, observed that as riot police purposefully targeted protestors' eyes, "[the] image of a bandaged eye is now so common it has become a rallying symbol for the protestors in Chile." Even as the fare hike was rolled back, demonstrations continued to demand a replacement to the Pinochet-era constitution, and a University of Chile study concluded that the "rubber pellets" used to target demonstrators were mostly composed of denser materials, *including lead*, which cause terminal damage to eyes and optic nerves, permanently blinding young people for demanding public services. Doctors observed that the rates of eye injuries in the Chilean demonstrations were far higher than other areas seeing unrest at that time, like Kashmir or the French general strike. One demonstrator shot in the eye, a hospital assistant, said police held him for hours afterward: "They were taunting me, saying that I will lose my sight, that I'll have one less eye." He lost 95 percent of his vision. Yet even despite this vicious response by the state, protests continued.

But Ecuador has maybe the most impressive case of sheer ungovernable public outrage against austerity, where 11 days of giant protests erupted in 2019 after fuel subsidies for the poor majority were once again slashed, a policy the *Times* noted was "particularly hard on the rural poor" but "was a keystone of the broad austerity plan required by the IMF in order to extend Ecuador a credit line." Notably the cost of the "popular subsidies" was about \$1.3 billion a year, or about half of the military budget. The public reaction was so volcanic that President Moreno was forced to move the government 150 miles from the capital Quito to the coastal city Guayaquil. At that time the administration indignantly said it would never back down from the subsidy cuts. When it finally did, jubilant Indigenous and student demonstrators cleared the streets of debris.

IMF RIOTS AREN'T ALWAYS GUARANTEED TO FOLLOW austerity, though, as demonstrated in Egypt, the land of great hope in the 2011 Arab Spring (and terrible oppression both before and after). With declining support from traditional patron Saudi Arabia, Egypt recently had to turn to the Fund for new loans. Soon it made "painful" policy changes, including a regressive value-added tax and lower gas and power subsidies. It also bowed to pressure to float the national currency—allowing its exchange rate to fluctuate with the currency markets—and it immediately lost half its value. This triggered explosive inflation that the IMF is supposed to help stop, along with "wiping out savings and halving salaries," according to the *Times*. But with Egypt's long, painful history of U.S.-financed repression, there were few protests: "[security] forces in armored personnel carriers, including masked men carrying assault rifles, were deployed across Cairo and other parts of the country to discourage such demonstrations."

Even Iran, which the West has targeted with military action and heavy sanctions since the overthrow of the U.S.-backed Shah dictator in 1979, has been given no choice but to submit to the IMF. As America tightens sanctions despite the humanitarian crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Islamic Republic was recently forced to turn to the IMF for emergency financing. Iran hadn't borrowed from the Fund since before the revolution; now (you guessed it) they are forced to contemplate the IMF's austerity cuts.

For countries in desperate need of money, the IMF has simply been the only game in town—until the last few years. Amusingly, Western analysts are widely suspicious of the rise of China and its enormous Belt and Road Initiative, a program which makes large loans to developing countries for building trade-related infrastructure like highways and commercial ports. Former U.S. national security adviser and prominent war-mongering dick John Bolton claimed China is making "strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands." You might ask: *holy shit, where did they get the idea that you can get away with that?*

If you live in one of the developed world's rapidly crumbling democracies, remember that each night as you sleep, governments in the poorest countries on the planet are cutting social supports and raising taxes to line the pockets of rich foreigners. This is the way of the (neocolonial) world. And as long as these practices continue in the name of progress, there will be more IMF riots, and potentially revolution to come. Bet your bottom dollar on it. ♣



WHAT THEY DO WHEN WE'RE NOT LOOKING

Some people assume that the creatures of the rainforest are wiser than human beings: that they have discovered the meaning of life. When we do not see them, are they living the good life? To some extent, yes, but many are busy being just as stupid as we are, attending poorly-planned raves and hosting ill-advised gender reveal ceremonies. In this exclusive panorama, *Current Affairs* reveals what the rest of the animal kingdom does when humans aren't looking.





"And now," cried Max, "let the Gay Marriage Rumpus start."

Where the Gay Things Are

by Yasmin Nair

“That Is So Your Generation!”

IN THE SITCOM *YOUNGER*, AN ENTERTAINING IF UNREALISTIC show about the publishing world, a millennial named Lauren Heller (Molly Bernard) finds out that the man she has been lusting for is gay—when he introduces her to his boyfriend. Unperturbed, Lauren quickly propositions the two of them into a threesome. When she tells her friends about it, Liza Miller (Sutton Foster), a coworker in her forties who is consistently portrayed as slightly behind the curve, asks excitedly (clearly pleased that she knows the term): “Are you in a *throuple*?”

Lauren shoots back, “Liza! Throuple! Nonononono, that is *so* your generation. Listen, I’m free and I’m happily non-heteronormative.”

It’s a brave new world where being gay or lesbian or queer or gender-nonconfirming or nonbinary or in a *throuple* is not just accepted but subject to trends. Some might argue that such things are mostly only possible in certain urban areas, but it does feel as though, for the most part and against some frustrating pushback (particularly on trans matters), we are gradually moving toward the shattering of traditional sexual and gender norms. All of that is for the better.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the widening of sex and gender norms means that we have come to terms with recent gay and lesbian history, or that we have confronted the enormous and far-reaching effects of the activism of the last few decades. Historians and cultural commentators tend to think of *gay* history as somehow separate from, well, history itself, and gay and lesbian issues are only analyzed within a rights-based discourse. So, in terms of the Holy Trinity of gay activism (gay marriage, hate crime laws, and gays in the military), the logic is this: gay marriage is simply about “equality” in the sense of allowing gays and lesbians access to a historically significant cultural institution, hate crime legislation is about expanding existing laws to include crimes against LGBTQ people, and inclusion in the military is about just that. But all three movements saw arguments from radical queers who pointed out that these issues were not about “equality” but instead helped strengthen the endless privatization of everyday life and necessary resources that we call neoliberalism. The radical queer critique, however, was systematically ignored in favor of a larger diagnosis

within the framework of rights. All three movements were, in a sense, victorious.*

In 2007, Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest gay nonprofit on the planet and led by then-CEO Joe Solmonese, backed a conservative and limited version of the Employee Non-Discrimination Act. While affirming the rights of gay people to not be discriminated against in the workplace, the act was stripped of gender identity protection in order to make it more palatable. That HRC felt free to do this speaks volumes about the vulnerability of trans people within the gay community at the time; nonetheless, the move galvanized the larger LGBTQ movement and resulted in gender identity being increasingly centralized in legislative activism. Today, the giant gay nonprofit world has taken up trans rights issues with a vengeance, partly because of new commitments to protecting trans people and partly because it needs a blockbuster fundraising issue. Trans identity certainly remains a battleground, with LGBTQ organizations fighting legislative efforts to malign and stigmatize trans youth in particular.

Still, against this backdrop: if the three big issues of mainstream gay activism have been resolved, and if fewer people seem interested in banning visibly alternative modes of sexual expression and activity and, it seems, at least on TV, everyone is potentially queer—is there (once the anti-trans bathroom bills have been defeated) really anything to fight for anymore? Are we close to living in a rainbow paradise, bathed in sunshine and with no imperative but to continue to live our best lives? Where, to echo Maurice Sendak, have all the gay things gone?

* To clarify: Marriage as an institution is mired in centuries of gendered disparity and the consolidation of property, but it is also an emotionally and socially meaningful institution for many. And forcibly disallowing gays and lesbians from participating in the institution is state-mandated exclusion and profoundly alienating, just like preventing LGBTQ people from joining the military. But both institutions have also been around for aeons with only enough changes to keep them going, not to end the systems they perpetuate (for instance: marital rape is now outlawed in the U.S.—only since 1994—and deserters are no longer executed). People are still compelled to marry for something as life-defining as healthcare, or to join the military because there are no other economic options for the poor. The argument often made—that marriage can be changed and that it is meaningful for individuals—ignores the fact that its changes amount to little more than solidifying its links to capitalism, and that individual feelings are not the point of political change. The problem for the left continues to be: how do we make clear the massive, reified effects of these oppressive institutions within which some or many may find compatible homes while simultaneously creating a world that does not require them to enter these institutions simply in order to survive?

"But we won."

IN 2016, I GAVE A SHORT PRESENTATION AT THE AUGUST 165-year-old Chicago History Museum titled "How Gay Money Became Gay Wealth." I focused on the fact that nothing about the gay marriage movement had ever been about ending "inequality" for all and that in fact, it had always been designed by wealthy gay men and women to ensure that they too could hold on to and pass down their estates just like their straight counterparts. The fight for gay marriage was predicated on the ideas of inclusion and normalization/assimilation; but, as groups like Against Equality (the radical queer collective I still belong to) had consistently pointed out, these goals were tiny and ineffective: they perpetuated a rights-based discourse which ignored the political and economic costs of extending the idea that *marriage* should guarantee basics like healthcare. Gay marriage, I argued, was not about "equality" but about the consolidation of wealth for gays who were part of the wealthy minority in the country, people who didn't actually need jobs with healthcare or excellent public education. I used as an example the now famous *Windsor vs. United States* case, and the unexamined history behind it.

In 2013, the Supreme Court came down in favour of plaintiff Edith Windsor in *Windsor vs. United States*. Prior to this, Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) defined "marriage" to only mean a union between a man and a woman, which had significant tax consequences for gay and lesbian couples. In Edith Windsor's case, this meant that she had to pay taxes on the *substantial* estate she inherited from her wife Thea Spyer (they had been married in Canada). *Windsor* "held that Section 3 of DOMA was unconstitutional because it violated the constitutional principles of equal protection," as the law firm of Smith, Gambrell, and Russell (SGR) puts it. The impact of the decision meant that the IRS would now recognize same sex marriages, and all their tax implications.

After *Windsor*, those whom SGR refers to as "high net worth Same Sex Couples" could now marry comfortable in the knowledge that their spouses would not have to pay estate taxes (the sort that, in the United States, allows us to pay for piffing stuff like roads and education), by claiming the unlimited marital deduction formerly available only to opposite sex married couples.

Windsor's net worth was around \$10 million, but her attorneys, plus all of the press—gay and straight—and supporters of gay marriage generally kept that fact hidden from the public as they sought to rally support for the case. Instead, most accounts only disclosed that Windsor had to pay around \$300,000 in what many called the "death tax" (a term more proletarian-seeming than "estate tax")—a number that seemed shockingly large to a sympathetic public. But in fact, she actually owed \$638,000, or about ten percent of the estate she inherited (all that plus \$70,000 in interest was refunded to her after the case was settled). If there had been any hint that Windsor owed *that much* in taxes, people might have begun to do the math and realise that she was, in fact, a millionaire, not a starving widow striking matches to stay warm in a cold garret in big, mean New York City. It was certainly true that forcing someone to pay that amount in estate taxes was unfair when heterosexual widows and widowers

were not compelled to do the same, but only in the abstract sense of unfair taxation laws. The larger point, again kept hidden from the public, was that such estate taxes only fell upon the estates (we cannot emphasize that word enough) of very wealthy people. According to the Population Division of the Bureau of the Census, "only about 0.07 percent [of Americans] will pay any estate tax."

Windsor was simply about the reproduction of capitalist patriarchy, only this time with lesbian overtones.

I was one of the first to reveal these facts and to implicate the national press in its subtle coverup, or at least failure to tell the full story. Three years after the *Windsor* decision, my revelation dropped into an uncomfortable silence as I spoke, and dark blue-suited gay men and women—wealthy donors to their beloved Chicago institution—absorbed it. My comrades and friends in the audience grinned knowingly and clapped in support, but as for the others: let's just say that several eyes shifted away from mine as the session ended.

That is, except for one man, who came bounding up to me, hand outstretched. "You're absolutely right, and I agree with everything you said," he told me. "But we won."

"Won what?" I asked. It's a question I've pondered ever since, even when I'm not faced with people who simultaneously believe that the movement was about accruing benefits for the wealthy few *and* a win for the masses.

WHEN QUEERS AND STRAIGHTS WANT TO express criticism of mainstream gays and lesbians like the man who came up to me, they are most apt to dismiss them as "assimilationists." Assimilation, we tell ourselves, is the problem: too many people want to be just like straight people and enjoy the same benefits, denying their amazing, *fabulous* selves.

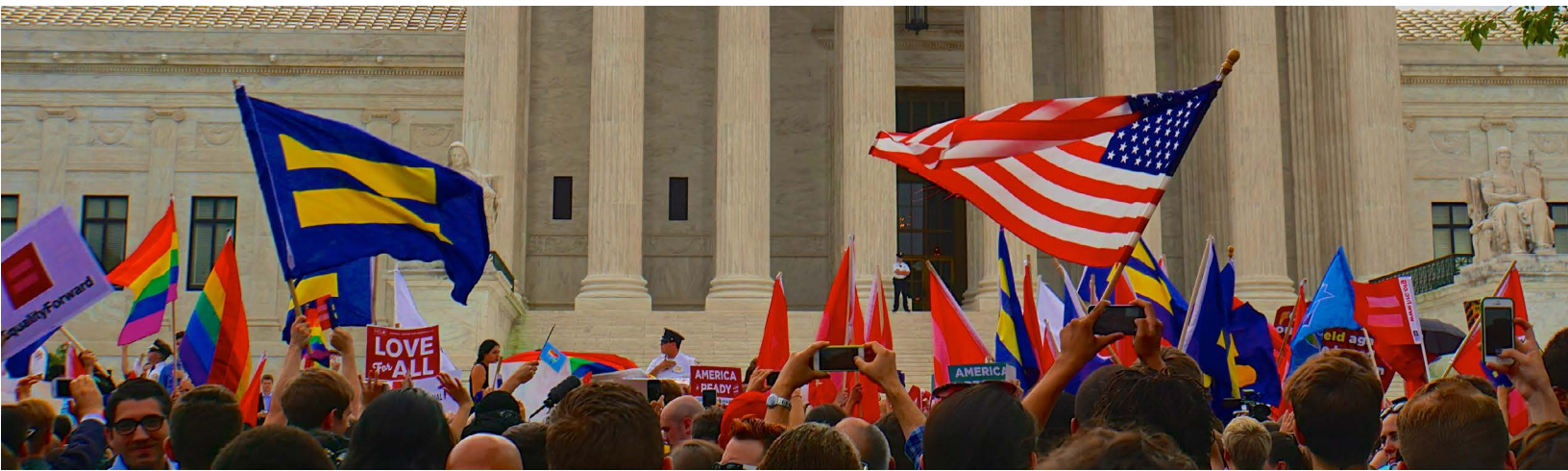
But "assimilation" has never really been the problem. As we've always said in the Against Equality collective, if you need to marry for healthcare, that's not assimilation: that's survival in a country without a healthcare system. If marriage is what will get you citizenship and security, marry away. Additionally, the charge of assimilation is not much of a left, materialist critique: it assumes that people wanting to be a lot like other people is the biggest problem and that those who are resolutely *unlike* others are somehow inherently radical. We see this with the annual fictitious uproar over "Kink at Pride." Every year, rumors spread that someone, somewhere is trying to shut down the exhibition of kink at pride parades and every year, the rumor turns out to be just that. But more importantly, the resulting online kerfuffle assumes that kink, a sexual/pleasure practice, is somehow *politically* radical when it simply isn't: it's merely a practice. The purported anti-assimilation argument leaves untouched the devastating economic and political effects of the last few decades of gay activism. Over the last thirty years, gay activism has won victories, but it has also helped strengthen neoliberalism and the brutality of the state. Hate crime legislation enhances prison sentences and can even bring the death penalty into play. Inclusion in the military, whether gay or trans, only provides more vulnerable, mostly poor bodies for the killing machine of U.S imperialism. (For more on all three issues, try the excellent anthology *Against*

Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion.)

Most of all, gay marriage, the big cause that has defined gay activism for the last three decades and whose spectacular public success emboldened the fights for the other two issues, has quietly shifted the national political conversation towards more privatization of resources. Need healthcare? Gay marriage will help because you can get on your spouse's plan! Neither one of you has such a job? Too bad! Gay marriage was not for *you* anyway! Gay marriage was never simply part of the machinery of a neoliberal privatization of resources: it was from the start a necessary cog, an essential gear in the machinery. It was always a deeply conservative movement that has had long-lasting and damaging effects. ↓

4,000-word summary which only mentions gay marriage twice, and positively only once. The report notes that many young people in attendance thought marriage was about pressuring them to live up to “unwanted heteronormative expectations.” In 2009, the LGBTQ Family Affairs Newsletter put out a pre-election poll and found that 70 percent “did not identify marriage as their top priority issue.”

Despite such clear evidence that queer Mainers had little interest in gay marriage, both HRC and NGLTF (the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, now known as the The Task Force) sent their executive directors at the time—Joe Solmonese and Rea Carey—to speak to Maine voters at a pep rally. Even more significantly, the two organizations together gave Maine gay marriage activists \$400,000, along with staff members' time and labor. Money also flowed in from



Ted Eytan. Wikimedia.

“The Fight for Our Lives”

THE LORE REGARDING GAY MARRIAGE WOULD HAVE US believe that the struggle for legalization occurred state by state, fueled by bitter opposition between rabid conservatives and the embattled gay and lesbian couples and activists who bravely rallied their forces again and again. A popular example of this narrative is Maine in 2009, where Governor John Baldacci signed a bill to legalize gay marriage. Maine voters rejected the legislation, and gay rights activists returned with renewed vigour until gay marriage became legal in Maine in 2012. The 2011 documentary *Question One* details the 2009 battle, portraying it as, essentially, an ideological and cultural battle between church-led people and lesbian moms. The truth is quite different. In what remains the only such history of the Maine matter, the writer and activist Ryan Conrad (and my co-founder of Against Equality) analyzes *how* marriage even became an issue in that state. In his “Against Equality, In Maine and Everywhere,” Conrad reveals that a significant part of the LGBTQ community in a state that is among the poorest in the country actually *did not want* to waste resources on gay marriage. In 2007, the Maine Community Foundation's Equity Fund convened a symposium and subsequently published a

gay marriage organizations in places like Massachusetts, Vermont, and Colorado, states where gay marriage had recently been a winning issue. Equality Maine, an organization devoted to gay marriage, declared that gay marriage was “the fight for our lives.”

Meanwhile, as gay marriage organizations and gay nonprofits in general poured in money and whipped up national frenzy around the issue, several AIDS organizations like the Western Maine Community Action Health Services and queer/trans youth support groups like Out as I Want to Be and Outrageously Supportive struggled. The Maine Speak Out Project and the Charlie Howard Memorial Library shut down from a lack of resources. In 2010, the Maine Department of Education announced it would no longer fund HIV Prevention Outreach Educators. In Conrad's words, gay marriage was “sucking up resources like a big sponge.” Even Karen Ocamb, a gay marriage *advocate* writing in Bilerico, questioned the wisdom of what gay organizations were clamoring for that year: a giant gay marriage march on Washington. Did it make sense to devote so much energy to this when California, for instance, had just instituted massive cuts to public services? Ocamb quoted Mike Genest, the state's finance director, in reference to the state and local AIDS agencies losing a lot of their funding: “Government doesn't provide services to rich people.”

Maine remains a poor state, one whose picturesque coastlines at-

tract wealthy out-of-staters who buy exclusive waterfront property where they spend their idyllic summers while literally turning their backs on local economies. Ultimately, the wealthy who were fighting for the “rights” of marriage were not the ones who would need the kinds of services that other queers needed simply to survive, to find housing, and to live, in Maine or elsewhere.

THE STORY WAS THE SAME ACROSS THE COUNTRY. In the years until gay marriage became the law of the land, I covered several gay protests and actions in Chicago for *Windy City Times*, currently the city’s only remaining gay paper. Rallies numbered in the hundreds, filled with impassioned lesbians and gay men who often brought their children to participate, held up homemade signs, and genuinely thought that theirs was a grassroots movement about securing their rights and those of the people who would inherit their “estates.” Either willfully or genuinely clueless, few seemed aware that they were unlikely to be as rich as Windsor and Spyer. Much was made of the 1,138 federal rights that gay couples were denied but, as Conrad points out, they “largely pertain to the transfer of rights and property.” Chicago ended up looking much like Maine as the HRC, the Task Force, Lambda Legal, and numerous other gay organizations poured money and resources into the gay marriage fight, and even LGBTQ nonprofits that had nothing to do with marriage were forced to issue statements in support of the “struggle.”

A little-known dark secret of the gay nonprofit world, which outsiders likely imagine to be composed of Birkenstock-clad, patchouli-scented hippies, is that it’s a cutthroat and brutal sector, where large organizations often serve as fiscal sponsors for smaller ones, maintaining a great deal of control over how money is disbursed to smaller organizations and groups (and no one unironically in Birkenstocks is usually allowed into their ranks). Larger organization leaders did not hesitate to tell the smaller ones to publicly support gay marriage or see a withdrawal of support. It made for some bizarre statements on the websites of organizations, which posted statements in support of gay marriage that stretched credibility in terms of the connections between the work they did and this cause that had nothing to do with them.

Again, as in Maine, gay marriage sucked resources, time, and energy from everything else affecting the community. The majority of the events covered by the *Windy City Times* were focused on gay marriage, even though there were several other more pressing issues facing a city where, at the time, queer health resources were focused almost exclusively on the white north side, meaning that people of color, concentrated in the south and west sides, had to trek out of their neighborhoods on slow and unreliable public transportation into wealthier neighborhoods where cops and neighbors treated them with suspicion or worse.

Meanwhile, of course, the city’s wealthiest LGBTQ people had no such concerns, given their access to the best and finest of all resources. In Chicago and all around the country, thousands of gays and lesbians would keep marching for gay marriage in those early years, believing that they and they alone were bringing about change, and that every political win was due to their efforts. In some ways, this

was true—in the sense that the visibility of the marches sent a message to the public that gays and lesbians not only existed but were now out chanting for their rights. In a country where feminism means so little that abortions are, in fact, now virtually impossible for most women, the presence of a minoritized community speaking up for their conservative marriage rights presented little threat to the comfort levels of straight liberals and lefties. Many straight advocates for gay marriage took up the banner using archaic, even Biblical language. In the *Seattle Times*, Lance Dickie wrote, “This is and remains an issue about the sanctity of families. For loving couples and legions of children with attentive, responsible parents there is no issue.” Few expressed any criticism of such rhetoric, and the inherently patriarchal and conservative assumptions behind “sanctity” and “attentive, responsible parents.”

