

*The Magazine You've Been Waiting a Long Time For*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 6, ISSUE 5

NOV./DEC. 2021

## DREAMS

*Should we be having  
more of them?*

## FAST FOOD

*How governments  
made it ubiquitous*

## MALLS

*Surely they should  
not exist*

## CHE

*Why his ghost still  
haunts the world*





A PROUDLY LOUISIANA-OWNED AND LOUISIANA-OPERATED PUBLICATION

# PRELIMINARY REPORT

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



YOU ARE ALWAYS  
ONE HAT AWAY  
FROM CONVINCINGLY  
IMPERSONATING  
**LENIN**

## EDITION SKIPPED

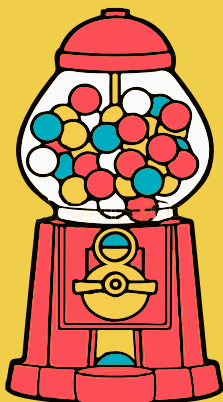
If you are an observant subscriber of this magazine (and let us hope you are), you will have noticed that the present edition of *Current Affairs* is the November-December issue. And you may wonder to yourself whether you received the September-October edition, and you will realize that you did not. This time it is not the fault of unscrupulous thieving postal officials. (WE SEE YOU.) This time, for once, the problem is with *Current Affairs* itself. We realize this may be difficult to accept, for is this not the magazine that has promised eternal infallibility? But reader, we too have to live in the flawed world of Now rather than the glimmering utopia of Tomorrow, and in this world, sometimes there are production delays. One such delay has been experienced. This has necessitated forcing the September-October edition to not exist. Instead, readers will be given the November-December issue, and have their subscriptions extended by an issue. We apologize for the inconvenience; we know well the severe pangs of deprivation that can come with failing to receive one's *Current Affairs*. We will strive to do better in future. If you truly wish to have a September-October edition to add to your collection, and the gap is impossible to accept, please feel free to use the space below to design your own, which we hereby officially permit you to call the September-October issue.



## The War On Christmas MUST BE WON

Comrades,

It is that time of year again. The time when our enemy regrouped and attempts once again to conquer. The reindeer are on the march, the sleigh bells of doom ring out. It is Christmastime once more, which means it is time for all good foot soldiers in the War on Christmas to come to the aid of the Party. The spirit of Christmas continues to sneak its way into unexpected crevices, and wherever we find it we must be prepared to smother and destroy it. If someone should wish you a Merry Christmas, remember that the only proper response is an aggressive and indignant "HOW DARE YOU!" If someone asks to kiss you beneath the mistletoe, give them a kick in the groin. Should a neighbor bring over a plate of tree-shaped cookies that their grandchildren helped decorate, toss the cookies on the ground and call them wretched. If you hear Christmas music playing in a shop, call the manager and demand compensation for the wrong that has been done you. If you are at a department store, and there is a Santa, expose his fraudulence before the assembled children. If you see a string of lights, snip it in half. If something is wrapped in tinsel, destroy it. Wherever a Christmas tree is erected, knock it down and attack it like a kitten after midnight. Together we can ruin Christmas forever and achieve final victory in the war to create a bland non-denominational Holiday Season. Godspeed.



If anybody knows how to unclog the gumball machine in the *Current Affairs* lobby, please get in touch with the editor in chief.

## Obscene Shapes

It has come to the attention of the editors that a recent edition included several "obscene" shapes buried within its pages. Several children witnessed the shapes before parents had time to excise and destroy them. We wish to extend our apologies to those affected. All prior editions of this magazine have been recalled and are being scoured for any other obscene shapes that may mistakenly have been printed. Those found will be cut out and burned, and the remnants of the magazine returned to the subscriber. There has long been a strict prohibition on sexual or otherwise suggestive content in this magazine and we will henceforth check every shape for its conformity with our stated values.