Despite all the show of grassroots fervor, the gay marriage fight was being fought in the conference rooms of the large nonprofits and, as it turns out, in the private planes of their biggest donors. Jo Becker’s *Forcing the Spring*, a record of the marriage movement, is a book so bad, so ass-kissey that even the man at the center of her long narrative, Chad Griffin—the HRC CEO who led the campaign in its tail end—felt the need to distance himself from it (though not to the satisfaction of his critics). The short version of all the criticism of the book is that Becker 1) compares Griffin to Rosa Parks and 2) ignores the contributions of people like Michaelangelo Signorile and Andrew Sullivan, who complained of having their part in the story erased. But putting aside the controversy that surrounded the book (which is truly quite bad, as my own review points out), Becker’s book is actually invaluable: she inadvertently reveals the money at play through the years of the gay marriage fight (and she reveals them with great pride, thrilled at the dollar amounts and prestige on display). Among some of the details: Griffin and Rob Reiner—that Rob Reiner—and others flew about in private Gulfstream jets owned by David Boies, who had been part of the legal team that overturned California’s anti-gay Proposition 8. They also attended \$1,250-a-plate fundraisers for Obama, and received a check for \$100,000 from J.J. Abrams—that J.J. Abrams—as well as a contribution of \$1.5 million from David Geffen, along with the support of the billionaire David Koch—that David Koch—plus a million from the Gill Action Fund and a million from Yerdley Smith, the voice of Lisa on *The Simpsons*. You know, *those Simpsons*. This is just a tiny fraction of the amount that gay organizations and the major players were able to gather for the gay marriage fight. On the ground, ordinary gays and lesbians were tramping in the heat and cold in a city that only knows extremes in both, organizing bake sales or the equivalent, and donating what they could to “the cause.” Ultimately, none of that mattered in comparison to the sheer amount of money being collected up above them, in the private planes that jetted by.

Who Won?

SO, YES, GAY MARRIAGE WAS “WON” BUT IT WASN’T EXACTLY “won” against a monstrous and conservative Right. There certainly was a conservative Right arguing against gay marriage for a time, but by 2012, presidential candidates couldn’t be bothered with gay issues and in 2016, even Donald Trump didn’t care. More importantly, what commentators and historians fail to see, or ignore,

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is that these supposedly *gay* social and economic and cultural values (marriage, children in wedlocked families, the accrual of wealth) were always conservative values, even if articulated by men and women who seemed outwardly liberal and, say, campaigned for Obama. The real people who had to be won over were not hidebound, hateful bigots but socially conservative Democrats and Republicans: the potentially sympathetic straights who just needed to be convinced that gay people were every bit as worthy of traditional, patriarchal marriage and family structures. The public and media were sold this idea that there were Ogres of Repression, Wild Things that were dangerous and threatening to the good and kind gays and lesbians who merely wanted to live in nice houses, raise sweet and legitimate children, and eventually pass down their fondly imagined “estates” to said children. Because the gays and lesbians arguing for marriage *were* gays and lesbians, straight supporters were reluctant to either see the inherent conservatism of their goals or, if they saw them, to call them out for fear of seeming homophobic. And, in fact, who could blame them when gays and lesbians themselves were apt to call out allies for not giving their complete, uncritical support?

I once participated in a debate on gay marriage with Andy Thayer, a supporter of gay marriage. At one point, after I’d spoken, a member of the audience leapt to her feet, turned to the audience, and forcefully declared that everyone needed to support gay marriage. As she put it, the stakes were clear and, strangely echoing George Bush rousing support for the Iraq war, said, “You’re either with us or against us.” That interjector was Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, today a spokesman for and writer of left opinions (much of which I support and admire, incidentally), at the time a member of the International Socialist Organization and whose speeches at various pro gay marriage rallies I had covered. Faced with such stridency, no one in the audience was willing to express any

dissent. Here was a *very* left woman giving them an ultimatum. Who could argue? How could gay marriage not be a left cause?

The gay marriage movement has always been a peculiar political animal. Like a griffin with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion, it has managed to seem both conservative and liberal/left at the same time, its exact political persuasion depending on which end you’re looking at. The arguments made by people on the liberal/left side of the spectrum were essentially that to be against gay marriage was to be against *gay people*. And there was plenty of anti-gay sentiment and legislation floating around (Prop 8 was just one example). Many liberals and lefties who were invested in the gay marriage cause likely did so both out of a genuine spirit of solidarity and because they feared being called homophobic: all the gay people they knew were, after all, reminding them to be for gay marriage. (Against Equality was frequently barred from speaking at various universities when their local LGBTQ organizations deemed that our radical queer critique of gay marriage was proof that we were, in fact, anti-gay).

That easy alignment of “Gay Marriage = Liberal/Left and Opposition to Gay Marriage = Homophobe” becomes vastly complicated when we consider the deeply conservative origins of the fight for gay marriage. To start, let’s look at the career and writings of the gay rights advocate and attorney, Evan Wolfson, considered by many to be the father of the gay marriage movement. Wolfson’s 2004 book *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People’s Right to Marry* shares a title with the conservative Glenn Stanton’s 1997 book *Why Marriage Matters: Reasons to Believe in Marriage in Postmodern Society*. Put the two books together side by side and they are nearly indistinguishable in their proselytizing about marriage as not only an economic good (Wolfson and his cohort have spoken at length about the thousand-plus tax benefits) but as a necessity for a healthy society.

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Both speak, for instance, about how marriage makes for happier and healthier children, and both believe that marriage affirms love and commitment and mutual respect (while giving lip service to other arrangements, mostly it seems to just give lip service). Wolfson would freely admit he's no queer radical, but the extent of his conservatism on a social issue like marriage has never been scrutinized or challenged. If he had been, say, a Director of Global Family Formation Studies at the Christian fundamentalist organization Focus on the Family (Stanton's post), he would have been dismissed and ignored by straight society. But because Wolfson is gay—and because he has always been backed by wealthy gay lobbying interests (on the existence of which we could also write entire books)—no one has dared to question his vision of the world vis-a-vis the family, a vision that should perplex and alarm feminists across genders. Wolfson's pro-normative-family proclamations tacitly reaffirm the importance of a particular kind of individualized care labor which tends to fall unequally on the shoulders of women or those who are deputized to stand in their stead.

"Our Dreams Have Become So Small."

THE GAY MARRIAGE MOVEMENT CAME AFTER THE AIDS CRISIS, and the work of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation. These organizations fought loudly and relentlessly for the state and pharmaceutical companies to improve access to life-saving drugs, efforts that have long been painted as strenuously and inherently radical. My own baby queer heart fluttered in joy as I watched Larry Kramer rage against the "Bullshit!" of the state during the 1993 gay rights march on Washington. Kramer more than anyone actualized the fierce anger that had brought the gay community to the attention of the public; ACT UP was well known for its agitprop tactics which included a die-in in St. Patrick's Church in New York and throwing fake blood at politicians to bring attention to the numbers of people who had died of AIDS. But after the AIDS crisis was over, especially for white, gay, well-off men who now had easy access to pharmaceuticals, Kramer and other ACT UP activists like Michaelangelo Signorile became fervent advocates for gay marriage.

Once upon a time, AIDS movement activists had marched with Haitian immigrants stigmatized and brutally quarantined as health risks, as part of an argument that what we needed was a more just system of universal healthcare. The marriage movement, following on its heels and composed of many of the same people, now rationalized the fight for marriage on the grounds that it could get us healthcare through marriage. How did a movement that was entirely constituted around a massive health crisis and whose activists once insisted that universal healthcare was necessary to prevent future epidemics end up becoming a movement that insisted that people should be able to marry so that they could be covered by their partners' healthcare plans?

The problem is not just that gay marriage has been overdetermined by the money and power behind it but that it has come to define gay rights, period. If you were to start a whole new country, tucked in somewhere between Moldova and Romania on a tiny sliver of land, you could begin from the ground up, ensuring free education and housing and healthcare for all as a basic human right. But if you don't somehow guarantee the right to marriage for all, the United Nations and Evan Wolfson (who literally flies around the world, teaching others how to win gay

marriage battles) will shame you until you emerge with a proclamation about the "freedom to marry." It doesn't matter how many rights you have for queer people, as long as you have that one (marriage); and if you have marriage, then according to the gay nonprofit superstructure it seems it's not really imperative for you to have the others.

IN *WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE*, MAX SETS SAIL IN A boat across the seas and his journey at night and his eventual meeting with The Wild Things are lit by the stars. The long journey of "gay rights" from the mid-1990s onwards to now has always been lit by a single constellation, *Gay Marriage Ursa Major*. Sure, there were other battles along the way, like inclusion in the military, but those were considered ancillary and only picked up once the major organizations realised they could be deployed to strengthen gay marriage (Nathaniel Frank's book *In the Line of Fire* points out that HRC ignored Don't Ask Don't Tell until it couldn't). Gay marriage has always been the lodestar for that combination of matters we call "gay rights" because nothing else could advance a neoliberal gay agenda that guaranteed both social acceptance and economic power to a group that so longed for both, that so desperately wanted to abjure all the messiness of a contentious, tumultuous history marked for so long by exclusion and stigma.

Matilda Bernstein Sycamore has spoken about the failure of the gay imagination, of the fact that "our dreams have become so small." For men like Evan Wolfson, the dream of gay marriage was the biggest dream of all, the ultimate victory for gaykind. In 2015, having seen that dream realized, Wolfson packed up his organization Freedom to Marry—in some ways, the most ethical thing to do, but also a giant shrug. The larger LGBTQ community still suffers from a realm of problems, including homelessness, healthcare inadequacy, and more but, eh, who cares? Gays could now get married.

There's an argument to be made that the battle for gay marriage, which squarely and firmly insisted that healthcare was something that only gay couples and spouses deserved, helped weaken and even invalidate the struggle for universal healthcare. In 2005, Cheryl Jacques, then the outgoing CEO of HRC, was asked by the *Windy City Times*: "But won't gay partners feel like they must get married to gain benefits?" She responded: "I think gay couples will feel the same as straight couples. If you get married, there's a host of responsibilities and rights and protections that come with that, and if you don't, those don't."

Shrug.

We might imagine a different world, one where those who had fought hard to get AIDS pharmaceuticals to everyone thought, "What if we continued to fight for healthcare for all?" We might imagine a country where the advent of COVID-19 would not have been nearly as devastating as it has been, with the number of deaths at over 600,000 at the time of this writing. We might imagine a country where medical expenses are not the leading cause of bankruptcy and where most people live in fear of penury even when they have health insurance. We could have worked to eradicate homelessness and poverty for everybody including gay and trans people (who are especially vulnerable to homelessness and poverty), rather than turning them into funding opportunities.

We could have dreamed bigger dreams, but we chose marriage instead. ✱



"Christian Horror" and the End of the World

by Isabel Ling

IN THE OPENING SCENE OF THE 1972 FILM *A THIEF in the Night*, the clock ticks ominously as a woman searches her home in vain for a husband who is no longer there, his sudden disappearance evidenced only by an electric razor left buzzing on the bathroom counter. The first famous foray by evangelical Christians into the horror genre, *A Thief in the Night* (and its three sequels) seized the imaginations of the Sunday school set with its campy depiction of the rapture and the ensuing fallout of the End Times. Despite the cringe-inducingly thick sideburns and low-budget camera work, the film contained an incredibly effective shard of fear that lodged in the hearts of generations of Christians. It was eventually translated into three languages and has been viewed by an estimated 300 million people. The film's success and the persuasive powers of apocalypse were not lost on evangelical filmmakers and media moguls; *A Thief in the Night* pioneered a genre of apocalyptic books, television and movies that have had an outsized impact on the shaping of the current evangelical interpretation of fire and brimstone, and consequently, their views on sin, redemption, and the end of the world.

I first encountered *A Thief in the Night* in 7th grade Bible class, nearly four decades after its release. My teacher, a friendly Southern woman with a stylish mullet and a fake tan, rolled out the television cart to a sleepy, post-lunch class that was eager to take a break from analyzing Bible verses in exchange for a quiet afternoon dozing in a dark room. Despite an upbringing in the church and in Christian schools, the film was my first official introduction to the Book of Revelation outside of the surreptitious read-throughs I would do during particularly slow Sunday sermons. Revelation had always possessed a distinctly taboo air, its visions of destruction and retribution often skirted in favor of the miracles and resurrection of the

more popular books of the Gospel.

Based on a highly dramatized version of the themes in Revelation, *A Thief in the Night* was conceived by Christian filmmaker Dan Thompson as a vehicle for bringing the gospel to secular masses. To do that, he leaned hard into horror film scare tactics. The film unfolds through the eyes of a young woman named Patty Meyers, whose search for salvation in a post-rapture landscape is loosely tied together with bad acting and a soundtrack composed of the devil's music. With the warnings of her raptured friends and family fresh in her mind, Patty spends the movie evading the clutches of an emergency world government formed by the United Nations called U.N.I.T.E, whose enforcers are outfitted in red armbands. Her refusal to submit to receiving a "mark" (of course, the numbers 666 written in binary code) prohibits her from engaging in day-to-day transactions and also identifies her as "one of those religious people" and thus, an enemy of the state.

The film's scare tactics worked—for months after I saw it, my dreams were terrorized by imagery from the movie and an existential fear of being left behind. Over the course of the rest of the school year, I developed a troubling relationship with sleep, and would often get up in the middle of the night to check if my parents were indeed still sleeping in their beds. My experience was not unique; other viewers have reported a similar, deep-seated horror, often citing experiences of coming home to an empty house and immediately believing that they must have been left behind. Online review forums for the film are filled with stories of trauma: one reviewer even cites their childhood experience of watching *A Thief in the Night* as the primary motivation for their decision to pursue psychiatry with a focus in childhood trauma. However, the film's use of fear was also highly successful when it came to its goal

of driving people toward God. In her book *Shaking the World for Jesus*, MIT film and media professor Heather Hendershot reports that throughout her research, *A Thief in the Night* was the only evangelical film that her subjects would cite directly, and repeatedly, as something that helped provoke a conversion experience.

While many non-evangelical members of my generation may have escaped an encounter with *A Thief in the Night*, they have likely come into contact with the broader genre of apocalyptic horror that it inspired within evangelical media. Most influential of these is *Left Behind*, the multimedia franchise of the 1990s and early 2000s that included not only a *New York Times* best-selling 16-part book series, but also four movies by the Lalonde brothers, a video game series, and most recently, a failed Nicolas Cage film. *Left Behind* owes clear debts to *A Thief in the Night*—it contains similar plot points and also follows a dispensational premillennialist view of the End Times. (“Dispensationalism” tracks the relationship between humans and God via a timeline that is broken into eras, or dispensations; premillennialism refers to the specific era of tribulation and devastation that will ultimately lead to the restoration of Jesus’ kingdom on Earth, which will last 1000 years aka a millennium.) In the *Left Behind* series, the rapture occurs after peace is achieved in the Middle East, on the heels of an Israeli botanist’s reception of the Nobel Peace Prize for discovering how to grow crops in the desert. What follows is the consolidation of all nations under a young Romanian leader—who happens to be the Antichrist—through the United Nations, which then goes on to institute the “Mark of Loyalty,” a microchip that represents the Mark of the Beast and allows constituents to participate in economic activities within the new world order.

LEFT BEHIND’S CO-CREATORS, TIM LAHAYE AND Jerry B. Jenkins, have often attributed the inspiration for the series to Dan Thompson’s evangelical films, and the *Left Behind* movies themselves directly reference *A Thief in the Night* in their repurposing of the movie’s theme song—Larry Norman’s eerie Jesus Freak anthem, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” Despite the various similarities, an examination of the films in conversation with one another reveals a troubling trend in how evangelical filmmakers have shifted the narrative around apocalypse and condemnation.

The journalist Adam Davidson highlights this shift through a 1999 analysis of the depiction of the Antichrist’s henchmen in these films. During the course of the series, Jerry, one of Patty’s friends, takes a job working for U.N.I.T.E., and is shown weeping with regret at the end of the fourth film, his story one of repentance too late. However, with the *Left Behind* movie series, the Antichrist’s henchmen are wiped of any trace of humanity. In the filmmaker’s endeavors to create a secular action movie, the U.N.-based henchmen are villainized to such an extent that it suggests they never had the capacity for salvation. Davidson argues that this stylization of religion into entertainment had, by 1999, created dangerous dichotomies within evangelical America:

“The progression (or regression) is the move from rural towns to

the halls of power. It’s the expansion of the evangelical sphere of concern from the very local (my friends, my church) to the national and global (my president, my international policy). It’s a move from a complex view of the individual to an oversimplification that identifies everyone as either good-believer or bad-beathen. It’s also a change in sentiment toward the unbeliever from sadness, caring, and invitation to triumph, judgment, and dismissal. It’s a chilling mutation, and has entrenched evangelical Christianity in an antagonism to secular America that borders, at times, on cruelty.”

Two decades later, in a fractured political landscape that has partly and uncritically adopted the language of evangelical media, Davidson’s description rings true not only for American Christianity but the United States as a whole.

THE APOCALYPSE, SUGGESTS WRITER AMY Frykholm in a 2012 analysis of *A Thief in the Night*, is a uniquely American fear, one that is rooted in the country’s founding by Puritan settlers who subscribed to the belief that their existence on the continent was either “phenomenally blessed or on the brink of a God-ordained disaster.” It should be no surprise, then, that when rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6th, the crowd was filled with signs, slogans, and images ripped from the Bible. Banners were emblazoned with slogans like “Jesus Saves,” “Jesus is My Savior, Trump is My President,” and “Jesus 2020.” The undercurrent of the End Times was evident—a guillotine (not unlike the one employed by U.N.I.T.E. to execute Patty) was set up amid calls for Mike Pence’s head. Israeli flags were flown (subscribers to premillennial dispensationalism believe in a prophecy that the rapture will occur soon after Jerusalem has been restored to the Jews), and other signs cited scripture from Revelation (one sign drew parallels between Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jezebel). For many insurrectionists, this was a holy war.

The framing of Donald Trump’s campaign for presidency and the resulting conspiracy theories that surrounded his loss carry a sense of apocalyptic magnitude. While the insurrection itself was not solely a Christian endeavor, a large number of insurgents appear to have been white evangelicals. In the 2020 election, white evangelicals, who make up nearly 1 in 5 of the U.S. electorate, were the largest demographic of Trump supporters, with exit polls showing that 75 percent of white evangelical voters cast their votes for Trump. In the months before the election, evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham and the Christian Broadcasting Network’s David Brody issued ominous warnings of the downfall of “Western civilization as we know it” and of an impending anti-Christian “storm” if Trump were to lose. The weaponization of the concept of apocalypse was bolstered from messaging within the campaign as well, with Trump’s spiritual advisor, Paula White, declaring that there were “demonic networks” at work in Biden’s favor during the Trump campaign’s rally in Florida. As such, when Trump delivered his inflammatory speech at the “Save America” rally held on January 6th, warning

attendees that “if you don’t fight like hell you’re not going to have a country anymore,” the crowds were primed for what they perceived as a spiritual battle.

But while the insurrectionists may have been united in apocalyptic fervor, they were not unified around a traditional theology. The ideas behind their perceived war for America’s salvation, and thus, the apocalypse, are not really rooted in core biblical tenets, but in the language and imagery popularized by *A Thief in the Night* and *Left Behind*. The QAnon conspiracy—perhaps the most effective modern weaponization of the apocalypse narrative—alleges that a cabal of cannibalistic, satanic pedophiles composed mostly of politicians, high-ranking government officials, and celebrities run a child sex trafficking ring and have also been using their network of power to conspire against Donald Trump. QAnon adherents, whose beliefs were nurtured by Trump throughout his time in office, believe that Trump is planning a day of reckoning termed as the “Storm,” where the members of the cabal will be exposed, punished for their crimes, and stripped of their power.

QAnon’s ideas seem to have found traction in communities within or associated with evangelicalism. A recent survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute examined the ties between religious affiliation and QAnon believers, finding that 26 percent of white evangelicals and 29 percent of Hispanic Protestants agree with the statement: “There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.” Another study performed by Lifeway Research has found that 49 percent of Protestant pastors have heard conspiracy theories within their congregations. While it must be made clear that the majority of evangelical Christians do not subscribe to QAnon, the modern American evangelical church has proven fertile ground for conspiracy.

IT IS ARGUABLE THAT Q’S THEORIES IN PARTICULAR, which have been disseminated in cryptic “drops” filled with riddles and paranoia, rang true in evangelical circles not just because they echo the imagery of *Left Behind* and other related media, but because they harken back to another familiar practice: decoding the prophecies in the Book of Revelations. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Arthur Jones—the director of *Feels Good Man*, a documentary that explores the role of memes in the 2016 election—says that QAnon reminds him of his childhood growing up in an evangelical Christian family in the rural Ozarks, where the devout have always held a deep interest in the Book of Revelation and deciphering its signs and symbols. “I think the same kind of person,” he said, “would all of a sudden start pulling at the threads of Q and start feeling like everything is starting to fall into place and make sense. If you are an evangelical and you look at Donald Trump on face value, he lies, he steals, he cheats, he’s been married multiple times, he’s clearly a sinner. But you are trying to find a way that he is somehow part of God’s plan.” In this interpretation of God’s plan, different characters can be slotted in to fill different needs: some sinners can be redeemed, and others can’t. Accord-

ing to Elaine Pagels, the religious scholar and author of *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics*, the Book of Revelation’s continued relevance can be attributed to the slippery nature of its symbols. “The images in Revelation—the whore and the beast and the monsters and angels and demons—they work so well on both sides of any conflict because they’re not specific,” Pagels told me in a phone interview. “Revelations is, of course, about a war between good and evil—the people who go into a fiery pit are the dogs, the evil doers, the pornoia. But that could apply to anybody. It’s not like Matthew 25, which outlines very specific actions on how to enter the kingdom of God. In the Book of Revelation the people who go into eternal fire are horrible people, but that’s the only descriptor, so essentially, the beast and the whore, they can be anyone you dislike.”

The power of *A Thief in the Night* lies in its depiction of conflicted sinners, particularly Patty. While Patty considers herself a Christian and attends church weekly, she is left behind anyway because she has failed to accept Christ in her heart. A relatively new term in the canon of Christianity, “accepting Christ into one’s heart,” came about in the 20th century to describe a specific act of conversion. In *A Thief in the Night* and in the modern evangelical church, the path to salvation is boiled down to a formula that consists of asking Christ for forgiveness of one’s sins and re-dedicating one’s life to His will. Patty abstains from committing her life to Christ in this way, explaining that she goes to church and is a good person, trusting that this will protect her from the future of doom her peers warn her against. The idea that one could consider themselves aligned with Christianity but still be passed over in the rapture due to insufficient personal acceptance of Christ introduces a paradigm of insecurity that can seed religious fervor or, more commonly in the case of *A Thief in the Night*, paranoia. However, for some, the murky division between what constitutes “saved” and “unsaved” has become a source of empowerment, one that the religious right and its base of radicalized white evangelicals have co-opted into a political narrative where they are the arbiters of who is and is not included in salvation. The potential destruction of political “enemies” such as those named by QAnon is a matter



“Shift Change!”

of glee and celebration. The specter of the End Times, too, is welcomed openly by those who think they have nothing personally to fear.

The influence of this mentality extends far beyond right-wing conspiracy groups, with End Times-thinking shaping U.S. foreign policy, specifically when it comes to Israel, Palestine and the Middle East. Domestically, apocalyptic thinking has arguably helped fuel the U.S.'s own shift towards Christian nationalism, providing part of the theological foundation that has facilitated some of the distrust in government and the embrace of conspiracy that fueled the insurrection. This is, in no small part, correlated with the anti-government narrative put forward in *A Thief in the Night* and the *Left Behind* series. Evangelical media has always been deeply intertwined with the political intents of evangelical Christian leaders; Tim LaHaye, the author of the original *Left Behind* series, was a co-founder of the Moral Majority as well as the Council for National Policy, an influential and secretive group of the nation's top conservatives. LaHaye believed that his writing in *Left Behind*, though dramatized, was a blueprint to prophecy unfolding, once saying, “We are using fiction to teach biblical truth.” Through their role as cultural touchstones, these media sources have provided American Christians and non-Christians alike with a visualization of what the End Times will look like, demonstrating tell-tale signs to look out for as well as political goals to strategize toward (for example, supporting Israel as a Jewish state because it is supposedly one of the necessary conditions for the apocalypse).

Of course, the United States itself is never mentioned in the Book of Revelation. Many scholars believe, based on the author's self-description and the dating of the text, that Revelation was authored near the end of the first century B.C.E. by John of Patmos, a Christian on the run from Roman persecution. As an exile who no longer had a homeland, John of Patmos' accounts of fire and tribulation would not have been mythic visions, but rather imagery and symbols drawn from the very real current political and environmental events of his lifetime—the war on Jerusalem, the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, and the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. For Christians who were facing heavy persecution under the Romans, Revelation presented the hope of deliverance from suffering, and the dream of retribution served by a just God. The prophecies of Revelation weren't fulfilled at the time, at least not as John of Patmos or his fellow believers likely had hoped they would be—Rome continued its rule, Christians continued to be persecuted until Constantine I's conversion, and the Temple of Jerusalem remains unbuilt to this day. As a result, these prophecies have been interpreted and reinterpreted, each time aligning with new struggle and strife. According to Pagels, Revelation is constructed in a way so that “anyone who reads it is living on the end time.” As a result, it has always been easy for evangelicals to skate over the U.S.'s omission from the Bible and to center America in the narrative, extending and evolving prophecy over significant events such as the Civil War, the advent of Y2K, and now, the conclusion of Trump's presidency. In this sense, anything of major political consequence can be interpreted as a symbol of the end.

IN THE PAST TWO YEARS, IT SEEMS THAT “APOCALYPSE” has been on the tip of everyone's tongues. Indeed, in the first early months of COVID-19 terror in New York, I thought often about my viewing of *A Thief in the Night* and childhood fixation with the End Times, wondering if this was what I had been preparing for my entire life. However, amidst a year and a half of intense collective grief and systemic disappointment, I feel that there has been a change in how people speak, and more importantly act around the concept of apocalypse. Instead of an ending, we have seen communities, activists, and even media treat apocalypse as a site for reinvention, as it has become clear that the inherited attitudes of scarcity and fear do little in crisis. Last summer saw protests that demanded an end to failed systems, the rise of informal mutual aid networks, and a greater awareness of our interdependency on one another. The need to build out new, workable infrastructure has become glaringly urgent in the face of climate disasters such as the unprecedented heat waves across the country and the normalization of sweeping wildfires on the West Coast. Recent scenes such as the eruption of flames in the Gulf of Mexico and wildfires in Canada set off by thousands of lightning strikes take on particularly biblical proportions: they seem to promise that the future, if not apocalyptic, will certainly be radically different.

The storming of the Capitol in January can be read as an attempt to seize control of the apocalypse; to reclaim white evangelical agency over the future through a return to the outdated blueprint outlined by films like *A Thief in the Night* and *Left Behind*. As insurrectionists entered the Capitol building, chants to “Make America Great Again” intermingled with prayer in Jesus' name over the country. The contradictory nature of the insurrectionists' desire to consolidate political dominance in the earthly realm while simultaneously trying to usher in a period of apocalypse and worldly destruction highlights ideological fractures within the movement. But also, in a nation that has claimed divine anointing across centuries, apocalypse-seekers are absolved of fear because of the belief that they are covered in God's favor, destined for salvation while their enemies and doubters face the fate of damnation. In this context, the aggregation of political dominance can provide an apparatus for apocalypse-seekers to create the conditions that will bring about the End Times.

In this brand of mythic thinking, which has been represented and reinforced in American pop culture by evangelical apocalyptic media, there is only a binary of good and evil, with little room to factor in the struggle or pain that informs the current state of division in which we find this country and Christianity as a whole. *A Thief in the Night* and *Left Behind* are a part of a greater American tradition that places fear as the endpoint, sensationalizing religion in order to rack up numbers of souls saved, with little regard for spiritual nourishment afterward.

Standing at the brink of apocalypse, American Christians may find that they are confronted by a different binary, one representing different historical strains of Christian thought. Will it be the culture of fear that has been sowed for generations, or will it be a return to a different tradition, one of community, care and love across hardship that has contributed to Christianity's survival as a religion over millennia? Because, ultimately, if it feels like we are always living in the End Times, it is because we always are. ✚



Medieval Dreams and FAR RIGHT NIGHTMARES

by Benjamin Bertrand and Tirumalar (Drew) Sarayanian

ON APRIL 16, 2021, the congresswoman, conspiracy theorist, and noted CrossFit enthusiast Marjorie Taylor Greene put out a memo outlining her plans for a new “America First Caucus.” This voting bloc was intended to pick up where former President Donald Trump had left off, fighting for the rights and privileges of white people who already have them. Within the seven absurd pages of this memo, there appears some positively medieval language: she calls the United States “a nation with a border, and a culture, strengthened by a common respect for uniquely Anglo-Saxon political traditions.” The term “Anglo-Saxon”—a dog-whistle that caught the attention

of many on the left—has increasingly been condemned in Medieval Studies for being both anachronistic and profoundly problematic. Although the term itself was used sparingly in medieval England (appearing only three times in all surviving Old English literature), it was co-opted into early modern colonialist discourse to justify the superiority of the white race, and has a long history of use by far-right actors who glorify their own supposedly “Anglo-Saxon” past. As medieval scholar Mary Rambaran-Olm explained in a recent interview with *Time*: “It was always used for propaganda. It was always used for nationalist reasons.” Like so much of medieval history, art, and culture, the far right has taken the past, misunderstood it, and used it for their own purposes.

The modern obsession with the idea

of the Middle Ages, or “medievalism,” has a long history in American culture that goes beyond drinking mead at a Renaissance Faire or smashing skulls in *Skyrim*. Medievalism refers to the afterlife of the Middle Ages, or how it’s been popularly reimagined by subsequent generations. (This is in contrast to Medieval Studies, which is the academic field studying the historical period known as the Middle Ages, as well as the later medievalisms it gave rise to.) Medievalism has a complex and often contradictory history that begins with 19th century romanticism and extends into the modern day. Regardless of whether the medieval is idealized as romantic and chivalric, or weaponized as a pejorative against “backward” cultures, public discourse around medieval imagery is disproportionately used to justify modern intolerance and violence. Most recently, the far right has rallied around the imagined brutality of the Middle Ages in order to legitimize their own ideologies, glamorizing “medieval” strongmen for fascistic purposes.

Over the past fifty years, researchers in the field of medieval history have analyzed an increasingly visible cultural obsession with the Middle Ages. Medieval scholar and novelist Umberto Eco described this phenomenon as far back as 1973 in his essay “Dreaming of the Middle Ages,” noting that medieval mania was especially well-suited to the United States: “a country able to produce Dianetics can do a lot with wash-and-wear sorcery and Holy Grail frappé.” This fascination has been fed by, and in turn contributed to, the prevalence of medieval-ish books, films, and role-playing games that pervade every library, bookstore, and streaming service. But recent events remind us that medievalism is hardly a harmless curiosity: for example, at the Charlottesville “Unite the Right Rally” in 2017, far-right rioters marched with medieval symbols from the Holy Roman Empire and Norse culture, chanting the crusader battle cry, *Deus Vult* (“God wills it”). Many medieval scholars reacted with horror and disbelief to this use of medieval imagery, even though scholars of color in the field had spent years attempting to call their attention to this kind of behavior in various contexts. Notably, medieval scholars of color such as Sierra Lomuto, Dorothy Kim, Cord Whitaker, and Mary Rambaran-Olm have examined the fascist and conservative use of the Middle Ages and medievalism. In their tracing of the history of medievalism, they draw us back to that breeding ground of modern intolerance: the 19th century.

Past Obsessions: Scott, Klan, Hitler



MUCH OF OUR OBSESSION WITH THE medieval past can be linked to Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). While Scott wrote historical romances in other periods, his most famous and (as we shall see) harmful creation was the medieval epic *Ivanhoe*, which weaves a narrative of chivalric knights fighting for love and honor in a heavily romanticized version of medieval England. *Ivanhoe*’s immense popularity helped fuel what scholars have called the “Medieval Revival,” an interest in medieval art and history that impacted elite culture in 19th century England by presenting a particular fantasy of medieval life. Some Victorian tryhards even attempted to revive the sport of jousting, and held a three-day tournament in 1839 to celebrate Queen Victoria’s coronation. The event was hindered by a tremendous rainstorm, and one can only imagine the rust and chafing that plagued many a would-be knight. Although

the tournament was a “complete disaster,” historian Marcus Bull observed that it nevertheless demonstrates how Scott “made an enormous impact in raising the profile of the Middle Ages.”

To Scott’s readers, the Middle Ages were a simpler time when chivalrous, heroic men proved their worth in a violent and chaotic world by swinging sharp objects. *Ivanhoe* also imagines a medieval past that is explicitly racialized: as early as Chapter II, we encounter a Templar knight, Brian de Bois-Guilbert, commanding a battalion of dark-skinned slaves. This perfect blend of romanticism and racism would prove extremely popular in the United States—especially in the American South, where the image of the chivalric white knight played directly into the Southern gentry’s sense of racial and cultural superiority. Amy Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant’s book *The Devil’s Historians* describes how white Southern readers identified with the knightly figures in Scott’s novel, and viewed the Middle Ages as a period when noble lords justly held power over the lower classes. To the Southern aristocracy, the Middle Ages of *Ivanhoe* was a white utopia, and they embraced the supposed gallantry and brutality of this past in equal measure. As Kaufman and Sturtevant describe, “they whitewashed their enslavement of Africans as benevolent neomedieval lords” and even “challenged each other to duels, and jousting for entertainment.” This Southern “chivalry” drove Mark Twain to rail against Walter Scott in *Life on the Mississippi*, with all the passion and fury of a righteous Twitter cancellation: “He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote... Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war.”



STWAIN SAW IT, SCOTT HAD DEEPENED the white Southern aristocracy’s obsession with class and rank through his glorification of an imagined medieval past. After the war, when Southern landowners clung to their notions of racial superiority in the face of newly-freed Black Americans, Southern medievalism was vital to the founding of the first “Knights of the Klu Klux Klan” in 1861. Portraying themselves as chivalric defenders of the white race, the organization adorned its highest members with explicitly medievalized titles like “dragon” and “wizard.” The Klan set the stage for how successive generations of American extremists would adopt and weaponize the trappings of medievalism.

The Klan was not alone in adopting knightly cosplay in service of their far-right ideologies: the Nazis also drew on the medieval past for inspiration. Hitler and Himmler obsessed over the Arthurian legends, the Knights Templar, and the Holy Grail. (Whether their Grail obsession also led to them tangling with a whipcracking American archaeologist and his inexplicably Scottish father must remain an open question). Himmler seems to have modeled his headquarters at Wewelsburg Castle in imitation of the Round Table. As scholars Fabian Link and Mark W. Hornburg note in an article, “Nazi ideologues also used medieval figures such as Henry I, Henry the Lion, and the Knights of the Teutonic Order to justify conquering territories in Eastern Europe.” The Third Reich used the imagery of medievalism to highlight the strength of the National Socialist movement, and portrayed the medieval period as a heroic past that demonstrated German might.

A particular fantasy of the medieval thus became entrenched in

the far-right imagination as a time of racial and cultural purity that white European traditionalists could look back to with nostalgia. This fetishizing of the Middle Ages was, of course, a mere caricature of the actual human past, stripped of all complexity and nuance. Such thinking turns history into a blunt instrument, a weapon to be used against those who are Othered. The events of the early twenty-first century would see the Middle Ages weaponized yet again, in a slightly different way, this time as a xenophobic slur to hurl at America's enemies.

9/11, The War on Terror, and Modern Medieval Cosplay



THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TWIN TOWERS on September 11, 2001 opened up a Pandora's Box of medievalism. Immediately following the attack, news outlets, particularly those with a conservative bent, began making references to the supposedly "medieval" qualities of the West's enemies. On September 12, David Beers of *Salon* wrote that the United States was not as safe as it thought from enemies on the "still-medieval hinterlands." Victor David Hanson of the *National Review* positioned the United States as in "an age-old fight against medieval foes who despise modernity, liberalism, and freedom." Shortly afterwards, Joe Conason of the *New York Observer* remarked that these terrorists' belief system was "medieval, opposed to progress in every sense." One would be forgiven for thinking that terrorists had attacked the Twin Towers with a trebuchet.

The crusades, moreover, soon became the *de facto* metaphor for understanding the attack, compounding the growing Islamophobia that surged through a frightened American populace. Having denounced their enemies as "medieval foes" who despised American-style progress, thought leaders and politicians just as easily turned on a dime and began characterizing Americans as a "good" kind of medieval, the crusader knights who would bravely charge into battle against the Islamic world. That this paradigm made little actual sense obviously didn't matter: the country seemed to be existentially threatened by a violent, unreasonable Other, encouraging a turn to an imagined past in order to fight it.

While George W. Bush's infamous comment that "This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while," is perhaps the best-remembered bit of 9/11 medievalism, this kind of thinking was profoundly embedded in conservative circles in a way that went well beyond Bush's gaffes. In *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*, medieval scholar Bruce Holsinger explores how the Bush administration routinely called on medievalized and "neomedievalist" language in its effort to seize political power. "Neomedievalism" is a theory propagated in international relations, prophesying that world politics is heading towards a time when the nation-state will fail, and the population's loyalty will transition to "supra-national" institutions that defy national boundaries, like the medieval church. Many conservative thinkers saw the Taliban and other Islamic extremists in this light, and likened them to "feudal lords." Neoconservatives within the Bush administration, such as Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, helped to spread this interpretation of the Middle East as a means of aggressively Othering the entire Islamic world as the enemy of the West. In turn, because these neoconservatives believed their enemies presented an existen-

tial threat to the nation-state—and indeed to the modern world itself—they behaved as though this gave them license to deal with them in similarly "medieval" ways, justifying a mad crusader-style grab for regional power and the use of torture against their adversaries.

This rhetoric outlasted the Bush years: throughout 2016, presidential candidate Donald Trump often likened violence in the Middle East to "medieval times." (We must assume that he did not mean the restaurant.) Trump's answer to this violence was to meet it head-on with equal aggression; to be just as "medieval."

The Modern Allure of Medievalism



HIS DESIRE FROM THE RIGHT TO "GO medieval" on their enemies increasingly catapulted medievalism into mainstream political discourse. Drawing on both older and more recent histories of fascist medievalisms, conservatives on the internet began imagining themselves (both "ironically" and not) as crusaders and other medieval strongmen. The same internet communities that fueled the rise of neo-conservatism and neo-fascism have offered a space for medieval mythmaking that escalates from crusader memes to real world violence. Much like the Klan, fascists and white supremacists happily adopt the trappings of Vikings, Templars, and other figures; it's common to see any number of medieval appropriations at far-right rallies, mixed in with QAnon flags and Punisher t-shirts. The Anti-Defamation League's "Hate on Display" website and an extensive Twitter thread by medieval scholar Mary Rambaran-Olm both catalog a staggering breadth of medieval imagery adopted by such groups. The use of these images and memes plays on what Andrew B.R. Elliott has termed "banal medievalism": the creation of an idea of the medieval period through symbols and imagery that have little to do with the historical past.

The actual past, in all its complexity, is generally inconvenient for white supremacists. Genetic research shows that the Vikings were not blond-haired, blue-eyed supermen, but had a heterogeneous genetic makeup which suggests cultural mingling and interchange. The European crusaders' efforts to conquer and colonize the Middle East were all abject failures, thus making it not only immoral but idiotic to cite the crusades as evidence of "Western" superiority. The existence of actual research and evidence on these subjects, however, rarely carries weight in white supremacist circles: scholarly research is only interesting if it can be used or misused to support a pre-existing narrative about European superiority.

Fascism, of course, is particularly invested in myth, usually appealing to a legendary heroic past, rejecting the softness of modernity and aspiring to the strength of previous generations. The imagined brutality and violence of the Middle Ages is the perfect backdrop for fascist fictions. It helps that since the Early Modern period, the Middle Ages has often been portrayed as a regressive contrast to modernity, one that is simple at best and savage at worst.

And just as there was something attractive to 19th-century elites about the image of the chivalrous, virtuous knight who rightly held dominion over serfs and slaves, there is also something perversely compelling about what medieval scholar Christopher Bishop calls "dark medievalism." This decidedly unromantic perspective on the medieval past caricatures it as a brutal historical fugue, filled only



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

with callous, sadistic violence. Such an environment is a breeding ground for precisely the kind of strongmen that fascists worship, because they presume that only a *real* man could survive such a brutal world. Modern depictions of the medieval, such as *Game of Thrones*, play into these fantasies by emphasizing the “grittiness” of the period. Again, the fact that this is a fantasy makes no difference, as fascists often ignore or dismiss the intellectual inconsistencies in their own ideology. It is the supposed darkness of the “Dark Ages” that makes them so appealing to the modern far right.

One illustrative example of this phenomenon is the modern right’s frequent deployment of “Conan the Barbarian,” a character first created by Robert E. Howard in the 1930s. Conan the Cimmerian—a muscle-bound, sword-wielding barbarian—exists in the pseudo-medieval world of the Hyborian Age, situated between the mythic Fall of Atlantis and the founding of Rome, a kind of precursory “Dark Ages.” The black-haired and blue-eyed character himself hails

from a tribe that the author frames as an ancestor to the Gaels. In the original stories, Conan adventures through various lands, “rescuing” damsels and battling vicious adversaries. His most enduring foes come from Stygia (supposedly Egypt), a land of seemingly unending quantities of snakes, plagues, curses, priests, narcotics, and sorcerers, who ritually sacrifice scantily-clad women. (Edward Said must be rolling in his grave from the sheer volume of Orientalizing tropes listed here.) Scholar Helen Young has noted that fantasy narratives suffer from “habits” that traditionally imagine the protagonist as a white paragon juxtaposed against villains who are not. Although this is surely not the only reason for Conan’s popularity writ large, users of extremist sites such as Stormfront have drawn plenty of inspiration from the racist aspects of Howard’s stories.

The allure of Howard’s work differs greatly from that of Scott, though they both draw from popular conceptions of a broadly Eurocentric medieval setting. While *Ivanhoe* celebrates the knight-errant struggling for king, country, and chivalry, the Conan stories dispense with such romanticisms to portray a dog-eat-dog world where might makes right. The various civilizations through which Conan travels tend to be characterized as weak, decadent, and unprepared to survive the violent and dangerous conflicts of their time. Indeed, Howard’s narrative moralizes Conan’s pure barbarity as superior to both the civilized (even if white) politics or the hybrid “mongrels” alike. The barbarian’s ability to overcome seemingly insurmountable foes in an era of violence and chaos perhaps appeals to the conservative values of rugged individualism and traditional gender roles.

Set against the backdrop of one man’s quests against hordes of recycled racialized enemies, the Conan narratives even draw upon notions of Manifest Destiny. From sea to shining sea, the barbarian conquers the lecherous Hyrkanians (Mongols), fraudulent Vendayans (Indians), sorcerous Stygians, bloodthirsty Picts, as well as the shifty Shemites and Black Cannibals of Darfar (these last two are among the most horrifyingly explicit racializations). Howard’s stories follow Conan from lowly thief, to mercenary, to frontiersman, and eventually king. Such social progressions are framed as justified and expected because of his ability to shape his environment by violently displacing those who “get in the way.” In doing so, the character often exudes an Ayn Rand-ian “Objectivism,” whereby the barbarian lives for himself, his own self-interest, and his particular morality, with only vague moments of honor to nuance him. Howard’s depiction of Conan embodies a kind of “Western Supremacy” that is accessible to white, able men, if only one has the wherewithal to forge it with steel, blood, and aggressive self-reliance.

MAGA culture has cast the now-former President in the role of Conan: one political cartoon produced on the right-wing blog “Red-PillJew” imagines Trump with a Schwarzeneggerian physique (**Figure 2**), paying homage to the infamous lines from John Millius’ 1981 *Conan the Barbarian* film: “Crush your enemies. See them driven before you and hear the lamentations of their women.” Trump-Conan promises to actively undermine the first Black president and shame “Globalists” (a dog whistle for anti-Jewish conspiracy theories), while suggesting contempt for the “hysterical” nature of liberals. The cartoon reflects the weaponized dark medieval language deployed throughout the Trump administration. As the former president himself stated outside the White House on January 6th, “you’ll never take back your country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong.”

If the right-wing appropriation and obsession with the medieval ended with Conan memes and silly complaints about culture, then

Know Your "RIGHTS"

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS WHEN SUMMONED BEFORE THE INQUISITION.



1. **You** have the right to recant your false and misguided beliefs.
2. **You** have the right to denounce your neighbors.
3. **Remember** that the Church authorities **CANNOT** execute you for heresy! By law, the Church can only transfer you to the custody of secular authorities, who will then execute you for heresy.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE ACCUSED OF MURDER.

1. **Take shelter in the nearest church.** If you claim sanctuary, the law can't touch you, provided you're willing to live the rest of your life as an unwashed choir ghoul.
2. **If there's no church,** flee into outlawry. But bear in mind that once you are declared an outlaw, loyal subjects of the realm are forbidden to feed, house, or converse with you; the most they can do is sexually fantasize about you and immortalize your deeds in song.
3. **You have no right to an attorney,** but to be fair there's like no way your accuser has an attorney either, so just bring all your friends to court with you and have them gush to the jury and/or judge about what a god-fearing, tithe-paying, non-murdery kind of guy you are.