**DOUBT  
EVERYTHING**  
except our  
magazine

Are You An  
**Economist?**  
Remember, you  
don't have to be!  
**THERE IS ALWAYS HELP.**

## REQUIRED

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Every Article In This Issue  
Can Be Turned Into A  
Makeshift

# MASK



WE VALUE YOUR SAFETY

## The Proliferation of BOOTLEGS

All works of genius inspire imitators, and we should not have been surprised to eventually see knockoff magazines arise with titles like *Coorrant Affairs*, *Cyrrynt Affyrs*, *Curent Affairs*, *Currrnt Affairs*, etc. (*Concurrent Affairs* is an authorized spinoff publication.) Frequently these magazines come in deceptive packaging: if our cover for the month depicts a walrus giving birth, the forgers will produce a cover of an elephant seal nurturing its newborn offspring. It can be difficult for the ill-informed consumer to tell the difference, though of course the discerning reader is not fooled. We recommend constant vigilance. If you see a bookshop or newsstand selling "store brand" *Current Affairs*, know that this generic is unlikely produce the sensations of elation and enlightenment that the genuine article promises. We are constantly trying, through threats both legal and physical, to suppress these unscrupulous competitors. But, like the fungi, they multiply beyond one's capacity to exterminate them punctually. If you find yourself reading a magazine printed on suspiciously thin paper with suspiciously unamusing jokes, remember that the magazine you have in your hands may not be this one. Beware knockoffs. Accept no substitutes.

# WRETCHEDNESS/DESPONDENCY

Do you have them? Cure by reading!

## THE ABOLITION OF MALLS

A certain article in the present edition may leave the reader with the impression that this magazine is categorically against shopping malls. That impression would be correct. *Current Affairs* does not and cannot countenance the further existence of malls, whether mega or mini. Even the micromall displeases us, despite its diminutive (typically, less than a quarter-inch) footprint. The problem with the mall is not one of execution, but of theory. A shoppers' republic cannot be a true democracy. The solution to the mall problem is obvious: remove their roofs, fill them with plants, and let them become overgrown jungle mazes. We do not think there is anyone who could seriously oppose this course of action.

## Never Rank ANIMALS

It is tempting to draw up a list of the Good Animals and the Bad Animals. Indeed, reader, the *Current Affairs* editorial staff nearly succumbed to the temptation ourselves. We planned to put out a special edition in which all known species of fauna would be ranked from Hot to Not. Good animals would have included capybaras, beetles, seahorses, ladybugs, bearded dragons, brown bears, manatees, hedgehogs, cats, and foxes. Bad animals would have included scorpions, raccoons, bald eagles, dolphins, and pangolins. But we realized all we were really producing was a list of prejudices. Some animals are more charismatic and charming than others. But is this reason to assign them greater significance? Does cuddliness connote moral worth? It surely should not. How much irrational conservation has occurred thanks to the moral distortions wrought by the so-called "charismatic megafauna," whose good looks get them unfairly prioritized? Does a mealworm not deserve love? Does the scorpion not cry? We have therefore adopted a firm editorial policy of never ranking animals, no matter how great the temptation. The equality of fauna is now a bedrock principle upon which all other views in this magazine rest. Dissent from it will not be tolerated.

## SISYPHEAN WORKOUT



"One Must  
Imagine  
Sisyphus  
Buff!"

CAN YOU BELIEVE IT'S OUR

# 33rd ISSUE

Some kind of  
milestone  
probably!

## OPINIONS ON BUILDINGS

If you have strong opinions on the aesthetic merits of buildings, do not be ashamed! Make sure everyone knows what you think of every building. It is your right to speak out. If you think it's ugly, say so. If you think it's gorgeous, tell the people around you. It is important to have a robust national discourse on the quality of buildings and any contribution you make to that discourse will move it forward.

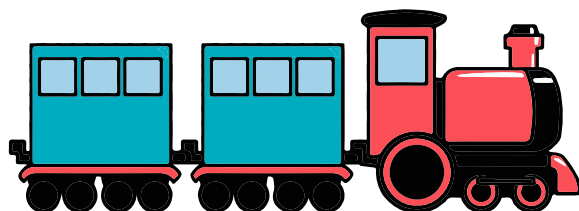
## ACTIVITY DESIGN-A-SOCIETY

Can you figure out how to create harmony across all demographic groups and ensure justice for all? Mail in your answers!