4. **Agree to fight the other guy** or get dunked in a river or something. Look, every court is different and they keep changing the rules for this stuff (don't even get me started on the Fourth

Lateran Council and all THAT bullshit!)

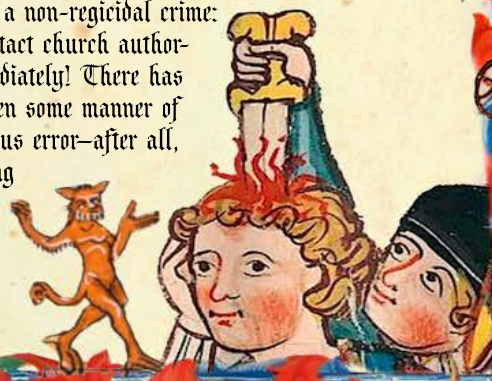
5. **Seriously,** just offer to do some Jackass-style stunt to prove your innocence and see how it plays with the crowd.
6. **Abjure the realm.** In lieu of facing punishment, you have the right to confess your crime, take to the sea, and sail away never to return—wait, really? Why did we even bother talking about the other options?

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS IF THE KING TAKES YOUR STUFF

1. **NA**

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS IF THE KING LOCKS YOU UP IN A TOWER FOR THE REST OF YOUR NATURAL LIFE

1. **If you declared yourself the true king,** and were defeated on a muddy battlefield or betrayed by the noblemen you insufficiently bribed—this one's kind of on you, sorry.
2. **If you just happen to be inconveniently related to the king,** or the pretender, or that other pretender, or the guy who pretended to be the pretender but just had a similar face, do not be afraid: the rest of your natural life will not be much longer.
3. **If you are a peasant** who has committed a non-regicidal crime: please contact church authorities immediately! There has clearly been some manner of blasphemous error—after all, imprisoning sinners forever is Satan's work.



perhaps they could be considered peripheral. But they do not. The fascination with medieval European fantasy is present in online spaces that have proven to be breeding-grounds for real-life right-wing rallies, marches, and riots; it's also present in spaces like the U.S. military, which holds much more immediate and tangible power throughout the world. Take the 2009 installation at Fort Hood of the statue known as the "Phantom Warrior," the mascot for the III Army Corps (**Figure 3**). The "Phantom Warrior" is, in fact, an adaptation of a character from a 1973 painting by Frank Frazetta (**Figure 4**), the "Death Dealer," showing a figure with a horned helmet, axe, and a shield bearing the Reichsadler, or German black eagle (which is replaced with the Corps' caltrop insignia in the Foot Hood statue). Similar to Conan, the Death Dealer is coded as a white, "Viking," Proto-European, hypermasculine barbarian, though he exists in a world even less nuanced than Howard's character. The painting inspired the 1987 novel *Prisoner of the Horned Helmet*, where the character, here known as "Gath of Baal," single-handedly defends a group of forest-dwelling white people from an army of yellow-skinned slavers and their Islamized allies. Gone now are the decadent white civilizations of the Hyborian Age: this world is shown as a simple dichotomy where "Eastern" incursions threaten a "Western" frontier.

So, what does it matter if a division of the United States military decided to adopt a bizarre icon of 1980s sword and sorcery? Iconography is important to the public: if it were not, then defenders of Confederate monuments wouldn't bemoan the loss of their "history," nor would Black Lives Matter protestors cheer at these monuments' dismantlement. According to the Army's own literature, the "Phantom Warrior" statue was meant to "reinforce and reinvigorate the image identity of the heavy maneuver force to its soldiers." In no uncertain terms, the military recognizes that iconography informs values. But if the statue inspires military prowess, then it simultaneously references and idolizes a bizarre fantasy about medieval Europe.

The implications of this work of art and its placement are striking and troubling. This symbol of an important Army formation, situated at a base named for a Confederate general, fetishizes a white hero who slaughters racialized outsiders to defend the homeland. Given the growing problem of white nationalist groups in the U.S., and the disproportionate number of former military personnel at the Capitol riots—not to mention the problem of white supremacy in the police and military writ large—we should at least wonder at what values such visual programs engender. The truly terrifying part of the right-wing appropriation of the medieval is not when nutjobs decide to roleplay barbarians, but the realization that U.S. military propaganda enshrines such imaginings in the first place. A military genuinely concerned about the possibility of "domestic terrorism" would not, one assumes, glamorize anti-democratic strongmen like the Death Dealer. Like the Islamophobia that pervaded the Bush administration, seemingly incidental medievalism reveals a far more nefarious truth about the extent to which medieval imagery affects contemporary conservative politics.

Managing the Medieval



THE FAR RIGHT'S USE OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY and medievalism should be troubling for everyone who seeks to live in a just, inclusive, well-functioning representational democracy. For more than a century now, conservative extremists and white supremacists have looked back upon an imagined version of the distant

past to valorize their behavior. Building upon already politicized and identitarian understandings of the Middle Ages, these groups cling desperately to a fractured vision of the past and reduce a millennium of complex history into a parody of itself. The far right seeks to claim the Middle Ages as its own, but a historical period is not a slogan or propaganda. It does not belong to the right, or the left, and certainly not to the white race. The Middle Ages do not belong to anyone. Yet because of its racist baggage, it must be managed by everyone.

In this respect, medieval scholars as a field have much to learn. As medieval scholar Sierra Lomuto has noted, there are no "innocent medievalists" whose scholarly interests have been suddenly and unexpectedly utilized by Nazis: the academic discipline of medieval studies has historically centered narrowly on a European (and particularly a Western European) geographic focus, used Eurocentric benchmarks for historical periodization, excluded non-European and non-Christian cultures as irrelevant or incidental to their narratives, and generally foregrounded European history in ways that contribute to white supremacist narratives and ideologies. Only over the past several years has Medieval Studies begun to wrestle with the long-unacknowledged racism within the field. Examples range from the revelation that prominent scholars are aligned with the alt-right propaganda machine (such as Professor Rachel Fulton Brown of the University of Chicago, later appointed by President Trump to his Cultural Property Advisory Committee), to the resistance to retiring the misnamed (and racist) sub-field of "Anglo-Saxon Studies." Failing to address these issues with the discipline will only continue to make medieval scholars of color feel isolated and unwelcome, and lead to a less vibrant and interesting study of the past. It is also worth noting that the issues of nationalistic appropriation of the medieval past do not end with the "West" and have implications for the rise of fascist ideologies in other parts of the world. For example, the 2018 Hindi film *Padmaavat* depicts a medievalized Indian (Hindu) kingdom besieged by a particularly treacherous, dishonorable, and rapacious Islamic ruler. Evidently, both European and non-European countries can employ fantastical pasts to promote notions of cultural and religious homogeneity.

Understanding the way the past can be used to prop up a racist and fascistic ideology can better prepare us to combat it. If fascism attempts to simplify and smooth over the complexities and inconsistencies of history, then it is our responsibility to call attention to them. The Middle Ages *was* a harsh and often brutal time which informed modern constructions of race, yet it also saw a flourishing of art and culture that can still move us after hundreds of years, and innovations in science and technology that revolutionized the global discourse. Its complexity and richness—its beauties and horrors alike—should be accessible to all for interest and study, and not partitioned away for the fascist fetishizing of the far right. Examples of what this reclamation of the medieval past and imagery might look like include the current translation project seeking to render *Beowulf* into every language, authors like N.K. Jemisin helping to upend the general whiteness of the fantasy genre, and A24's new film *Gawain and the Green Knight* starring Dev Patel in defiance of the rigid expectations of whiteness in Medieval Europe. Such projects, from both academia and popular media, help to demonstrate that popular medievalism does not have to reify racial stereotypes and bolster modern imperialist fantasies. Perhaps we will never stop dreaming of the Middle Ages, as Umberto Eco would say—but we should be able to tell which are the dreams and which are the nightmares. ✦

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF POISON



BY BRIANNA RENNIX

BEING AN ADULT IS BETTER THAN BEING A CHILD BY almost every conceivable metric, but one major area in which society regularly mistreats the non-child population is the quality of the books they give us to read. We'll even put aside questions of aesthetics—such as the fact that publishers one day decided, arbitrarily and incorrectly, that adults no longer wanted their novels to have illustrations—and simply focus on content. For example, there are very few

books of Cool Facts About Animals that are written for grown-ups. When I recently had a hankering to learn more information about poison dart frogs, the only books I could find on the market were glossy 15-pagers with titles like “GROSS-OUT DEFENSES: DEADLY POISON DART FROGS” written in blood-dripping Halloween fonts. There is apparently no *definitive monograph* containing everything an adult layperson is supposed to know about poison dart frogs, and so I was left to cobble together what I could from non-paywalled public science articles and Wikipedia.

It turns out that of all the poison dart frogs, the most virulent one is the golden dart frog, a bright yellow creature that’s less than two and a half inches long and contains enough poison in its tiny body to kill ten adult men. But dart frogs are generally not very dangerous to humans, because you’d have to actually ingest one of them—or have its toxins permeate your body in some other way—before you’d experience the characteristic side effects, beginning with creeping paralysis and ending in death. That’s because poison dart frogs are poisonous, but not *venomous*, a distinction of which I was previously unaware. Venomous animals force toxins into their target’s bloodstream by making a puncture wound with their teeth or some other lacerating apparatus on their bodies; poisonous animals have no such delivery mechanism, and the only way they’ll kill their enemy is if their enemy takes a bite out of them. Humans nevertheless realized that frog poison could envenomate their *own* predatory weapons, and native Amazonian peoples like the Chocó have long used frog poison on their hunting arrows in order to more efficiently incapacitate their prey. The methods for extracting the frog poison aren’t very well-attested in Western scientific literature, but one 19th-century European traveler describes a fairly gruesome process: “they take the unfortunate reptile [*sic*] and pass a pointed piece of wood down his throat and out of one of his legs. This torture makes the poor frog perspire very much, especially on the back, which becomes covered in a white froth; this is the most powerful poison that he yields, and in this they dip or roll the tips of their arrows, which will preserve their destructive power for a year.”

However, frog sweat wasn’t the only source for arrowhead venom: hunters throughout Central and South America also used various plant compounds made from poisonous barks and stems. Colonizers dubbed these mysterious resins “curare” and brought samples back to Europe, but it would be centuries before European scientists actually identified their components. The investigation into curare’s muscle-relaxing properties ultimately proved integral to Western medicine’s early breakthroughs in anesthesiology. (Curare was also at the center of an alleged 1917 plot hatched by three antiwar activists to assassinate British prime minister Lloyd George with a blowgun, although it now seems

likely that the activists were framed by a bored MI5 agent). The long-running association in human societies between poison and arrows is sufficiently deep—premodern societies across the world have used venomous darts of all kinds—that it finds expression in the word we now use in English to describe the study of poisons, “toxicology,” which seemingly comes from the Greek word “toxikon,” referring specifically to arrowhead poison, itself derived from “toxon,” the word for bow.

GIVEN THIS ANCIENT HISTORY OF the weaponization of toxic substances, it’s perhaps odd that poison has nevertheless traditionally been conceptualized in many cultures as a “woman’s weapon.” Whether women *are* more likely to be poisoners than men depends a bit on how you interpret the numbers: going off U.S. crime statistics, men are overwhelmingly more likely to murder people than women, with any murder weapon, and thus male poisoners outnumber female poisoners by quite a lot. However, when you look at *choice* of murder weapon, women are about six times more likely to choose poison than men. (The gender of the intended victim also have an impact: looking at statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice, when the victim of a poisoning is a woman, the perpetrator is more likely to be a man; when the victim is a man, the gender of the killer is more of a 50-50 split.) It seems likely that the historical stereotyping of poisoners as women has perhaps less to do with actual numbers and more to do with the fact that poisoning has long been thought of as a coldblooded, devious form of killing, something that the physically weak and uncourageous could use to overcome a stronger victim—and an act which women were well-placed to carry out unobtrusively, because of their broad responsibility over household and table. There’s also, perhaps, the lingering specter of the witch, the woman on the margins of society, who knew both natural and supernatural secrets for exacting revenge by stealth.

Many of the poisoners-for-hire that became historically infamous have been women: students of Roman history (or people who have just seen the 1970s TV miniseries *I, Claudius*) will know of Martina and Locusta, expert poisoners who were allegedly involved in several high-profile political assassinations. In 17th-century Italy, one of the most notorious poisoners was Giulia Tofana, whose clientele were allegedly almost all women seeking to do away with their husbands. (I’ve seen some popular historians claim that Giulia deliberately targeted domestic abusers, but I’m not sure if there’s any actual basis for that assertion or if it’s just retroactive hero-making.) Giulia’s special tonic, *aqua tofana*, was disguised as a bottled cosmetic product, allowing women to bring it into their

homes without arousing suspicion. According to a confession supposedly extracted under torture, Giulia provided the poison for around 600 murders. The pop culture sensation around *aqua tofana* likely also contributed to the French scandal several decades later known as “the affair of the poisons,” in which various prominent noblewomen of the French court were alleged to have plotted the deaths of their male relatives after obtaining poisons from a sinister cabal of lady fortune-tellers and occultists. This association between women and poison was so deeply-ingrained in Europe by the 19th century that, for instance, the British Parliament contemplated a law to prevent women from being allowed to buy arsenic at the chemist’s, for fear that they would use it to slaughter their families and abscond to more glamorous pursuits.

The secretive nature of poison, in the centuries before modern forensic science, made it the ultimate murder weapon: particularly in the original sense of the word “murder,” which referred specifically to *clandestine* killings. Poisons like arsenic were effective because they were widely available and produced symptoms (like nausea and diarrhea) that couldn’t easily be distinguished from those of many other common illnesses. These days, it’s rather harder to fatally poison someone and get away with it, since most poisons can be detected in the body after death if anyone thinks to look for them. Poisons are, to be sure, still utilized by individuals attempting to be inconspicuous, but it’s also true that in the modern era, deliberate poisoning is often an act that’s *intended* to be detected by forensic investigation: whether it’s sending public officials anthrax in the mail, or unleashing sarin gas on a subway, or crippling a defected intelligence agent with a rare government-manufactured nerve agent. Making use of a fancy poison, far from being a way to evade discovery, is a way to send a *message*, bright as a flash of color in the forest gloom: fuck around and find out.

MY BRAIN IS, REGRETTABLY, VERY anthropocentric. I have a pretty good handle on subjects related to how human beings think and communicate in our day-to-day, observable lives: things like language, psychology, history, and politics. And so it’s easy for me to think about the *uses* of poison, by people, as a means to human ends. But when I try to understand what poison actually *is*, on a material level, I quickly become dizzyingly bewildered. Honestly, I can easily imagine why some subset of the population are COVID-19 skeptics, because infectious disease—caused by the machinations of malevolent microscopic particles—simply doesn’t *feel* real to me. The fact that I behave as if such things *were* real is



18th century illustration "Murder By Poison" depicting a young wife murdering her husband with poison

entirely a heuristic of institutional trust—itself a risk calculation based on human psychology—rather than any confidence in my shaky understanding of how pathogens work. The mechanics of the universe, on a fundamental level, are as weird to me as overelaborate worldbuilding in a tedious fantasy novel. (As Lyta Gold once said: “I gave up on science once I learned about Golgi bodies, because I thought, ‘I’d rather just make this up.’”) Even when an engaging, legible science writer like Christie Wilcox—author of the very entertaining book *Venomous*, which is the closest thing to a Book of Cool Animal Facts for adults I’ve encountered recently—describes how a given poison actually operates inside a living body, it simply sounds like science fiction:

All along the [cell] membrane are these voltage-gated channels, so once one is triggered, the movement of ions sets off the next closest. That voltage-gated sodium channel swings open, and the whole process is repeated just a teeny tiny bit farther down. This domino-like cascade is how the electrical signal moves from one end of a long neuron cell to the other... These ion channels are what neurotoxins attack. Tetrodotoxin, for example, is a sodium channel blocker. When a blue-ringed octopus bites, tetrodotoxin in the venom shuts down the victim’s neuronal signalling, leading to numbness radiating from where it entered the body. Weakness and paralysis aren’t far behind; when sodium channels in neu-



rons are prevented from perpetuating action potentials, the brain simply cannot tell the muscles to move... Venoms from diverse species contain neurotoxins that affect every step of our neuronal signaling. Some shut down critical channels, while others pry them open. Some stop signals at the very beginning or ends of these pathways. Some indiscriminately act on a broad range of given channel types, while others are incredibly specific...

It's overwhelming to think of what's happening on a minute scale whilst a poisoning is taking place, more difficult still to conceptualize these as processes without conscious motive or intention. I really am much more fit for an age that would simply have called toxins "demons" and sorted them into a disturbingly-illustrated compendium. On the molecular and cellular level, I am simply going to have to take science's word for it that poisons are not witchcraft.

"The mechanics of the universe, on a fundamental level, are as weird to me as overelaborate worldbuilding in a tedious fantasy novel."

Also puzzling to contemplate is how certain species *come to be* poisonous, through a process of evolution. Evolutionary biology is a science that's closer to a scale my brain can comfortably deal with, in part because it feels more like a narrative, often involving larger, more familiar creatures, who are frequently described as acting—if only as a shorthand—with strategic intent, as if each given species had a collective hive-mind and a conscious desire to propagate itself, learning by trial and error over the course of millennia. Within this framework, I can broadly imagine how a species might become more and more *venomous* over time: how a genetic mutation might make an individual creature a *little* bit venomous, how this would make them a little more dangerous to prey and would-be predators, how this would allow the venomous creature to survive longer and produce more offspring, how mutations producing venomousness would then become adaptively favored. Cone snails, for example—which have an extremely high mutation rate of about three times the highest rates found in fruit flies, and produce an interactive array of toxins targeted at shutting down multiple kinds of ion channels simultaneously—I can easily imagine as diabolical lady-chemists in their labs, plotting the demises of their enemies with ever-increasing precision. But how evolution produces *poisonous* creatures, that is, creatures like the dart frog, who are only dangerous when

devoured—and in particular how evolution comes to favor poisonous creatures who are *brightly colored*, sacrificing all the advantages of camouflage in favor of a "warning" that's little more than the precarious bluff of a reluctant suicide-bomber—is much harder for me to imagine. I try to picture how that particular evolutionary ball got rolling, how a creature whose lethality is correlated only with their demise was selected for survival, and my brain starts to hurt.

Of course, this is in part because evolution is *not* actually the working of an unseen logical intention, and a lot of survival comes down to random chance and the often bizarre vagaries of mating preference. One hypothesis for why the luridly-colored dart frog is poisonous, for example, is that the poison comes from their diet of toxic ants, and was initially just an incidental result of the overlap between the species range of the frogs'

ancestors and this particular kind of prey. (Dart frogs raised in captivity are not poisonous, which may suggest that their toxins are absorbed from their natural environment, although there are other possible explanations.) Their bright coloration was perhaps initiated randomly through sexual selection, and then intensified as a warning signal as they co-evolved with predator species whose survival was correlated with their ability to distinguish these now-poisonous bastards from their other prey. I can *sort of* imagine how it happened—but from a human perspective, it doesn't feel very *neat*, certainly not a fact pattern I'd like to explain in front of a judge. The cone snail would easily get convicted for murder, while the conspiracy of the colorful frogs would fall apart in court.

ULTIMATELY, I THINK WHAT FASCINATES me most about poison is that it *does* simply seem like magic to me. Historically, magic, medicine, and natural science—which we now regard as entirely separate and indeed incompatible domains of human thought—were part of a much less differentiated continuum of methodologies for investigating and explaining visible phenomena, and nowhere has this been more true than the world of poison. Countless alchemists succumbed to mercury fumes while trying to unlock the secret of turning one element into another; numerous Chi-

Frog photograph by Jim Liestman

nese emperors and officials accidentally poisoned themselves while attempting to create an elixir of life; Mithridates VI, a first-century BCE Anatolian ruler, came to be known as “the Poison King” because of his obsession with developing a universal antidote that would render him immune to all poisons, which he pursued under the guidance of Scythian shamans. Yet for all that we’ve been fascinated by poisons for centuries, we actually still know surprisingly little about them, especially the biological toxins that are manufactured in the bodies of living things like animals, plants, and fungi. This seems surprising, in a society where we’ve been conditioned to believe that humans have discovered pretty much everything there is to know about our own planet, particularly on a subject like *poison*, which feels *sexy*: surely all the Poison Research Assignments must have been claimed before anybody was willing to move on to more boring topics?

But, as Christie Wilcox writes, this research is still actually in its quite early stages, in part because it’s always been complex and expensive to do. The production of antivenoms, for example, has long relied on the use of large biological hosts, mainly horses, to act as living laboratories for antibodies: in other words, we haven’t come up with a more sophisticated method than injecting horses with non-lethal doses of venom and periodically siphoning off their blood. Poisons synthesized by living creatures for defensive and predatory purposes can target the circulatory, nervous, and immune systems of animals in an extremely precise and specific manner that offers potential insight into treatments for pain and disease—cone snail venom, for example, has led to the development of a powerful painkiller called Prialta—and thus much of the funding for this kind of research comes from pharmaceutical companies. “There’s lots of things that can go wrong,” says one research biologist quoted by Wilcox. “There’s isolation of your starting material. There’s doing a lot of work understanding structure-activity relationships and making an optimized version. And then doing all the rodent experiments—you have to do rodent experiments to prove that it’s efficacious. And it’s only at that point you’ve got any chance really of getting a drug company saying, ‘Okay, we’re willing to spend the amount of money that’s going to be required to put that through a clinical trial.’”

I have a number of close friends with poorly-understood medical conditions, and so the idea that there are potential miracle cures just waiting out in nature to be discovered is certainly profoundly appealing. But just as it’s disturbing to contemplate the sadistic skewering of living frogs for the purpose of sweating the poison off their backs, it’s also a little disturbing to think about the countless caged lab animals that have to be deliberately poisoned in order to unlock nature’s secrets, as if all such revelations required sacrificial propitiations to evil gods. (I think this is partly why it’s practically and ideologically

difficult for most of us to commit fully to the idea of animals having *rights*: it’s a premise that doesn’t just inconvenience humans who selfishly refuse to stop eating burgers, but would also mean that it’s wrong to systematically impose suffering on animals in medical and research contexts as well.) Reading about how non-human animals routinely poison each other may make us feel a little less bad about ourselves, of course: the jewel wasp, for example, injects a mind-altering venom into a cockroach’s brain that compels it to obediently dig its own grave and then allow the wasp’s larvae to feast on its living body, while the bite of the brown recluse spider can cause the flesh of its victims to liquify and slough off. On the other hand, even if the animal world has sociopaths fit to compete with our maddest scientists and most coldblooded serial killers, they can’t really outdo us in the field of mass environmental poisonings, whether through deliberately-manufactured weapons of war, or unregulated industrial waste. And so, on the whole, we continue to be the most venomous species of all.