# 100% CURRENT

## REMINDER THAT TRAINS EXIST

"It's either traffic forever or tunnels." This was a recent online pronouncement from celebrity entrepreneur and extremely rich man Elon Musk, who owns a tunneling company. Mr. Musk, responding to complaints about traffic on the Freeways of America, indicated that we face a binary choice: either the cars will run aboveground and we shall be stuck in traffic until we die, or we must (commission him to) build tunnels so that the cars may run underground. Many have pointed out that this scheme does not make sense, but we would also like to take this opportunity to remind Mr. Musk and others of an unjustly forgotten device called the "train," which may present an Option C to be considered. These "trains" can run both aboveground and underground and not create traffic. They are miracles of modern engineering. If you have not heard of them, do look them up. You may be astounded at what they can do!





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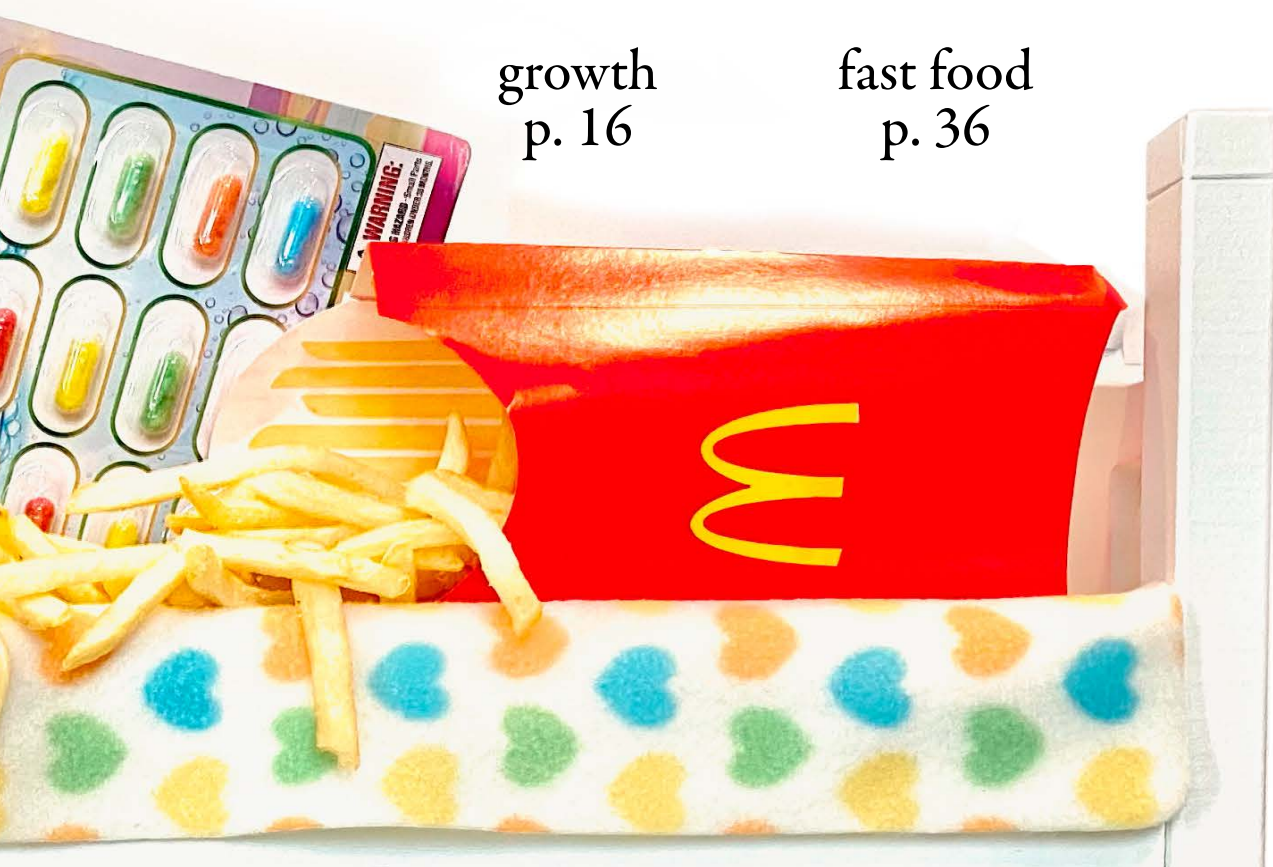
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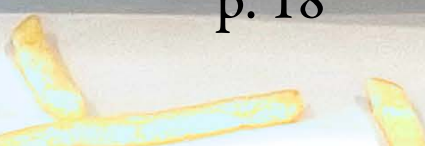
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# YOU'LL BE ALL EYES

*The problem with most  
magazines is that after a certain  
amount of time, you can stop  
looking at them. Then you  
have to go back to your life,  
even though you don't want  
to. Current Affairs does not  
produce this problem. You won't  
be able to stop looking at it. Ever.  
No matter what.*



[currentaffairs.org](http://currentaffairs.org)



# A World of Pictures

by Arjun S. Byju

A FEW MONTHS AGO, A HIGH SCHOOL FRIEND OF MINE got engaged. He brought his girlfriend to a small, unpopulated beach on the north shore of Kauai under the pretense of finding the perfect snorkeling spot. As Christie snapped on her goggles, Kevin dropped to one knee, splashing gentle Pacific sand across his soulmate's feet. She recognized the glint of the diamond instantly. Crying, she said the magic word. They kissed.

I haven't congratulated Kevin-From-High-School on his engagement yet.<sup>1</sup> In fact, I haven't even spoken to him in eight years. Still, I know everything there is to know about his life—including the detailed chronology and choreography of his probably not staged betrothal—from pictures on Instagram. Mere moments after the tears were dried and the ring secured on the awaiting finger, all 1,974 of Kevin's Facebook friends, including me, could view the professional photographs: the pair hugging and smiling on the beach; wading into the ocean, flippers in hand; a few glamour shots of the diamond.

That I could have "kept up" with someone for so long without ever exchanging personal or reciprocal communication is by now no real surprise. We all do it, all the time: imbibe a steady stream (or really, a steady scroll) of personal accomplishments and breathtaking vistas—status

*1. Names have been changed to respect privacy, although I am quite confident that my friend would not take umbrage at the broadcasting of his engagement details with the estimable readers of this publication. After all, he shared the news with far surlier parties. Coach DiLorenzo, of middle school Phys Ed, was the first to "like" the proposal pictures.*



updates—from people with whom we rarely interact beyond depositing double-taps of the thumb.

Instead, what struck me in the wake of Christie and Kevin's engagement was how much I had come to rely on the *imagery* of my internet peers, their curated boxes of connotation without denotation. I know a lot about my "friends," but not because I've spoken to them, or read about them, but because I've *seen* them. I thought of all the pictures from that day: a lobster roll, a Slovenian church, innumerable mountain tops and semi-nude bodies, an anniversary, cats, a birth, dogs, an ad for a scrubs company featuring surprisingly brawny doctors whose rippling muscles gripped toy stethoscopes. I swim daily through this cybersea of pictures, devoid of language save for the sparsest of captions, images haunted by splendor or sadness, but always laden with meaning.

I'm also gripped by daily photographic anxiety. In the wake of Kevin's engagement, I began to wonder, when I proposed one day *how would I* share the news online? Presumably, I would need to plant surreptitious cameramen at the scene hours before our arrival. But even before that, I'd have to ensure the venue was conducive to photography, securing adequate lighting and the absence of errant pedestrians. And then, what if the photos didn't turn out well? Could my fiancée pull off a reshoot? How much do guerrilla photographers charge for re-dos? Kevin would probably know the answer to some of these things, but, like I said, I don't really talk to him.

A vast reservoir of ink has already been spilled defining the ills of social media: how it makes us depressed and polarized, or how it ruins our body image and our democracy. Several prominent Silicon Valley types have come out against the omnipresent social forces, including Jaron Lanier—who wrote the straightforwardly named *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*—and many architects of the technologies themselves, featured in the 2020 Netflix documentary *Social Dilemma*. A surprising number of people who designed social media, we are told, don't allow their own children to use Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat despite, or rather because of, their years spent creating the platforms' wildly addicting algorithms. (It's interesting to note, from a sociological perspective at least, the recurring theme of the turncoat firebrand, the former insider—not unlike the physician who was on the payroll of a pharmaceutical company and now, having come to the light, decries industry influence, or the Wall Street trader of yesteryear bemoaning financial loopholes. We place a premium both on expertise and on redemption, the ex-pill pusher, the ex-trader, and the ex-social engineer all valued for their seeming authenticity in whistleblowing.) One of the most popular videos about quitting social media, with over 8 million views, is a talk given by Cal Newport, a computer scientist who assures the audience that it *is possible* to live without Facebook. (*But, he works on a computer all day! How does he do it?*)