IF EVOLUTION APPEARS TO SHOW US ANYTHING, it’s that life can survive all kinds of conditions. A species that appears to be evolving toward certain doom may turn out to be adapting cannily in response to a matrix of invisible forces; a predator species’ elaborate offense may give rise to a yet more elaborate defense in its prey. If our planet is Mithridates, the Poison King, seeking to immunize himself against all possible toxins, he could have picked no better species than our own to really test his survival capacity. It’s hard to make humans understand the scale of the changes we’re wreaking on the physical environment that sustains us and our sibling species, not just because the mechanics of worldwide events like climate change are complex, but because our society deliberately fosters incuriosity in adults. Interest in cool facts about animals, in nature’s unsolved mysteries, even (much of the time) in the interrogation of existential doubt and dread, are generally treated as juvenile and unserious, fit only for books written for children. How, then, do we expect adults to take any interest in the comparatively dry matters of carbon emissions policy and waste regulation? Ideally, we should care about our world selflessly, with an appreciation for the inherent magic of all living creatures in their own right, regardless of whether our knowledge leads to invincible new weapons or miracle drugs. But more selfishly, we should really look to our own welfare, as we blindly choke off all the avenues of life around us. After all, humankind won’t live to know if our poison plot to destroy the living world succeeded, or—what’s far more likely—our species’ flesh and bones will be simply ground up and dissolved into the soil, and life on earth will go on evolving without us, in ever stranger and more fantastic forms, never to be seen by human eyes. 🦋



Trees and Other Abolitionist Allies

by Amelie Daigle

LET'S SAY YOU LEARN THAT YOUR FRIEND Beth is going to murder your other friend, Emily. You have two options: You can wait until Beth murders Emily, and then punish Beth. Or you can plant a tree and prevent the murder from taking place.

This thought experiment is of course fanciful. There's no guarantee that a *particular* tree will stop a *particular* murder. But it does reflect reality on a broader scale—multiple studies have found a connection between the number of trees in a neighborhood and reduced levels of violence. Other urban features associated with reduced levels of violence include painted crosswalks, lighted walk/don't walk signs, visible and available public transportation, and nearby public parks. So while the example of Beth and Emily may seem absurd, the tradeoffs made for models of individual punishment and deterrence at the expense of non-traditional, non-coercive crime prevention strategies are very, very real.

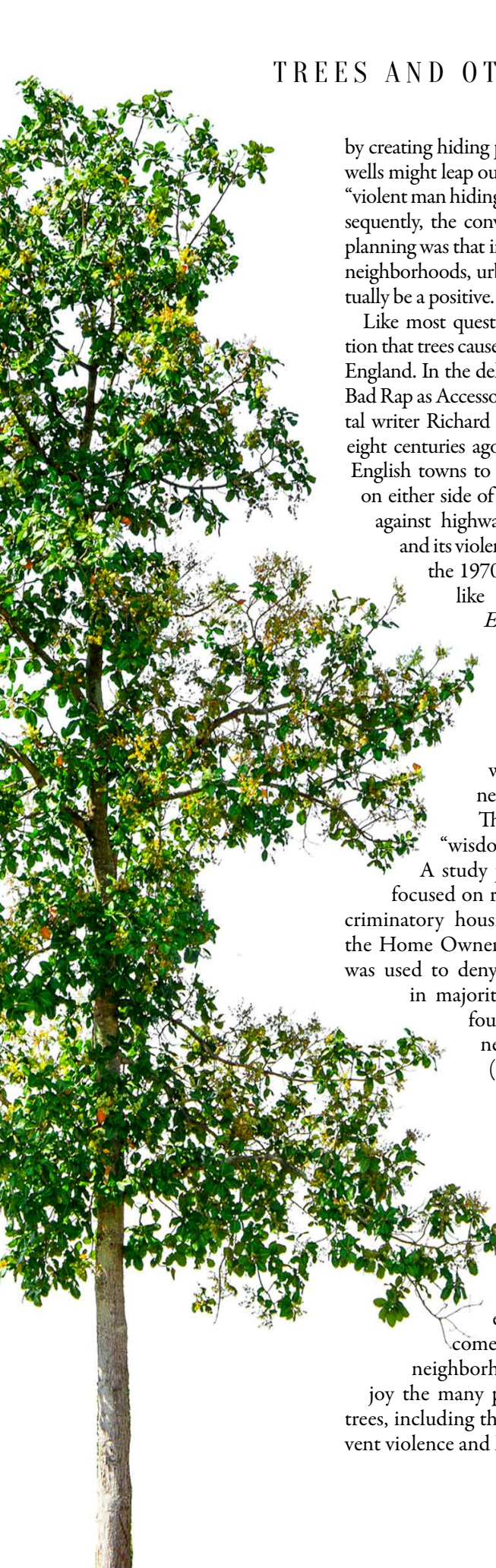
The relationship between trees and (the lack of) violence hasn't received as much scholarly attention as it deserves, but the scientific literature that exists to date has been remarkably consistent. A 2015 comparison of tree canopy cover and "crime incident data" from the New Haven Police Department

found that a neighborhood with 10 percent more tree canopy than another tended to have, after adjusting for other factors, 15 percent less "violent crime" and 14 percent less "property crime."* A similar study in Baltimore found that neighborhoods with 10 percent more tree canopy tended to have 12 percent less crime, and, notably, that the crime-stopping power of trees planted on public lands rather than private was increased by 40 percent. After an invasive species of beetle massacred ash trees in Cincinnati, a 2017 study found that areas where ash trees had been removed saw "significant" increases in crime. And the list goes on. Some studies compare apartment buildings within the same neighborhood, and some studies track tree cover and crime within specific neighborhoods over time, but all seem to support the proposition that more trees result in less crime.

We don't know *why* trees stop crime. The connection is not necessarily intuitive. Criminologists in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s actually insisted that vegetation *encouraged* crime

** Further along in this article, I will be discussing why "crime" is not synonymous with violence and harm, but rather "things the state prosecutes." However, crime is the most likely form of violence and harm to be tracked, and consequently the most likely to be used in tree canopy cover analysis.*

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by creating hiding places from which ne'er-dowells might leap out and assault passers-by (the “violent man hiding in the bushes” trope). Consequently, the conventional wisdom in urban planning was that in “high crime” (read: Black) neighborhoods, urban deforestation might actually be a positive.

Like most questionable legal ideas, the notion that trees cause crime can be traced back to England. In the delightfully titled “Trees Shed Bad Rap as Accessories to Crime,” environmental writer Richard Conniff reports that, some eight centuries ago, “King Edward I required English towns to clear the trees for 200 feet on either side of main roads as a precaution against highwaymen.” This anti-tree bias and its violent effects were resurrected in the 1970s through books with titles like *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* and *Defensible Space*, and reinforced throughout the 1980s and 1990s with a series of studies arguing that low, dense vegetation was associated with all manner of crimes.

The effects of this common “wisdom” can still be felt today. A study published earlier this year focused on redlining—the racially discriminatory housing policy established by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation that was used to deny housing loans to people in majority-Black neighborhoods—found that formerly redlined neighborhoods graded “A” (those set aside for “U.S. born white populations”) have twice as much tree canopy cover as neighborhoods graded “D” (where most residents were people of color). This study is part of the growing science surrounding “tree inequality.” Poor, low-income, and historically Black neighborhoods are less likely to enjoy the many positive health benefits of trees, including their amazing ability to prevent violence and harm in our communities.

DOES THIS SOUND RIDICULOUS to you? It won’t if you’ve ever spent time in a city with a real summer. Not if you’ve taken one step outside of your home and felt heat hit you like a truck, like something solid. The kind of heat that makes trees want to pull up their roots and crawl under each other for shade.

Toni Morrison wrote: “You don’t know what heat is until you cross the border from Texas to Louisiana. You can’t come up with words that catch it. Trees give up. Turtles cook in their shells. Describe that if you know how.”

If you know what heat is, then I don’t have to tell you the difference between walking in direct sunlight on a black asphalt parking lot versus walking through a tunnel of enveloping green. If you know heat, you remember the difference on your skin. At some point, you’ve abandoned the shortest path to your destination in favor of the shaded path, and in that moment, you knew that trees were essential.

Once we crawl inside and pour ourselves a cool, refreshing beverage and sit for a minute, once our body temperature regains equilibrium, the misery of 10 minutes before may seem a minor inconvenience. It seems ridiculous to say that it could be the cause of violence. But the entire structure of global capitalism orbits around ensuring convenience for people who can afford it. Countless nations have been ransacked so that other nations could season and sweeten their food, drink water from bottles, and enjoy bananas year-round. Our lives would look radically different without the thousand tiny conveniences shielding us from discomfort.

If you can bring yourself to remember what it’s like to be sweltering, dehydrated, and irritable, conjure that feeling now as I tell you that in the city of New Orleans, the temperature in some neighborhoods can be 18 degrees hotter than the official, recorded temperature. This is because of a phenomenon called “urban heat islands,” pockets of land that absorb and retain more heat than surrounding neighborhoods. In New Orleans, these heat islands are found in impoverished, largely Black neighborhoods like Hollygrove and Central City. There is a heat island covering the campus of Xavier University, a beloved historically Black school.

This is not merely inconvenient; it is dangerous. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports both that heat waves claim

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more lives than any other type of weather-event in the United States and that they are “expected to become longer, more frequent, and more intense” as climate change intensifies. In New Orleans, where summers are hot as hell but with more mosquitoes, it is not at all unusual for the recorded temperature to top 100 degrees on an August day—and, as I and other readers of the *New Orleans Advocate* recently learned, the machine that measures the recorded temperature for the city “sits in shade near heat-absorbing wetlands.” By the end of this century, according to an analysis by the Union of Concerned Scientists, Louisiana residents will have to endure three full months with a heat index of 105 or above.

Man-made climate change and also-man-made environmental racism will work in combination to ensure that the poor, Black neighborhoods of New Orleans are dangerously hot. People will die. It’s an example of what environmental humanities professor Rob Nixon terms “slow violence.” Slow violence, as defined by Nixon, is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” For example, the accumulated effects of systemic racism result in shorter life expectancies for Black Americans, who can anticipate dying four years earlier than white Americans, on average. Slow violence is caused by structural injustice, rather than by one individual making a split-second decision. The absence of trees in formerly red-lined neighborhoods, and the consequent unbearable heat, is slow violence.

Even apart from the absolute certainty that people will die from the heat this summer and every summer after, and that the burden of that deadly heat will be borne unequally across racial and class lines, there are reasons to be concerned about heat islands and shade inequality. The absence of mature, absorbent trees can lead to street and house flooding in low-lying areas. There is also a well-developed body of research showing that trees improve air quality by capturing pollutants, leading to lower prevalence of lung cancer and hospitalization for asthma, as well as reduced mortality overall.

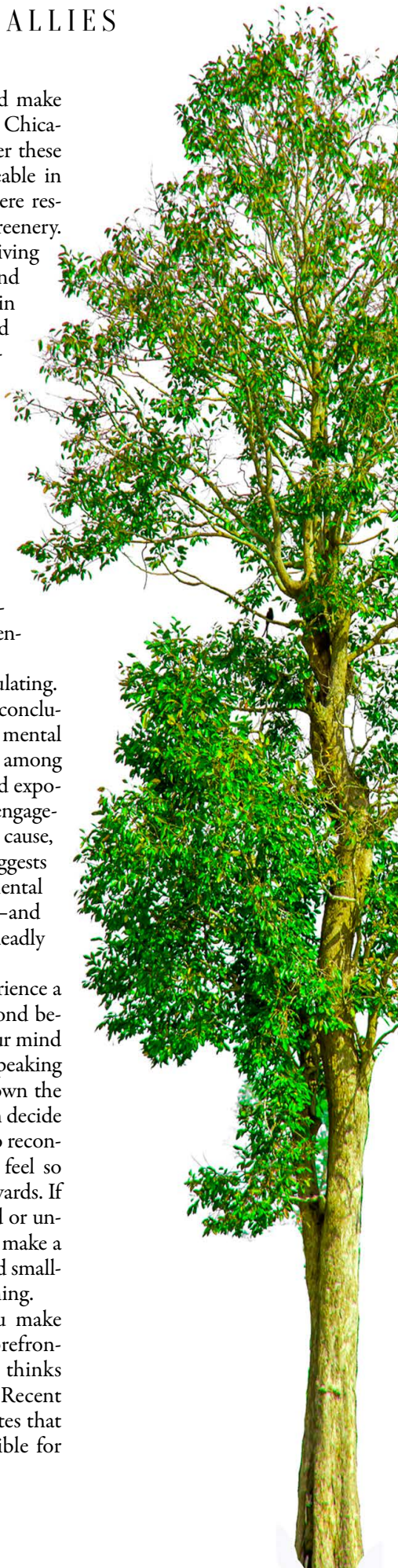
Perhaps less known are the myriad ways that trees protect our minds. To quote the abstract of a 2001 study of residents in a Chicago public housing complex, “[c]onsiderable evidence suggests that exposure to ‘green’ environments

can enhance human effectiveness and make life’s demands seem manageable.” The Chicago study sought to determine whether these effects were so great as to be noticeable in an urban public housing context where residents had very limited access to greenery. The results were striking: “Residents living in buildings without nearby trees and grass reported more procrastination in facing their major issues and assessed their issues as more severe, less soluble, and more longstanding than did their counterparts living in greener surroundings.” A companion study found, more relevantly for our purposes, that “[r]esidents living in relatively barren buildings reported more aggression and violence than did their counterparts in greener buildings. Moreover, levels of mental fatigue were higher in barren buildings, and aggression accompanied mental fatigue.”

City life is stressful and overstimulating. This is not just my opinion: it’s the conclusion of several studies indicating that mental health conditions are more prevalent among city-dwellers, possibly due to “repeated exposure to strangers” causing “chronic engagement of the amygdala.” Whatever the cause, an emerging scientific narrative suggests that city-dwellers are bearing a high mental load that reduces impulse control—and lack of impulse control can have deadly consequences.

Think about the moment you experience a surge of aggression. Think of the second before you lash out at a friend, when your mind hastily calculates whether maybe speaking in anger might have consequences down the line. It’s the moment in which you can decide *not* to act on impulse, a split second to reconsider that biting remark that would feel so *good* in the moment and so bad afterwards. If you are tired or hungry or dehydrated or uncomfortably hot, that opportunity to make a different decision becomes smaller and smaller, eventually dwindling down to nothing.

This moment of grace before you make a terrible decision occurs in the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that thinks ahead and calculates consequences. Recent research involving brain scans indicates that the frontal cortex, which is responsible for



critical decision-making, is not fully developed until around age 25. From self-reported research, we know that “almost all adolescents” engage in criminalized behavior, and that rates of both official and self-reported delinquency “decline precipitously during the late teens and 20s” as the frontal cortex develops. All of us are most likely to participate in some form of criminalized behavior—from violence to drug use—between the ages of 15 and 19.

The science is so settled on this point that the U.S. Supreme Court, which is not known for being science-forward, has recognized teenagers as “less culpable” than adults in a series of opinions beginning in 2005, the year that the Court found it unconstitutional to execute children under the age of 18 (despite a sputtering dissent by Justice Antonin Scalia). The American Psychological Association has consistently filed amicus briefs in cases related to the punishment of children, reporting that “middle adolescence (roughly 14-17) should be a period of especially heightened vulnerability to risky behavior, because sensation-seeking is high and self-regulation is still immature.”

All of which is to say that for teenagers and young adults—for anyone below the age of 25—the moment of grace is already sharply reduced. This is before we factor in heat, or smog, or not enough trees. Due to brain structure, young people are biologically less able to take a moment to imagine the consequences of an irrevocable act.

Having been a teenager myself once, I don’t need scientists to convince me that teens are wired for bad decisions. I can easily bring to mind several moments where I made a decision that could have resulted in someone calling the police, and I know that their forbearance may have radically altered the course of my life. I know that the margin of error I have been afforded is a product of my race and class background. I know that my whiteness shielded me from regular interactions with police and the resulting violence: chokeholds, arrest, incarceration. But less visible than the consequences I’ve avoided when I made mistakes are the mistakes I’ve narrowly avoided making. How many times was I on the verge of a poor decision and rescued by a cool gust of wind?

If I’d grown up in the same city, but in an urban heat island, would I have spent my summers sweltering and anxious? Could the airborne pollutants attacking my lungs also alter my mind and mood in near-imperceptible ways? Who would I have been in late August when the window unit broke, when my neighborhood was a tangle of frayed nerves, my community boiling and seething in the unrelenting and inescapable heat?

In laboratory settings, people are more likely to display aggressive behavior when a room is uncomfortably warm. Studies using real-world heat and violence data show the same findings, in every region, across every span of time: where there is heat, there is violence. If urban heat islands don’t kill you with a heat wave, or with street flooding, or with air pollution that slowly destroys your lungs, they’ll kill you with violence.

FOR ABOLITIONISTS, VIOLENCE AND HARM are not the actions of sick individuals; they are symptoms of a sick community, blighted by oppression and need. And as recent epidemiological catastrophes demonstrate, when a community is sick, treating individuals who exhibit symptoms is not a sufficient response. To see results, we need to treat disease at the community level.

Angela Davis, former political prisoner and vocal abolitionist, wrote: “Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.”

As Davis indicates, abolitionists don’t see violence and harm as something you can root out by disappearing individual people. Over two million people are incarcerated in the United States, yet the social problems that are the root cause of violence continue to exist, and so the violence continues occurring. In fact, homicide rates in the United States are seven times higher than violence in other high-income nations that incarcerate far fewer people. If incarceration were an effective way to reduce violence, we would have seen results by now.

A public health approach to violence and harm emphasizes prevention. Our criminal legal system’s focus is the exact opposite: we invest mind-numbing amounts of time and money into isolating individuals, punishing them for acts of violence after those acts have already occurred through policing, prosecution, and incarceration.

We expend far less energy and effort combating the “slow violence” that often doubles as the underlying causes of criminalized violence. As the prominent abolitionist community organizer Mariame Kaba has observed, “crime” is not synonymous with violent or even harmful behavior: “All that is criminalized isn’t harmful, and all harm isn’t necessarily criminalized. For example, wage theft by employers isn’t generally criminalized, but it is definitely harmful.”

Our society’s approach to violence and harm deliberately ignores slow, systemic violence. It’s hard to know who to blame for air pollution, exactly—no one pulled the trigger. There is no individual to prosecute, penalize, or incarcerate. Yet the person who dies of lung cancer or a severe asthma attack is exactly as dead as the person who was shot.

The most catastrophic example of slow violence, of course, is climate change. According to the World Health Organization, climate change already causes over 150,000 deaths annually. When structural violence is the killer, no one is prosecuted. And no amount of prosecuting individual people will bring us any closer to ending, or even mitigating, climate change. We can throw all of the money in the world at police departments, and the death toll will continue to rise. The carceral state has no response to slow violence.

But we have protectors. While they are not a panacea, trees

are multidisciplinary specialists in preventing slow violence. Trees cool and soothe. Trees drink carbon dioxide and floodwater. And in the instant that someone is about to make the worst decision they have ever made, irrevocably altering the lives of everyone around them, trees offer an extra fraction of a second, a moment of grace and the potential for something better.

IN ADDITION TO COOLING THE STREET AND removing airborne pollutants, some scientists have hypothesized that trees trigger the neighborhood's natural immune response to violence—what urbanist Jane Jacobs called “eyes on the street.”

Jacobs, a grassroots organizer and author who transformed the field of urban planning with her vocal opposition to “urban renewal” and “slum removal,” wrote that “[a] city street equipped to handle strangers, and to make a safety asset, in itself, out of the presence of strangers, as the streets of successful city neighborhoods always do, must have . . . eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street.” In order to do this effectively, Jacobs wrote, “the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously, both to add to the number of effective eyes on the street and to induce the people in buildings along the street to watch the sidewalks in sufficient numbers.”

We should distinguish this from more sinister models of surveillance, such as the proliferation of police cameras: Jacobs stresses the need for “a clear demarcation between . . . public . . . and private space.” It's a kind of surveillance that only extends to our public life, which would mostly be taking place on the street anyway. Also, this surveillance isn't the domain of prison officials, law enforcement, or some external authority—Jacobs is talking about communities watching each other, knowing each other, and holding each other accountable through a shared public life.

As Kuo and Sullivan, two scientists who changed the scientific conversation about trees and crime, speculated in 2001: “There is some evidence to suggest that in inner-city neighborhoods, vegetation might introduce more eyes on the street by increasing residents' use of neighborhood outdoor spaces. A series of studies conducted in inner-city neighborhoods has shown that treed outdoor spaces are consistently more well used by youth, adults, and mixed-age groups than are treeless spaces; moreover, the more trees in a space, the greater the number of simultaneous users . . . Not surprisingly then, a recent study found that children were twice as likely to have adult supervision in green inner-city neighborhood spaces than in similar but barren spaces.”

Abolitionists have long said that a safe community is a community where members know, care for, and watch out for each other. Mariame Kaba's June 2020 op-ed for the *New York Times* laid out a vision for a safer abolitionist society:

When people, especially white people, consider a world without the police, they envision a society as violent as our current one, merely without law enforcement—and they shudder. As a society, we have been so indoctrinated with the idea that we solve problems

by policing and caging people that many cannot imagine anything other than prisons and police as solutions to violence and harm.

People like me who want to abolish prisons and police, however, have a vision of a different society, built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation. What would the country look like if it had billions of extra dollars to spend on housing, food and education for all? This change in society wouldn't happen immediately, but the protests show that many people are ready to embrace a different vision of safety and justice.

Trees are but one component of creating safe, accessible, sustainable, nurturing communities that acknowledge the slow violence of economic exploitation and environmental racism and that minimize its impact. They are a familiar, tangible example of how small changes to urban environments can result in safer communities.

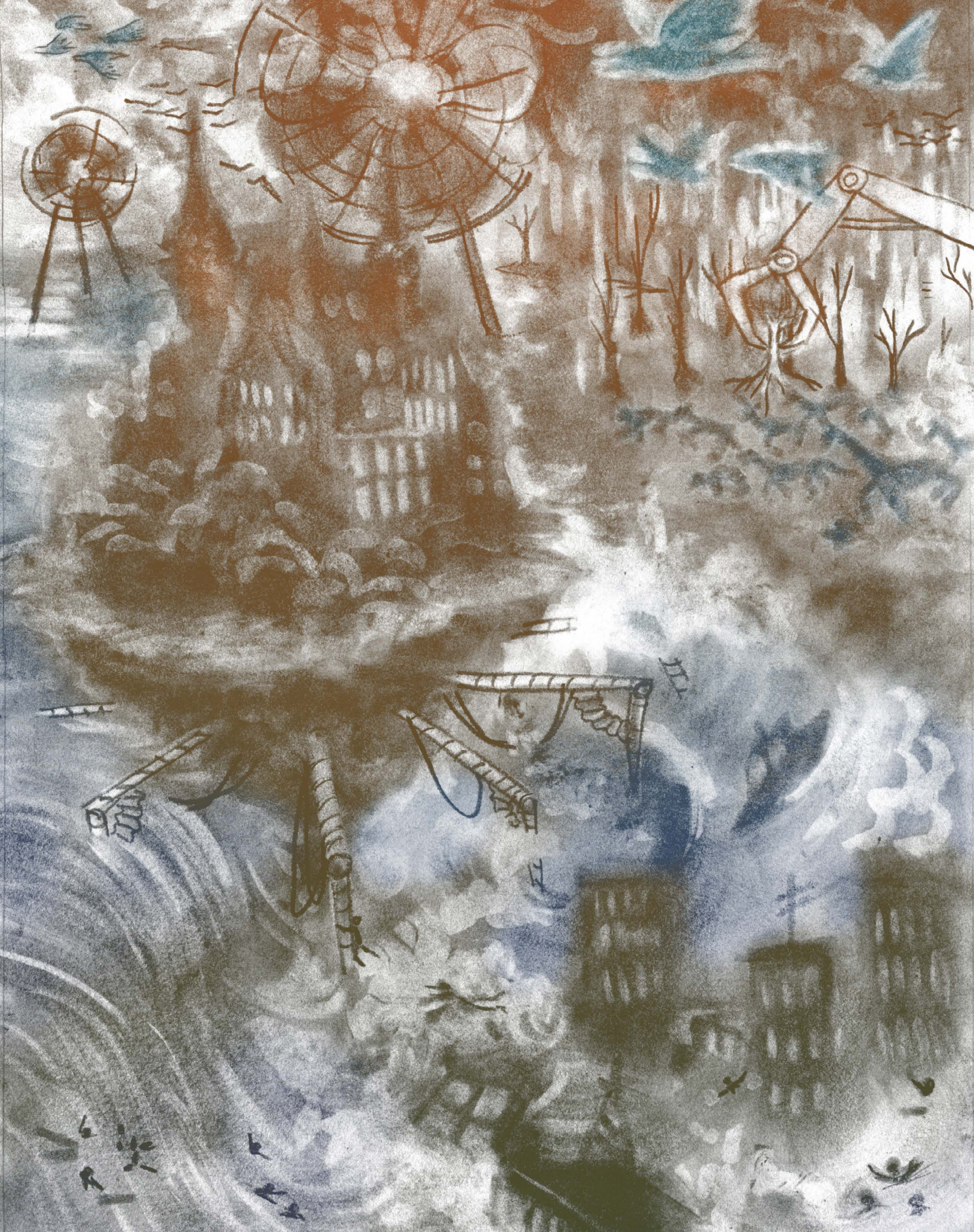
At the end of *Freedom Dreams*, a book included in the open-source abolitionist curriculum “Study and Struggle,” Robin D.G. Kelley envisions abolition as a park: a tangible, public space where our collective needs and desires can be met.* He writes: “This would not be just any park. Imagine a space filled with odd, beautiful play structures intended to force people to engage each other.” (Jungle gyms, he explains, were “originally designed in post-Nazi Germany as a way to enable free, unstructured, democratic play.”) He continues: “I can envision a section composed of large round picnic tables, a great lawn for playing and dreaming, sandboxes for kids of all ages, works of art that we can engage organically rather than as distant object . . . works of art that might spur us to talk to each other.” This is a space designed for us to interact in, to see and be seen by each other. And of course, “[a]ll performances are free. Indeed, everything should be free, including food and drink. And how about a row of nice, airy bungalows with beds and showers for the homeless?”

This is infrastructure as it should function—not in the service of capital, but in the service of community, working to maximize our bonds with and accountability to each other. This kind of “Freedom Space” would be an accessible hub for mutual aid projects, community organizations, and study groups to gather. With a Freedom Space in every neighborhood, frequent visitors to the park might come to know each other, creating the strong communal bonds that keep us safe.

We can create Freedom Space. Liberation and joy are possible. But first we must be able to imagine ourselves outside of the confines of artificial scarcity. We must be able to imagine ourselves as part of a community that will care for us even and especially during challenging times.

When I imagine myself in Freedom Space, there are no cops and no fences. Instead, there are people around me—people who care about me, who will intervene if they believe that I might be harmed. Instead of scarcity, there is abundance. And above my head, a lush canopy of trees. ♣

* Kelley suggests that this “Freedom Space” be built on the site of the ruins of the World Trade Center (*Freedom Dreams* was published in 2002) and that it be funded with a percentage of each nation's military budget.



TAMING THE GREEDOCRACY

by Jag Bhalla

FEW OF US WANT TO FACE THE CLIMATE MESS. The numbers are scary and confusing, and the facts have never been reported in a way that actually generates public understanding. “The media are complacent while the world burns,” Mark Hertsgaard and Kyle Pope declare in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. There’s plenty of data to back up this bold assertion: based on an analysis of 600 *New York Times* articles on climate change, a UC Berkeley report states that “the vast majority contained none of the five basic climate facts,” meaning that readers are left uneducated about the truth and scope of the problem. (The five criteria the researchers used are that global warming is happening, that burning fossil fuels produces greenhouse gases that create warming, that 90%+ of climate scientists agree on the human causes of warming, that there is now more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than there has been for hundreds of thousands of years, and that warming is permanent.)

It’s not just a lack of effective information: many media movers and shakers claim that climate coverage is “a palpable ratings killer” in the first place, and so they tend to curtail or water down their coverage. Of course there are exceptions—an article in *New York* by David Wallace-Wells beat the supposed “traffic Kryptonite” curse (over 6 million hits, which led to his book *The Uninhabitable Earth*). Wallace-Wells has stated that “being alarmed is what the facts demand.” Still, amid the unfolding and encircling crisis, most people are still living on “zombified” autopilot as if little had changed. Instead of facing our new material and moral realities, we’re in deep denial, hoping that we won’t have to make changes (beyond tweaks like switching between burgers). Perhaps some techno-optimist gizmo—like geo-engineering—will swoop in like a superhero and save us.

Some argue that the smart approach is to focus on the numbers, but it’s not clear why, unless knowledge of numbers is supposed to

add up to some kind of *nerdvana* salvation. In fact, because numbers are abstract, focusing on the numbers can occlude the real-world meaning of those numbers. An X% increase in drought sounds bad, but doesn’t create a sense of urgency without understanding what drought equates to in terms of concrete suffering. Numbers can make you into a sanctimonious climate nerd but they are a sliver of the story and understanding them does not necessarily generate action. Just being frightened and hoping for a techno-rescue isn’t much better, either.

Our climate-conceptualizing woes start not with failure to know the numbers or with avoiding aversive emotions, but with our vocabulary and our thinking tools not being up to the task. To be savvier at saving ourselves, we’ll need to reconsider the role of thought-stopping abstractions such as “economic growth,” “standard of living,” “sacrifice,” and “neutral.” For instance, contrary to the PR coming from our overlords, technology—and especially supposed global-game-changers like geoengineering—can never be “neutral.” The choice of which technologies to develop and use will always have social, moral, and political implications that reflect underlying values and worldviews. We won’t be able to make the right choices of technology without careful deliberation on moral and social goals, plus democratic oversight and accountability to make sure tech is serving the people rather than the other way around.

The first step is to name the problem: to locate the incorrect assumptions that have led too many of us to believe that perpetual economic growth is essential and that consumption is our *raison d’être*. The “consumptive-assumptive” worldview treats a thing called “growth” (usually measured in “economic activity”) as inherently good. Because it is *inherently* good, there is no need to deliberate on the values underlying the particular “economic activities” being done, i.e., whether some of them are harmful or contribute more to our fulfillment and well-being than others do. If the casino industry and

arms manufacturing are thriving while the manatees and coral reefs are dying and your kids' life prospects are being worsened, don't worry, the economy is growing, and manatees and coral reefs and your kids' future just are not relevant for the good-uber-alles economic activity.

The consumptive-assumptive view can constantly be heard, even among those who profess themselves sincerely concerned about climate change. Consider Ezra Klein—the *New York Times* podcast host, opinion columnist, uberwonk, and stats-shaman. In a conversation with Brian Deese—the director of the National Economic Council and fresh-from-Wall-Street top economic advisor to Joe Biden—Klein said that when it comes to climate change, “you can’t... ask [people] for sacrifice. You can’t say, ‘We’re going to do this by making energy more expensive, and certain things are not going to be available anymore.’ You want to do this in a way that feels positive-sum to people—better technologies... You’re getting something out of it ... not ‘you get less in order for the future to get more.’” Deese strongly concurred, saying: “I want to double down on that.”

This may not immediately seem so bad. What’s wrong with “positive-sum,” “better technologies,” and cheap energy? Klein is a militantly (even desperately) optimistic sort of person; in 2019, during a podcast episode with clean-energy guru Saul Griffiths titled “How to solve climate change and make life more awesome,” Klein said that “conversations about climate change are pretty depressing [but] decarbonizing doesn’t mean accepting a future of less—it can mean a more awesome, humane, technologically rich, and socially inspiring future for us all.” Griffiths endorsed this abundance-oriented path. “Our cars could be just as big, only electric,” he said. “...The American Dream could be better than... ever.”

Big cars and a super-sized American dream! Who could be mad about this? It sounds so nice (big cars are so “humane”). Certainly, for Klein it’s more “awesome” than the responsible-resource-use alternative. In another podcast episode, David Roberts (a big-cheese climate journalist) joins Klein in fearing that since it brings out the worst in people, it’s best to avoid a scarcity or limit-oriented mindset. These journalists feel strongly that we can’t contemplate constraints on high-consumption lifestyles; that’s deemed unrealistic and presumed to be “politically impossible” because it makes life less “awesome.” To even begin to discuss it means you must be demanding austerity, asceticism, misery, the surrender of all that makes life rich and pleasant (pleasant mostly for the privileged few at the top of the consumption pyramid). But whatever your political orientation and data-dicing tells you, the relevant “limit-oriented” factor here isn’t a mindset. It’s the known facts of carbon physics and ecological science.

As of right now, a colossal 11,000 lbs of carbon dioxide (CO₂) *per human* per year is dumped into our shared air (though that’s a very unfair measure, as we’ll see). The aggregate annual dump rate has reached 40 GtCO₂e (GtCO₂e is gigaton CO₂-equivalents which factors in other greenhouse gases and issues like land use). Since the rise of industrial capitalism, over 1 trillion tons have been spewed into the air (CO₂ levels were 280 parts per million in 1750, now they’re about 420). The planet is about 1°C hotter than pre-industrial times and rising at an accelerating rate of 0.2°C per decade. Griffiths himself has suggested imagining it all like this: “If you had a giant set of scales and put all the things humans make or move on one side, and all of the CO₂ we

produce on the other, the CO₂” wins.

It’s all the things we “make or move” that have already “geoengineered” us into this hot mess. Hence we’ll need to change many, if not all, of the ways we make and move everything. That TED talk-trained impulse you may feel to focus on the one highest impact thing in your life just won’t cut it. For instance, electric cars may be an improvement, but they come with their own climate costs. Despite the macho-Muskian sales pitch, electric vehicles [EVs] aren’t exactly “clean tech” for a number of reasons. The International Energy Agency estimates that demand for electric cars will drive 4,200 percent more lithium mining by 2040, and EVs use 400 percent more copper than gasier cars. Lithium and copper aren’t mined under nice climate-neutral conditions: as one analyst notes: “Rising demand for metals [for] low-carbon technologies could perversely increase emissions and worsen environmental damage.” This is because the *production* process has to be changed as well as changes in the consequences of consumptions. Simply switching our vehicles from one type of tech to another won’t be enough; it’s highly unlikely that Americans in particular will be able to maintain their highly-consumptive super-sized-SUV lifestyles and simultaneously mitigate the climate crisis. The United States has already contributed far more to CO₂ emissions than any other single country; if the rest of the world started living like the U.S., the climate crisis would be far, far worse. The numbers just do not add up: the wasteful consumerist lifestyle of the United States cannot go on much longer and it cannot afford to spread to other countries. Any dream of a future tech-based “awesome” limitless society is a liberal-wonk version of science denial.

TO SEE WHAT LIES BEHIND THIS FEEL-GOOD physics-defying mentality, we need to discuss the disastrously under-exposed idea of “elite panic.” Elite panic is a phenomenon from the field of disaster studies (yes, that’s a thing). As Rebecca Solnit describes in her book about the joy of disasters (yes, that’s also a thing), the aftermaths of mass acute crises, like earthquakes, are often recalled as the most meaningful times in a person’s life—hence the title of Solnit’s book *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Calamity responses come in two broad types. Most ordinary people unthinkingly jump right in and help, with neighbors and strangers, strenuously, heroically sacrificing without thought for the costs to themselves. (And afterwards many of them experience the also disastrously under-popularized concept of “post traumatic growth,” whereby many people experience positive changes as a result of facing adversity, like no longer sweating the small stuff).

Meanwhile, elites tend to panic, individualistically protecting their property and their privileges (often triggering what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism,” whereby the rich use a crisis as an opportunity to find new ways to get even richer; COVID-19 is a fresh-hell case in point). In passing, Solnit makes a superb observation about how “public imaginations” of crisis are formed. Many of us, elites included, haven’t directly experienced earthquakes and similar nightmares, and our shaky expectations of what happens in disasters are shaped by TV and Hollywood. These fictional portrayals are, in turn, shaped by artistic norms in which heroic individuals

SPOT THE NATURE

You may have heard that human beings are destroying the natural world, that we are turning the planet into a vast blazing hot concrete desert: "paving paradise and putting up parking lots," to quote a known prophet. But you heard wrong! Plenty of nature's wonders still abound, if you're only willing to look closely. **Can YOU find them all?**

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tend to be contrasted against the stupid, hysterical masses. Meanwhile, during real crises, the masses tend to calmly help each other. For instance, when exiting the Twin Towers on 9/11, many people let those carrying the injured and disabled pass rather than stampeding down the stairs. Mass decency. Not elite panic.

In the slower (but quickly accelerating) climate-quake, elaborate forms of elite pre-panic are in play. As threats to high-carbon life modes mount, the wealthy—and the media that tends to cater to their material interests and their “conscience management”^{*}—have a tendency to project their psychology and preferences (political and moral) onto everyone else, pretending that their unbridled greed is just simple human nature. Rather than pitch in to adapt to long-known eco-constraints (like maybe not building a \$500 million super-yacht that needs a heli-padded support yacht), or helping those suffering now from climate change or those who will be most heavily impacted in the near future, the rich and their media allies are generally working hard to convince you that protecting your capitalist-god-given consumer liberties is paramount. Meanwhile there’s a “moral crime [in] how much you and I... consume, given how little is available to... so many other people on the planet,” writes David Wallace-Wells.

The positions preached by Klein, Deese, and Roberts fit this pattern of elite pre-panic and projective greed. And the doctrine that no viable climate program can now even *hint* at limits to highly consumptive lifestyles has spread to unlikely venues, such as *Jacobin*, where Holly Jean Beck proclaims “Progressives must avoid being seen as the advocates of heavy-handed restrictions,” because people will not accept curtailments to their lifestyles, and any attempt to make them do so will result in right-wing reaction. Again, the real restrictor here isn’t politics; it’s the heavy hand of climate physics. Carbon really bloats when burned, packing on oxygen pounds and ballooning 500 percent in size. To have any chance of meeting the 1.5°C goal set by the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), we have to cut back a lot, and we have to cut back now. Any refusal to face this fact has strong Bush Sr. energy: “the American way of life is not up for negotiation.” Okay: good luck negotiating with physics. It has historically proved quite hard to beat (it offers no loopholes for the rich). It’s wiser to ensure your politics fitting the physics.

TO SEE THE LOGICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MORAL fragility (and infantilization) of the all-must-be-awesome-or-else attitude, imagine similar “arguments” in historic crises. The U.S. can’t join the Allied side in WWII because it will require rationing and victory-garden veggies, and since we can’t ask people to make sacrifices, I guess the Nazis win. We can’t counte-

^{*} This terrific phrase, from Priya Satia’s book *Time’s Monster*, describes the elaborate ways elites have historically justified vast violent exploitation. Frequently, elites have developed ideas that help them rationalize their behavior and convince themselves they are Actually Good. Free-market economics is, in part, a conscience management system to help rich people avoid feelings of guilt over the consequences of their greed. If greed is good and serves all, you don’t have to feel bad at all: you can jolly well enjoy your guilt-free greed-gotten gains. No wonder the Koch brothers fund so many economics professorships.

nance making cotton “more expensive,” so we must keep up slavery, at least until substitutes are as cheap and as profitable. Unless we’re “getting something out of it,” equal to what we had before, we’re not saving that drowning child, or making those vaccines, or ending that poverty. It’s a curiously twisted conclusion to Klein’s purported awesome aim of a “humane... socially inspiring future.”

The accepted assumption behind this—that lifestyle change (maliciously mislabeled as “sacrifice”) is impossible—isn’t some “fact” of human nature or Americanness. It’s actually a very recent idea. To see how far the arguments here have shifted, consider what David Roberts wrote as recently as 2012:

“You can claim that clean energy can offer the same abundance that fossil fuels offered, through the magic of technology or innovation or whatever. But it’s dishonest. Reducing emissions enough to substantially slow climate change will inevitably involve being more judicious and intelligent in our energy use. Profligate, heedless consumption of disposable crap is going to have to be reined in.”

But when talking to Ezra Klein in 2019, Roberts said that he really doesn’t “think that rich people are going to make the right call.” Scarcity, limits, and stress make “us all meaner,” shrinking our “circle of moral concern.” Conversely, abundance makes us gentler to each other. Roberts and Klein admirably and genuinely wrestle with the worry that in attempting to battle the climate crisis, “what we are about to do is...throw the world’s poor...back a hundred years.” Yet their limited moral imaginations and win-win worldviews seem to hinder them from connecting the moral dots. Are we only interested in doing what’s right when it improves our own lives? When we “get something out of it?” When it costs us nothing? When it doesn’t constrain our consumer choices? Is this a crisis or are we choosing curtains?

So, if “heedless consumption” is now uncurbable and dishonesty is *de rigueur*, what’s the alternative? Another Klein podcast—podcasts are a useful source for experts’ real, unpolished opinions because they speak off the cuff—episode offers a disturbingly dark explanation. The episode in question features Elizabeth Kolbert, Pulitzer Prize-winning *New Yorker* environmental writer, and covers her book *Under The White Sky*, which considers the possibilities of geoengineering. Klein references Kolbert’s book, which contains “a wonderful quote [from a scientist]... ‘We live in a world where deliberately dimming the fucking sun might be less risky than not doing it.’ That feels like quite an indictment of the human race.” Kolbert agrees, saying that she hopes her “respectful horror comes through.” Klein adds that, “we need to be spending many billions of dollars studying [geoengineering]... not because we want to... but because... we may have no choice.”

Because, in this view, “heedless consumption” is unavoidable—the entire human race having been indicted as irredeemably greedy and addicted to comfort and “disposable crap,” incapable of any altruistic behavior or even just “sacrifices” to protect their own kids or their beloved way of life—we simply have “no choice” but to get serious about geoengineering. These purported tech-savior solutions come in two broad buckets: sun-blocking and carbon-sucking.

To some, “dimming the fucking sun” seems doable. A 2019 Royal Society report passing notes “multiple serious physical risks...[and]...

social challenges” before concluding it could be done “effectively..., rapidly, reversibly, and inexpensively.” Sun-blocking, aka solar radiation management (SRM), seeks to scatter incoming sunlight back into space; just a 2 percent shift, it’s widely thought, could counter current warming. Stratospheric sulfur dioxide injections, probably the best-thought-out method, are a form of volcano-mimicking. In the past, volcanic eruptions have caused measurable global cooling—when Mount Pinatubo blew in 1991, an ash cloud 1,100 kilometers wide and 35 kilometers high injected 15 million tons of sulfur dioxide into the stratosphere above the Philippines. A hazy layer of aerosols spread globally, yielding a year of cooling (1°F on average, though effects varied—some places warmed). It also shifted distant rainfall patterns (2,400 miles away, Mongolia got drier). In 1815, the eruption of Indonesian volcano Mt. Tambora caused crop failures from Ireland to Italy. Millions starved or emigrated—this is partly why there are now so many Americans of Irish and Italian descent.

Yet, even the most “practical” SRM approaches need slow-bake new technologies. For instance, we would have to develop new aircraft to aerosol-spray the stratosphere (heftier engines, longer wingspans). Kolbert suggests possible R&D costs of \$2.5 billion, as well as \$2 billion per year to take a million tons of aerosols on 40,000 flights (that’s only 1 percent of current annual plane trips). Regardless, SRM is a painstaking atmospheric aspirin, a minor symptom reliever, not remotely a cure. Kolbert herself notes that you would end up with two addictions: to carbon emissions, and to SRM. Emit more forever, riskily manipulate the Earth more to counteract the effects. An endless cycle. And all SRM variations suffer a Pandora’s pillbox of side effects (like the whitened sky that forms one by-product of SRM and gives her book its title). Alarming, these side effects have not been well-studied: “only a handful of papers... have addressed the ecological impacts and risks.” Given the vast gaps in our understanding of the enormously intricate dynamics of our ecosystem, it is volcanic hubris to say that SRM could be used “effectively... and inexpensively.” Side-effect droughts would likely mean millions of starving refugees. Does that “cost” sound “easy” or “inexpensive?” Or do we consider it a morally acceptable trade-off to avoid limits in cheese choices? And even if we were to set aside moral concerns and deploy SRM as quickly as possible, it would still take many years (just designing and building new large aircraft can take a decade or more), so that won’t help with the 2030 race (to stay on track for the IPCC’s 1.5°C goal we need deep cuts, not in timescales that are decades away, but by 2030, i.e., this decade = now).

ELSEWHERE IN THE TECH-SWOOPS-IN-TO-SAVE-US bucket, carbon capture (CC) seeks to wrestle the greenhouse-gas genie back into the bottle. Also known as “negative emission” or “carbon sequestration,” CC comes in two flavors: natural and mechanized. Natural CC means that atmospheric carbon is absorbed by biogeosphere processes (e.g., vegetation, soil biomes, sundry tiny sea beasts, weathering). Collectively, these processes currently absorb about 50 percent of human emissions—we spew out a total of around 40Gt per year, of which the vegetation absorbs about

10Gt and the oceans another 10Gt, leaving 20Gt net added (those are Global Carbon Project figures). Making a dent in that would involve vast vegetation shifts (aka a *lot* of trees planted, as in trillions of them). But the planet’s maximum additional reforestation potential is only about 2.4Gt (1/10th of current net annual emissions). Planting trees would certainly help, but like Rome not being built in a day, it will be little help by 2030. Other natural CC ideas are considerably less well-cooked and have smaller effects compared to the size of the problem.