And then, there's the entire genre of "social media sabbaticals," in which writers recount their experience "going off the grid"; these can range from the clickbaity 9 Reasons Why You Should Go on a Social Media Detox to the more meditative quests dedicated to erasing performativity or rediscovering boredom. I'll

spare the reader the obvious joke about sharing a narrative about quitting social media on, well you know, social media.

While these recent criticisms seem apt—we could probably all benefit by taking a break from echo chambers and fake news and watching teenagers dance in their bedrooms—most detractors of social media, in addressing the deleteriousness of its *content*, fail to acknowledge the problem with the *form* itself. That is, apart from Twitter (about which separate gripes abound), most of social media is not literate, but visual: pictures, videos, gifs, memes. Sure, there are the occasional Facebook rants and bombastic comment section flame wars (a dear friend was once engaged in a vituperative three-week repartee in the Facebook group "Christian moms against *My Little Pony*"; it did not end well for the religious mothers), but most of social media, at least the kind that is consumed blithely and perpetually—the kind most amenable to insouciant scrolling—remains grounded in *images*, not words. Instagram had 1.074 billion users in 2021, up more than 22% from last year. And YouTube is the second most visited site in the world, with over 1 billion hours of video watched each day. Irrespective of *what* we are viewing, such overwhelming consumption demands an appraisal of *how* we are doing it.

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher and pioneer of communication studies, made popular the phrase "the medium is the message," contending that each form of human communication conveys its own precepts which often subsume the content explicitly presented within them. If books, radio, and television each affected contemporary culture as much through format as through content, then what of our modern, internet age? The digital images with which we are constantly bombarded not only take up our time and attention; in creating a virtual world, one founded on representation, they also mediate our sense of reality. To understand the message of our modern media—one supported by digital imagery—we fortunately don't need to watch another TED talk. Instead, we can turn to thinkers who far predated the Kardashian era, critics from a time when black and white wasn't a filter but the norm, and cameras, revolutionary tools for objectivity and art, weren't yet in every pocket around the globe.

WHAT EXISTS IN THAT 2-MINUTE window between the surprise of slipping on the diamond and the posting of the picture of the freshly-adorned finger? As Kevin and Christie scramble to their phones, cupping hands over screens to shield the formidable Hawaiian sun, are they engaged? Do they stop and think about the event that has occurred, share in the incontrovertible beauty of their commitment? Or do they relish in anticipation of the exuberance—and a little envy—that will ensue as friends, digitally connected yet geographically remote, learn of the news? Most likely, they listen to the whoosh of the data as it spirals up to the cloud and wait for the luxurious ping that signifies consecration in cyberspace. Now, they are *really* engaged.



# Current Affairs

START YOUR DAY RESPONSIBLY

CONTAINS:

- GRAINS
- VITAMINS
- RAISINS
- STRUCTURE



THE JOYS OF CHILDHOOD ARE GONE



To conservatives in the abortion debate, life begins, irrevocably, with conception. For millennials, the line is demarcated digitally. Experiences (like kayaking down a river or proposing on the beach) are finished, in a temporal sense, as soon as they are done, yet they remain inchoate and untethered until they are added to the endless scroll of a feed. Now more than ever, we find that life begins not with conception, but with representation. Nothing is real until it is posted.

Guy Debord was a French philosopher and filmmaker whose slim text *Society of the Spectacle*, first published in 1967, offers much insight into our current social media milieu. Debord posited the concept of the spectacle, which he defined “not [as] a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” While Debord’s criticism was of TV and film, Kevin and Christie’s engagement photos typify a modern spectacle; their images interact with those of countless other couples on the plane of social media, detached from the world of physical reality, yet undoubtedly born from the same earthly terrain.

When I was in middle school, it was common for two people who were dating to make their courtship “Facebook official” (whatever this meant in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I still am not sure). Nowadays, nearly every stage in life can be concretized in a similar fashion, adding detail after detail to the tapestry of the spectacle, a simulacrum of real life. We announce when we are in a relationship, when we are single again, when we graduated high school, college, and professional school. We enshrine our engagements, weddings, and divorces, as well as our acceptance of jobs, translocations, and migrations. We share the quotidian (what we ate, watched, and read) and the internal (what we thought, misunderstood, and felt). Commenting on mass media in the middle of the twentieth century, Debord’s words still ring true: “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” Today, the representation of which Debord speaks is the detailed and chronological projection of our lives found on social media, a reality formulated by pictures.

Ernst Cassirer, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, made a claim eerily similar to Debord’s:

*“Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images...that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of [an] artificial medium.”*

This inability to experience anything—except by the interposition of an artificial medium—describes precisely our debilitated position as beings in the world. Every event in which we partake is now seen and known through the filter of how it *could* be seen and known online. This was long understood by concertgoers (“Stop recording the whole concert on your phone and *listen* to the music!”)

The symbolic realm—and our anticipation of how our physical life will be represented in that realm—now extends its reach beyond vacations and concerts, informing the course of major

life events. Take, for example, Kevin’s engagement. Presumably after deciding that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Christie, he began to consider where and how he would ask her for such a commitment. In knowing that pictures of this event must ultimately be shared on Instagram, he would have been influenced to pick a photogenic locale for his proposal, or at least one that exuded a certain amount of romantic charm.

In other words, the mere *specter* of the symbolic realm has the capacity to influence the physical. In recent years, leisure travel has increasingly been influenced by the prospect of social media as various locales—like the corner of Washington and Water Street in Dumbo, Brooklyn—have taken on symbolic value chiefly due to their photogenicity, or their Instagrammability, and not necessarily because of any intrinsic physical beauty, artistic, or cultural value. Travel blogs describe the “most instagrammable spots in all 50 states” and tour guides regularly promise to reveal the most Instagram-worthy spots from Pisa to Bali. While some might protest that these locations have always been beautiful, and hence beckon the social media user to photograph and share, closer inspection reveals that the most Instagrammable spots are gorgeous specifically *through the filter* of a camera lens—their proportions, lighting, foreground and background all remarkably well-suited for photographic memorialization.

SUSAN SONTAG, PROLIFIC INTELLECTUAL and activist, recognized this effect of visual media far before the advent of the internet in a series of essays entitled *On Photography*. In the second half of the 20th century, Sontag examined the effects of the mounting predominance of the photograph, as it became the basis for entertainment, advertisement, education, and memorialization—the primary medium for communication itself.

*“Seen through the acute eye of the camera, any object acquires beauty or appears interesting—the most mundane subject constitutes art. The camera empowers everyone to make artistic judgments about importance, interest, or beauty, to assert ‘that would make a good picture.’”*

The camera, coupled with social media, enables us to capture and recreate the “good pictures” that others have taken, allowing these digital images to serve as an instrument for social capital rather than aesthetic objects in and of themselves. This, Sontag furthered, “divorces the sphere of individual contemplation and expression from the sphere of surveillance and social utility.” In the modern sense, the social utility garnered from our digital iconography is a kind of viral capital, each pixel a building block in the online network we call our own.

Thus, we explore our own environment *as if it were* a jaunty pic or dazzling status update. We lose the ability to see the world and our experiences, to borrow from Cassirer, except by the interposition of this (social) media. This truth was made luridly clear to me during a ritzy luncheon hosted by my old employer. As we were arriving at our seats in the sunlit private room, one of



SUSAN SONTAG IN 1979 / ©LYNN GILBERT

my colleagues, let's call her Diane, pulled out her phone and began snapping selfies. "It's the room," she enthused. "The lighting is amazing! I need to get a few pics to save for later."

I realized that Diane might post those pictures weeks, maybe months, later—with some snappy and nonspecific message that dissociated the images from their temporal and sentimental grounding. That we have been trained to experience physical life—birthday parties, hikes, work luncheons—first and foremost through the lens of Instagram and Snapchat, as an indistinct series of events with more or less good or bad lighting, is perhaps the greatest travesty of the social media simulacra.