On the mechanized CC side, energy-engineer Saul Griffiths has been electrifyingly critical, writing that “[i]magine...we can build machines that work [several] times better than all of biology is a fantasy created by the fossil fuel industry in order to keep on burning.” Kolbert, for her part, describes a small air-to-rock operation devised by a company called Climeworks; it uses resin filters to capture CO₂ before geothermally heating the filters to release the CO₂ which is then rockified for \$1000 per ton. Another potential mechanical CC company proposes to build semi-trailer-sized machines which can suck a (literal) ton of carbon per day. The inventor of this technology says we’d need 100 million trailers “to keep up.” And like any needle-moving techno-structure that will consume copious quantities of other eco-constrained resources, we must always weigh the dirty downside of “green tech.” Carbon capture machines, just like electric cars, windmills, and solar panels, still likely have huge “embodied carbon” in the concrete, metal, water, and energy etc, used in their construction. The entire superstructure of production and consumption is filthy; these technologies may be cleaner, not clean.

Moreover, Griffiths believes that the invisible hand of the market will be too slow to get the job done, especially because CC will always be energetically expensive. He calls it, in fact, “a thermodynamically awful idea.” It’s costly energy-wise to collect and compress those pesky carbon dioxide molecules. If you set up your CC tech next to a concentrated smokestack source, it’s somewhat easier, but plucking carbon dioxide out of thin air is a challenge (400 parts per million of carbon in the air means you have to sift 2500 other parts for each jailed CO₂ molecule). And when carbon is pumped underground or into undersea reservoirs we face risks of leakage in perpetuity (don’t forget that burned carbon is now 500 percent



bulkier than the holes it first came out of).

In carbon-sucker circles, “moral hazard” fears are somberly speculated on (“moral hazard” is the idea that people will take extra unwise risks if they feel they’ll be bailed out). But there’s no need to speculate: a de-facto form of exactly this moral hazard has long operated in plain sight in IPCC reports: the possibility of carbon sucking at scale—no matter how remote, or fantasy-based—has delayed action for decades. Just about all safe-temperature paths promoted by the IPCC and other groups *presume* colossal use of CC. The usual type is “BECCS,” meaning “bioenergy with carbon capture and storage.” Bioenergy is niftier because its carbon isn’t from fossils—plants suck atmospheric carbon that’s rereleased when they’re burnt, which is then sucked up again by more plants. That sounds tidy, but a beefy-enough BECCS would mean far

pulse to avoid unpleasant feelings grossly mistakes the gravity of the crisis and the social value of emotions (ignoring threats because they don’t “feel awesome” is no way to survive as either individuals or a group.) Climate change is quite simply terrifying stuff. As Wallace-Wells has noted, it is “naïve to imagine we could respond to [the climate threat] without some people being scared.”

This purported “optimism” also hides a dark despair and contempt for humanity. In Klein’s interview of Kolbert, he suggested that the entire human race could be indicted for the climate fiasco. But the vast bulk of human beings (alive today or historically) really carry very little of the blame. For example, 1 billion people in 48 African nations have only caused 0.55 percent of total atmospheric CO₂. And the bottom half of the global population caused a mere

“Geoengineering is somewhat like playing Jenga, blindfolded, crossed with both 12-dimensional chess and Russian roulette.”

less beef eating. You’d need to plant trees on about 75 percent of global arable land (livestock currently accounts for just under 80 percent of global farming land). The BBC recently quoted an expert who called CC and BECCS “carbon unicorns.”

In the real world, which exists beyond models, geoengineering is somewhat like playing Jenga, blindfolded, crossed with both 12-dimensional chess and Russian roulette. Our mind-bogglingly complex biosphere has “tipping points” and likely many as-yet-unknown linkages, all of which add up to a risk of “abrupt irreversible” changes. These linkages could cascade, triggering further dominoes (resulting in a hothouse hell-on-Earth scenario). And I’m obliged to warn you that some of these triggers are likely near or already in motion. For example, “part of the Amazon may already have reached a tipping point ... [switching] to emit more CO₂ than it absorbs.” And the rate of ice loss from the West Antarctic Ice Sheet has tripled in the last decade. Both of these have far-reaching, knock-on effects (changes in global rainfall and sea level). It’s not possible to know how geoengineering will interact with already wildly complex systems and tipping points. This geoengineering gamble would be like setting up an elaborate stumbling block for your kids (and all future humans), and hoping they somehow don’t trip. What “benefit” outweighs the “cost” of worsening your own kids’ life chances?

RATHER THAN CONTINUING TO LIST DIRE numbers or avoiding the topic out of terror, it’s important to address how we feel. The ways in which we’ve been encouraged (or trained) to feel matters, since they shape how we think and act. Klein-esque optimism and the “awesome-at-all-costs” im-


6 percent of growth in total emissions from 1990 to 2015 (i.e., the unpoor caused 94 percent of emissions growth). In the meantime, Oxfam reports that “Nearly half [of global economic] growth has merely allowed the already wealthy top 10 percent to augment their consumption and enlarge their carbon footprints.” Indeed, calling this era “the Anthropocene”—the term used to describe the extent of human influence over the climate and environment in our time—is arguably a miscarriage of justice. It’s an utterly unearned collective punishment. It’d be truer to call this the Technocene, or Capitalocene, or Greedocene.

“Humanity” didn’t cause climate change: capitalism did. Make no mistake: geoengineering solutions are not offered as a stopgap solution while we get our carbon house in order, but to ensure that life—specifically greedy, consumptive W.E.I.R.D. (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) life—remains “awesome.” There are polluter-elite WEIRDos in every nation of course, but it’s not “human nature” that prevents us from making “sacrifices” or lifestyle changes—it’s capitalist nature, the worldview that treats greed as good or neutral, sees limitless growth as the goal, and believes altruism is impossible since humans are (and should be) selfish only able to solve a problem if the solution is presented as being in their own economic self-interest. As economic inequality expert Branko Milanovic observes, capitalism has been “successful in transforming humans into calculating machines endowed with limitless needs.” This insatiability is needed to get the math-o-magical machinery of capitalism to work, but it’s not an accurate or universal descriptor of how humans can or must function. We don’t have to be greed machines—and in fact, relatively few of us are.

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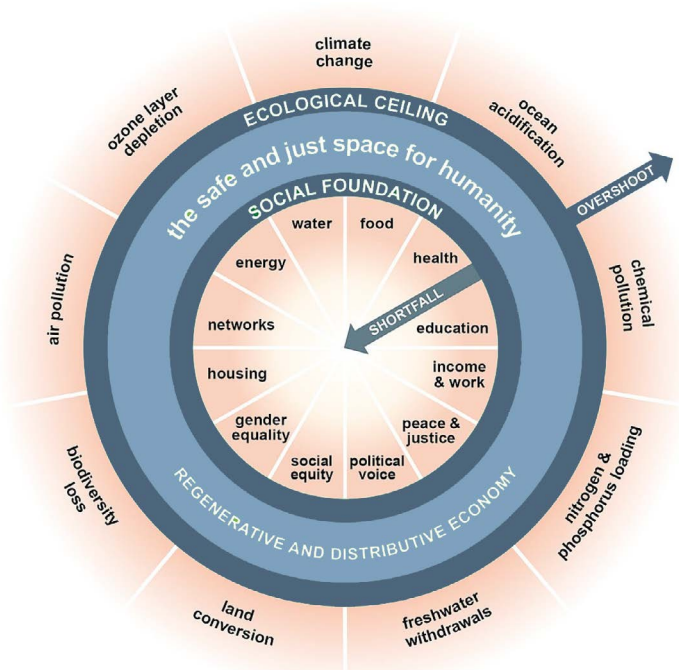
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THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS SCARY, BUT IT'S solvable—in theory. As Bill McGuire said bluntly in *Prospect* magazine: “There’s a simple answer to climate change. But will capitalism allow it?” If we curb “heedless consumption” and nix the excessive luxuries for the W.E.I.R.D.o world (COVID proved planet-scale consumption changes can be near instant), we can dramatically reduce carbon output. For example, if the global top 10 percent of polluter elite individuals cut their burn rate to that of the average European citizen, total global CO₂ would shrink 30 percent. This known-to-work strategy is called “degrowth,” which means something like managed, selective reductions in resource usage via better, more morally sound prioritization. That’s not remotely what markets are in the business of doing (not on their own, but they can be so guided).

To be fair, Klein and Kolbert do mention this; Kolbert says putting degrowth “on the table is really, really important” (though not important enough to include in your climate-adaptation book, apparently). They then quickly pass on to discuss more pressing issues like UFOs. (I’m not joking: the podcast episode is 1.6 percent degrowth, 12 percent UFOs, and 86.4 percent how tech can protect W.E.I.R.D.o norms so nobody ever has to face limited choices at brunch—with “nobody” meaning “nobody-rich-enough,” since the bruncherati typically don’t care how limited the choices of the poor are). The meta-message couldn’t be clearer: the climate crisis *sounds* serious, it is very scary and the numbers are bad, but it’s not serious and scary enough to trump consumer liberties even at the top end, or to warrant having to drive less planet-wrecking vehicles or eat fewer exotic fruits (and degrowth is worth less of your time than extraterrestrials). Perhaps they feel we’ll need alien tech to crack this?

Until the alien tech gets here, the moral clarity of more precise terms can help us get on a saner path. One morally-clarifying term that I’m fond of is “greedocracy”—the all-trumping faith that greedy self-interest is and should be our ruling passion. This “In Greed We Trust” doctrine is foundational to capitalism (sometimes euphemized as “self-interest” or “utility”), and baked into many of the institutions that run our world. And it’s perhaps more powerful than any religious doctrine in history, since it shapes the lives of even those who don’t believe in it.

It’s time for the white-gloved invisible hand of economics to meet the visible fist of physics. Despite Klein’s sunshine-and-optimism-only greedocrat-friendly preferences, much of what matters in life is very firmly (laws-of-physics firmly) not “positive sum.” Many aspects of ecology are, in fact, precisely zero-sum. Resources put to one use are not being put to another. A wetland turned into a strip mall is no longer a wetland. If the rich emit more CO₂ through their consumption, the rest of the world cannot afford to increase their own consumption.



Kate Raworth's "Donut Economics"

IN SHARP CONTRAST TO CONTEMPORARY CAPITALIST economics, the field of “ecological economics” starts from the basic reality-facing facts that many resources are finite, or renewable only at rates consistent with biosphere boundaries. Little of this work has been adequately popularized yet, but Kate Raworth’s “Donut Economics” squarely accepts the truth that our worldwide woes are wider than carbon. We are currently facing nine planetary boundaries: Biodiversity, Carbon, Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Land-use, Ozone, Ocean acidification, Freshwater, and Atmospheric aerosol loading. The first four are already busted, and they’re self-explanatory except perhaps that nitrogen and phosphorus are critical to all agriculture (without artificial fertilizers adding these to soils we’d be able to feed 3 billion fewer people today). Many “green growth” efforts will increase burdens on these boundaries (e.g., EVs needing 42X more lithium mining will mean huge water use shifts risking desertification and biodiversity losses).

Detailed degrowth work has been done on what could be called “The Great Satiety,” providing “decent living standards” for as many as 10 billion people in 2050 using far less energy and resources. It’s more likely than you might think; we’re already generating half the renewable energy that would be needed (here we’ve already incurred the embodied carbon costs). This degrowth shift doesn’t mean sackcloth and ashes; it would involve universal education and healthcare, and at least 5,000-15,000 km of mobility in various modes per person per year. It offers fairer and better lives for the vast majority of people than today’s greedocracy delivers. If Klein and people like him are serious about “humane, technologically rich, and socially inspiring future for us all,” this is clearly a program they ought to be interested in, rather than coming up with ways for rich people to further feather their already sumptuously well-feathered nests.

Economic “growth” is often defended on the grounds of lifting people out of poverty, but that’s not entirely an accurate picture. Only 5 percent of global income gains go to the bottom 60 percent; the *unpoor* get 95 percent of growth (this is the same trickle-down trick that gutted America’s working class). So little gets trickled down that—if all were to remain the same and climate were not an issue expected to hugely impact the global poor—it would take 200 years to end extreme poverty. As we quibble over whether the globally comfortable can be asked to give up their baubles, the extreme poor face multi-lifelong sweatshop toil (on fast fashion, sneakers, and “disposable crap” that we won’t “sacrifice”) before their 6th, 7th or 8th generation descendants can crawl above a horridly low poverty line. Hailed as one of humanity’s greatest achievements, glacially slow reductions in poverty are really an inertia-enabling “convenient alibi” says Philip Alston, ex-U.N. special rapporteur. At current ratios, the greedocracy’s organized cruelty will lift everyone above \$5 a day only with 173-fold greater GDP. That’s impossible (sans alien tech/asteroid mining/spare planets/carbon unicorns).

On top of that, “flourishing” lives aren’t nearly as tied to GDP and growth as greedocrats tend to claim. Spain, for example, beats America on many social indicators (like life expectancy, which is 5 years longer in Spain). And this is accomplished on 50 percent less GDP and 70 percent less carbon per capita. Abstractions like GDP and economic growth conflate survival basics with “nice-to-haves” with looney-tunes luxuries because market value is seen as the only important measure of social value. This causes categorical errors: these are not at all the same kinds of things, and do not carry the same kind of social value. This is the central moral error of greedocrats and the markets-uber-alles crowd.

Why do we cling to growth and GDP, even as it destroys our only life-support system? Here a great George Orwell observation applies: “those at the top had trained themselves to be impenetrably stupid.” The elite portions of society have been educated into a severe form of “theory-induced blindness” (a great phrase psychologist Daniel Kahneman uses to describe a common expert malady) and trained into guilt-free-greed-glorifying “conscience management” norms. And the world-shaping idea—beloved by utilitarians, liberals, economists, techno-optimists, rationalists, free-market growth fans, and greedocrats—that we should organize life to “maximize flourishing,” i.e., maximize access to all possible joys for those who can afford them, has misled us. A better goal would be to minimize suffering. Isn’t it obvious that nixing malnutrition is a far better use of resources than adding to the comforts of the wealthy? Doesn’t it make much more sense to cut back on consumer consumption in wealthy countries rather than to put all our eggs into the risky, untestable basket of geoengineering?

It’s not going to be easy to ask people to make changes and “sacrifices”—it is, after all, to paraphrase Mark Fisher, easier for people to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But this is a crisis of our imaginations (of disordered desire), as Ursula Le Guin reminds us, capitalism’s “power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings...Resistance and change often begin in ... the art of words.” Words to counter the greedocrat norms presumed and promoted by Klein and co. But words can connect the needed

THIS DEGROWTH SHIFT DOESN'T MEAN SACKCLOTH AND ASHES; IT WOULD INVOLVE UNIVERSAL EDUCATION AND HEALTHCARE

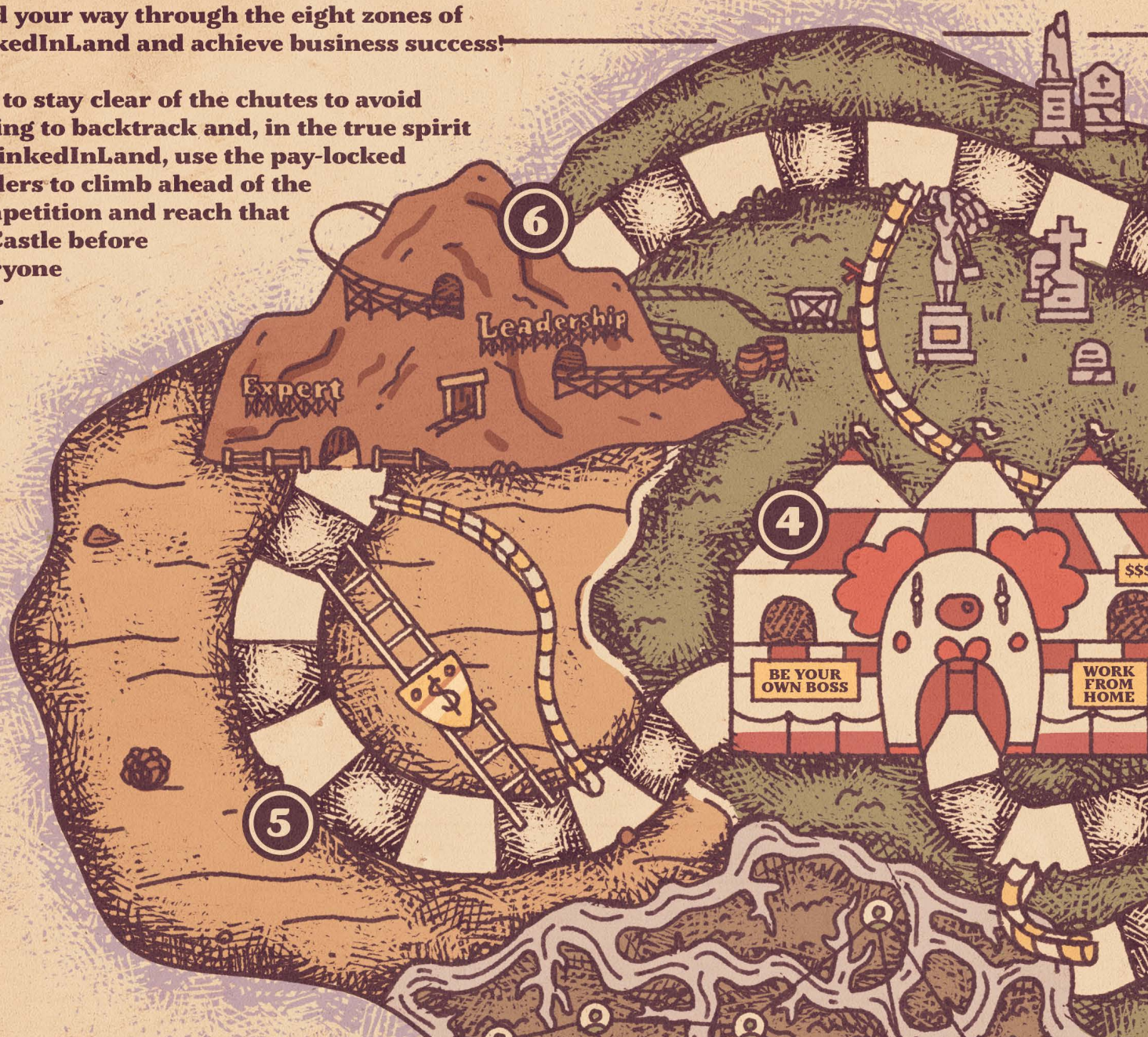
changes to what really matters morally, these changes will protect someone or something you love (your kids, polar bears, baseball). Can you really love what you aren’t willing to make an effort for, or to bear costs for, or “sacrifice” for? Degrowth doesn’t mean a drab world, or even an end to ludicrous luxuries. Furthermore, the “sacrifices” in question are not being asked for from the *poorest* people, but will come from those who have far more than they could ever possibly need, and whose consumption habits *are inflicting direct harm on others that those inflicting the harm are not currently paying for*. But once everyone’s basic needs are met and if we’re within biosphere boundaries... knock yourself out chasing your favorite (future-friendly) baubles.

As sustainability scientist Kimberly Nichols notes, our descendants will for centuries have to live *Under The Sky We Make*, the title of her own climate adaptation book. We’re all “skywriting our most important legacy,” as she describes it. For most of us, nothing we do will outlast the multi-generation impacts of the carbon we emit. Every carbon gram you choose to not emit is an act of grace, a gift to all future humans and life.

Should we pick the path of grace, or of greed? ✦

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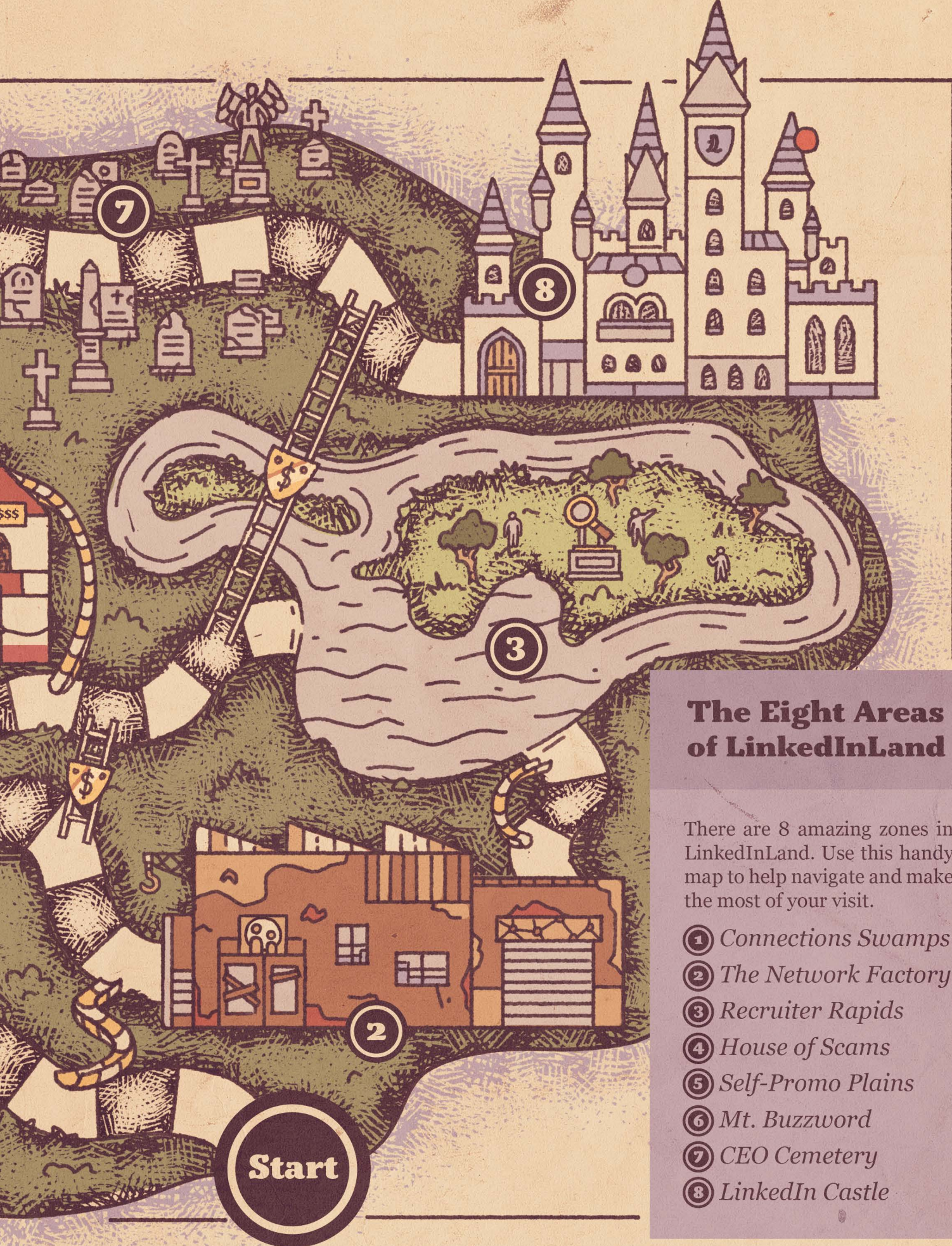
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RISE OF THE NEW AGE NAZIS

By Tom Perrett

ON DECEMBER 14TH, 2020, U.K. LABOUR leader Keir Starmer appeared on the radio show “Leading Britain’s Conversation” to discuss hostile public reactions to footballers taking the knee in protest against racial inequities. A listener who introduced herself as “Gemma from Cambridge” called in to the program and took the opportunity to propagate the Neo-Nazi “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory to a national audience. “In the wake of organisations such as BLM and other racial advocacy groups pushing what’s best for their people,” she said, “I just want to ask, should white people also start playing identity politics now, before they become a minority themselves by 2066?”

Clearly unprepared for this question, Starmer offered a meek condemnation, stating that “this is about recognising injustices that have gone on for a very long time,” without wading any deeper into Gemma’s white genocide conspiracy theorizing. This bizarre interaction took another twist when an anti-fascist collective revealed that “Gemma from Cambridge” was in fact Jody Swinger, a yoga teacher and musician living on the Spanish island of Ibiza, a famously laidback vacation destination. This is a far cry from the archetypal image of the hapless Neo-Nazi social outcast who lives in their parents’ basement, spending their days pulling the wings off flies and ranting on obscure online messageboards about how The Jews are the reason they don’t have a girlfriend. It turned out that Swinger’s call to national radio hadn’t been a one-off aberration, either: she had also recorded two YouTube shows with Mark Collett and Laura Melia, leaders of the white nationalist party Patriotic Alternative, which opposes the “replacement and displacement” of white Britons by people who “have no right to these lands.”

It may seem striking that people who advocate New Age spiritual beliefs, previously associated with “flower power,” alternative medicine, and the countercultural movement of the 1960s, could wind up on the same side as the far right. But as recent anti-lockdown demonstrations have shown, widespread skepticism of government

encroachment on personal freedoms—even in the context of eradicating COVID-19—has the potential to dovetail into conspiracy theories about malevolent elite interests. In Germany, for instance, Stuttgart-based entrepreneur Michael Ballweg led the *Querdenken* (“lateral thinking”) movement, an anti-lockdown group with reported ties to far-right organizations, which adopted the QAnon slogan, “Where we go one, we go all.” Former public radio host Ken Jebsen, who has since been fired for making antisemitic remarks, attended an anti-lockdown protest in Stuttgart in May 2020, during which he reportedly described COVID-19 as a “Trojan horse,” designed to “make the state and the lobbyists and companies that give it advice even more powerful, and citizens even more powerless.”

According to the far right, a class of global elites seeks to revoke personal and national sovereignty with the wider aim of stifling freedom of expression and imposing an authoritarian agenda. Emblematic of this mindset is a conspiracy theory that took root in the wake of the “Great Reset,” the self-titled name of the 50th annual meeting of the World Economic Forum which took place in June 2020. Pushed by websites such as *Breitbart*, this theory asserts that COVID-19 is not a natural pandemic but a coordinated attempt by a cabal of wealthy politicians, financiers, and bureaucrats to establish a global government, eroding national sovereignty and dictating fiscal and monetary policy. *Breitbart* columnist James Delingpole described the Great Reset (with what almost seems like self-awareness) as “another variation on the theme of the New World Order,” before going on to state: “it’s a technocratic elite—an unelected technocratic elite—deciding how you and I should live our lives.” The deliberate vagueness of such theories can make them persuasive to people who hold broad but ill-defined anxieties about authoritarian overreach, creating fertile ground for the recruitment of otherwise well-meaning people into far-right ideology. This is where New Age spiritual movements and extreme right-wing political movements can begin to find common ground: they share a disdain for the technocratic, modern systems of scientific and state bureaucracy, which they

characterize as being at odds with humanity's organic connection to the natural world. Combine this with racial prejudice—whether explicit, as in the case of Gemma from Cambridge, or unconsciously sublimated into other kinds of concerns—and you have the potential for real ideological convergence.

AS IT TURNS OUT, THE LINK BETWEEN New Age spirituality and extremist politics is not new. The Nazis drew support from the occultist Thule Society, and prominent Nazi figures such as Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hess endorsed homeopathy and alternative medicine, with Himmler supporting the use of plant extracts to cure cancer, and Hess setting up an alternative medicine center in Dresden. This embrace of holism and spirituality was based on the dream of a romanticized, agrarian age, offered up as an answer to the modern menaces of industrialization and materialism. For example, Ernst Lehmann, a Nazi professor of botany, stated:

"We recognize that separating humanity from nature, from the whole of life, leads to humankind's own destruction and to the death of nations. Only through a reintegration of humanity into the whole of nature can our people be made stronger... This striving toward connectedness with the totality of life, with nature itself, a nature into which we are born, this is the deepest meaning and the true essence of National Socialist thought."

This is deadly, because taken out of context it sounds almost *nice*, and a lot like the New Age desire to live in communion with the earth. It's certainly a related impulse, based on a wish to undo the crude, materialist logic that undergirds liberal democracy and to restructure the relationship between the citizen and the State. These are the concepts that spawned the Nazis' fascination with holism

and the reintegration of man (or rather, a very specific group of people) with nature. "Blood and soil" meant an organic connection with one's homeland that could not be expressed through civic or legal frameworks—such as the pesky "minority protection clauses" encouraged by the League of Nations—but only through the maintenance of racial purity within the nation-state. As Mark Mazower writes in his book *Dark Continent*: "The League (of Nations), after all, was an organization of States. But what was the State? According to Hitler's biological view of politics, it was no less than a living organism... Hitler's own vision of geopolitics—unlike that of many geopoliticians—rested upon race: the State itself was merely an expression of the racial 'Volk.'" Railing against the "juridification of politics"—the construction of relationships between members of the nation-state in purely legal terms—many Nazi legal theorists saw the nation as a biological organism, corruptible by outside influences and requiring protection from alleged Jewish subversion. This idea was also developed by Walter Schoenichen, Director of the Reich Agency for Nature Protection, who said in 1934 that: "Very early, the youth must develop an understanding of the civic importance of the 'organism,' the co-ordination of all parts and organs for the benefit of the one and superior task of life."

The Nazis' desire for racial and national purity, and for deepening the connections between man and nature, had historical antecedents in the anti-Enlightenment romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century, which decried the alienating influence of modernity—characterized by rationalism, materialism and industrialization—and instead advocated for a "return to the land" and an authentic connection with the natural world. The journalist Wilhelm Riehl, in his 1853 essay "Field and Forest," advocated for "the rights of wilderness," but also explicitly linked environmental preservation to racial homogeneity: "We must save the forest, not only so that our ovens do not become cold in winter, but also so that the pulse of life of the people continues to beat warm and joyfully, so that Germany remains German."

This veneration of the purity of nature and the simplicity of pre-industrial life became inextricably linked with a political ideology that saw Jews and other non-Aryans as complicit in the degradation of German society and sought to expunge them from the body politic. Again, the connection between these ideas is older than the Nazis; the linkage of environmentalism and racism into a single, unified romance is embodied by the career of the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term "ecology" in 1867. Haeckel used the study of the relationships between organisms and their environments to conclude that the Nordic race had a moral imperative to understand and deepen their connections to the land. From there, he went on to extol the benefits of racial homogeneity and oppose race mixing, later joining the Thule Society, whose connections with the Nazis we have already examined.

This idolization of ecological salvation as an important stepping stone towards racial rejuvenation was eventually formulated into cohesive policies by prominent Nazi figures such as Heinrich Himmler, who in 1942 released a decree entitled "On the Treatment of Land in the Eastern Territories," which referred to recently annexed areas of Poland. It stated: "If, therefore, the new Leben-



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

sräume (living spaces) are to become a homeland for our settlers, the planned arrangement of the landscape to keep it close to nature is a decisive prerequisite. It is one of the bases for fortifying the German Volk.”

As described by Marquette University history professor Peter Staudenmeier, this “link between a yearning for purity in the environmental sphere and a desire for racialized purity in the social sphere” also undergirds the ecofascist tendencies common to many modern Neo-Nazis, such as Norwegian mass shooter Anders Breivik; Patrick Wood Crusius, who carried out a mass shooting in 2019 in El Paso; and Brenton Harrison Tarrant, the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooter. All these shooters characterized nonwhite populations as invaders seeking to despoil the environment through having more children and consuming more resources. The same tendency is reflected in the writings of ecologist Garrett Hardin, listed by the SPLC as a white nationalist, who was one of the first to theorize about “human overpopulation” as a major threat to the Earth’s future. This idea gave rise, in turn, to a long and influential lineage of political organizations that connected environmentalism with anti-migration rhetoric and demographic scaremongering. This myth that “overpopulation” in the “Third World” is the main source of strain on our planet’s resources has, however, been roundly debunked; a study from Oxfam showed that the world’s richest one percent are responsible for double the CO2 emissions of the poorest 50 percent.

Given this history, we perhaps shouldn’t be surprised that farmers markets—generally thought of as wholesome community spaces—have become targets for the proliferation of white nationalism. In Bloomington, Indiana, the proprietors of Schooner Creek Farm—a couple named Sarah Dye and Douglas Mackey—were exposed in 2019 as members of white nationalist group Identity Evropa. Dye had posted online under the pseudonym “Volkmom” about her desire for “non-PC” history books and her dislike of living in nonwhite areas, reportedly writing in an Identity Evropa chat: “Any Whites who have spent time living in a neighborhood or attending a school with a non-white majority know the strife that Whites endure.” Dye and her husband were also noted associates of Nolan Brewer, a terrorist who spray-painted Nazi flags on the side of synagogues in Indiana. When he was being investigated, Brewer described Dye and her husband to the FBI as “extremely nice.”

This is not an isolated incident: multiple white supremacist groups were caught at Chicago’s Logan Square farmers market passing out flyers that read: “It’s OK to be white.” Heléne Lööw, senior lecturer at the Uppsala University and one Sweden’s leading experts on fascism, suggested that Neo-Nazis’ desire to recruit among farmers market attendees have coincided with attempts to rebrand themselves: by putting forth a more personable and less confrontational public demeanor, Neo-Nazis are better able to proliferate their eugenicist and racist ideology in otherwise liberal communities, using people’s interest in environmental conservation and localist, frugal living as a segue into rhetoric against immigration and racial heterogeneity. She told *The New York Times* that “I have hardly met anyone from these [far-right] movements, neither the old ones nor the young ones, who are not serving me organic food,

and lecturing me about the dangers of fast food, the dangers of McDonald’s.” She adds: “When people meet them in real life, they are not their media image. People get surprised. They are nice, they are talkative, they offer you a lot of good food.”

It’s a good trick: by aligning themselves with seemingly harmless organic farmers and altruistic environmentalists, fascists have been able to subtly spread their viewpoints and portray their own ideology as consistent with the convictions of environmentalists. And it’s not the first time in world history where malign, far-right agitators attempted to corrupt New Age spiritualists’ disillusionment with the alienation and tedium of modern capitalist society. During the 1960s, for example, Charles Manson infiltrated the hippie movement, exploiting their rage at the Vietnam War and governmental jingoism. Isolating young people whose worldviews undoubtedly lacked rigorous reflection and were susceptible to Manson’s influence, he brought the so-called Summer of Love to a bloody conclusion in August 1969 by murdering actress Sharon Tate.

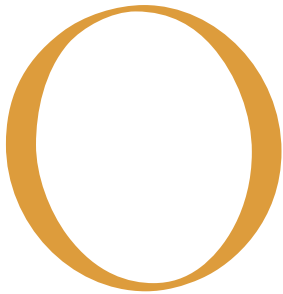
THE CONTENTION THAT COVID-19 IS A HOAX is just the most recent point of convergence between New Age hippies and the far right. Back in October, thousands of anti-vaxxers marched through Trafalgar Square in London at the COVID-skeptic “Unite for Freedom” event, during which a BUF (British Union of Fascists) flag was spotted. The event itself was hosted by notorious conspiracy theorist David Icke, whose theories have been endorsed by both Neo-Nazi groups such as Combat 18 and the New Age spiritual movement. For instance, Australian alternative news magazine *Nexus*, which explores “the fields of health alternatives and suppressed science,” has regularly cited Icke’s work.

In the U.S., Jake Angeli, a Trump supporter nicknamed the “QAnon shaman” who stormed the Capitol, was revealed to be a COVID-19 conspiracist who, according to his mother, also refused to eat non-organic food. His since-deleted Facebook page described him as “a Self Initiated Shaman, Energetic Healer, Ordained Minister, Public Speaker & Published Author.” He had also held a sign at the Capitol storming which read: “The poles are shifting! The ice caps are melting! This is Ragnarok! It’s time to wake up! Youtube Star Seed Academy Channel.” (The channel has since been deleted for violating YouTube’s guidelines.) Angeli has also appeared on the *Cosmic Gaia Podcast* alongside host Laura Eisenhower, who describes herself as a “Global Alchemist, Researcher and Medical and Intuitive Astrologist,” who “exposes hidden agendas so we can take our power back.” Eisenhower stated that her discussion with Angeli had covered topics such as “timelines, fractals, DNA, California fires, dark weaponry and rising above it and also these amazing patches he sells that helped to cure his father of Late stage Cancer and liver disease. They are good for anti-aging, migraines, pain, detoxing, energy circulation and more.”

More recently, columnist Laura J. Nelson has written in the *L.A. Times* about the disturbing prevalence of QAnon support in California yoga communities, noting that although vocal support for the conspiracy theory had lessened somewhat following the failed

insurrection, “New Age watchers say... the extremism is calcifying into something equally concerning: long-term conspiratorial thinking that encourages radical autonomy and sows distrust in vaccinations, elected officials and institutions woven into the fabric of American life.”

Both far-right reactionaries and New Age hippies are united in their belief that distant, sinister authorities are infringing on their liberties. In the case of the far right, this infringement supposedly comes in the form of online censorship: specifically, the alleged stifling of their ability to criticize the technocracy that is, in their eyes, imposing open borders and multiculturalism. New Age conspiracists, on the other hand, see constant infringements upon their personal, bodily autonomy, which they associate with “natural” methods of healing that are at odds with modern, scientific forms of inoculation such as vaccines. The excoriation of Bill Gates as a central figure in a supposed global plot to undermine civil liberties by using vaccines as a method of social control, including implanting microchips into unfortunate victims, has also been propagated by conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, who has suggested that vaccines are part of a government-induced eugenics program.



OF COURSE, SKEPTICISM TOWARDS authority—and heightened awareness of the erosion of civil liberties by governments that use crises as a pretext to usher in technocratic dominance—are not inherently absurd ideas. Indeed, these instincts are entirely rational and justified in an era where communications are

monopolized by companies like Facebook and Google, whose business models are predicated on mining consumer data; where a global pandemic has drastically increased the purview of the state’s influence over the lives of ordinary citizens through the increased monitoring and regulation of individuals’ movement and behavior in hitherto free public spaces; where finance, industry, and production have all been centralized in the hands of a few multinational corporations. Given all these realities, it is not unreasonable to be wary of authoritarian overreach. However, the vague criticisms of systems of power frequently made by New Age hippies—as well as the wild, conspiratorial denunciations of the “New World Order” or the “Great Reset” common to extreme right-wing political figures—are all devoid of any meaningful empirical analysis. While it is certainly true that in Britain, at least, the pandemic has seen a worrying development in outsourcing the “Test and Trace” system to companies such as G4S and Serco—which have been involved in nefarious operations from setting up immigration detention centers to developing some of Britain’s first for-profit prisons—the potential for government overreach in responding to public health crises isn’t itself a basis for denying the existence, or the severity, of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aversion towards vaccines, and broader suspicion of the aims of major pharmaceutical companies, is not inherently conspiratorial or fascistic; the duplicity of such corporations has cost millions of

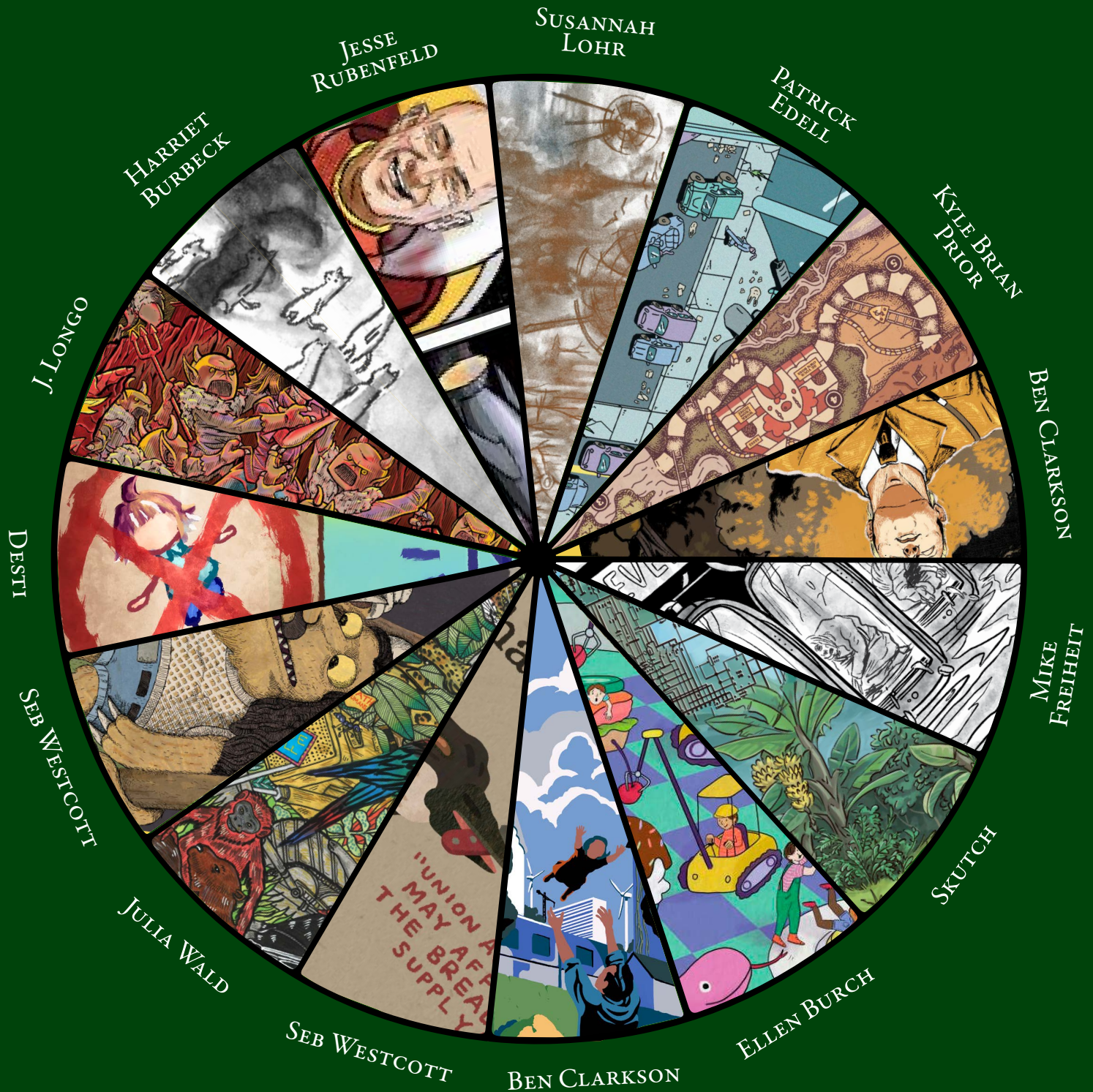
lives in the United States alone. In a 2007 lawsuit, Purdue Pharmaceuticals admitted that prescription drug OxyContin was highly addictive (a confession which cost the company a \$635 million fine), despite having previously claimed that it was less harmful than other opiates during the zenith of corporate deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s. The opioid crisis, perpetuated by the avaricious greed and unscrupulous amorality of Big Pharma, has since plagued communities across America. Between 1999 and 2017, 400,000 Americans died from opioid overdoses.

Given these grim statistics and the exploitative nature of pharmaceutical companies in general, it’s no surprise that the American public lacks trust in these companies’ benevolence when it comes to the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines. The task for the left, therefore, is to convince those who hold rightful skepticism about the motives of “Big Pharma” that vaccines—and the pandemic in general—are not tools to subvert the natural order orchestrated by calculating elites, as the far-right would have the public believe. The best way to do this, surely, is not just by spreading accurate public health information, but also by rigorously opposing these corporations’ merciless exploitation and profiteering, since these realities inflamed such skepticism to begin with. Acting as though *any* suspicion of drug companies’ motives is inherently ridiculous is a sure way to alienate vaccine and COVID-19 skeptics, and to give fuel to broader conspiratorial thinking.

Moreover, there are ways of recognizing the ideological convictions of “New Age” groups, whose romanticized view of nature and idealization of spirituality might otherwise be seized upon by opportunistic members of the far right. Opposition to the plunder of the environment by fossil fuel companies has long been a left-wing value, which can be fully expressed without any recourse to eco-fascist myths or invocations of racial purity. The “small is beautiful” movement, spearheaded by economist E.F Schumacher, aimed to critique mainstream economics in a way that advocated for innovations within carbon capture and storage (CCS) and small scale agriculture for the purpose of upholding the dignity of the small producer against industrial and petrochemical behemoths. By espousing an environmentalism based on localization of supply chains, sustainable farming, and communitarian values, rather than on technocratic fixes such as electric vehicles, the left may be able to provide an effective counter to eco-fascist attempts to connect environmental conservation with racial homogeneity.

This pandemic has shown that Neo-Nazis and New Age groups—though widely considered to have diametrically opposed political interests—are more similar than they appear and can easily fall into the same spheres. Unless their (largely justified) skepticism of the technocratic and civil liberty-denying impulses of governments can be countered with a thorough and precise refutation of conspiratorial political narratives, this unholy alliance will likely continue, and potentially lure alienated individuals to the fringe. The saddest part is that these same alienated individuals could otherwise have been integrated into a left movement that opposes environmental destruction and global economic exploitation, and robustly critiques authoritarian overreach and institutional groupthink. In short, environmentalism is too important to be left to the Nazis. ✚

The Illustrators



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