Equipped with a perpetual camera lens, every person is, as Sontag proposed, the judge of reality's artistic value, a miner scouring the physical realm for gems that might dazzle on the web, appreciating time and space only as a reservoir for the spectacle. And if curating the spectacle requires some amount of creative liberty (or illusion), so be it, for the spectacle itself is the only virtuous mode. Facetune and Photoshop are not sophistry, but artistry. Remember, the medium is the message. In the present era, *being* is less valuable than *having*, which is even less vital than *appearing*.

THE 1998 FILM *THE TRUMAN SHOW*, in which a guileless young man discovers that he has lived his entire existence in a massive television production, is frequently praised for auguring the rise of reality TV. Since the film was released, starting with *American Idol* and culminating with *Vanilla Ice Goes Amish*, reality shows—from the mainstream to the profanely niche—have established themselves as a staple of the small screen landscape; in 2015, there were at least 750 reality shows on cable.<sup>2</sup>

While the contemporary media panorama mirrors in many ways the world envisioned in *The Truman Show*, fact diverges from fiction in one crucial aspect. In the film, a vast army of production assistants, actors, and cameras were necessary to produce the illusion that aired to millions of viewers each day. Today, any individual needs only their smart phone—and nothing else—to instantaneously reach their friends, followers, and total strangers. The possibility of becoming an influencer, or perhaps merely the allure of *being seen* among a world overflowing with images, beckons all to share their life online, to turn their joys



# cats

in uniform.



**BOW DOWN TO YOUR ADORABLE LEADERS**



and sorrows into fodder for weary and ravenous eyes.

It seems almost foolish to attempt to recount the multitude of shocking ways in which individuals in the last few years have debased their private lives for the sake of social media prominence. Hundreds of people have died—drowned, hit by cars, bowled over by trains, charged by an elephant—trying to take selfies. A YouTuber traumatized a man by convincing him that his best friend had been kidnapped and murdered. Perhaps most symbolically appropriate, however, would be the example of rapper DJ Khaled livestreaming the birth of his son, including shots of his wife’s strained face and legs in lithotomy position. One would be hard pressed to find a better example of what Sontag called “chronic voyeurism.” This is a version of Truman’s show, one without the intermediary of a studio or camera crew, yet somehow even more invasive.

The film implied that it would take an elaborate ruse to convince anyone to live their entire life on camera; 20 years later, we know that people will record and broadcast pretty much anything intimate—including tearful break-ups, images from motor vehicle accidents, or replicas of their newborn—in exchange for public validation.

As Sontag trenchantly observed, “The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing.” That was in the 1970s. Now, cameras are even more ubiquitous, with Americans spending more time on smartphones than watching TV. *Everything* is now worth photographing.

And yet, our panoply of visual images is more than the product of a culture of oversharing. It’s a necessity for a consumerist society. Sontag again:

*“A capitalist society requires a culture that is based on images. It needs to generate images of new commodities and forms of entertainment in order to stimulate buying. It also needs to gather unlimited information, the better to utilize natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, and produce jobs. Serving these needs, ideally, are the camera’s twin capacities: to ‘subjectivize’ reality and to objectify it. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of a capitalist society: as a spectacle to absorb the at-*

*tention of the citizenry; and as an object of scrutiny to assist officials responsible for governing.”*

On the one hand, Sontag suggests that photography allows us to tame reality, to bring a moment into existence, to “objectify” it. And yet, those discrete moments are our own, each “subjectivized” account a distinct mimeograph of one individual’s experience.

While Sontag was prescient in her examination of the untoward influence of the explosion of visual images, her critique did not, and perhaps could not, foresee a world in which average citizens are both consumers *and* producers of media. If, as many have claimed, data is the new oil, with technology giants vying for access to digitized troves of our online activity, then we are the Mesozoic creatures, the dinosaurs who were sacrificed as fossil fuels. Every aspect of our online personae—proposal pics included—serves as monetizable data points.



AT THE SAME TIME, HOME-GROWN entertainment in which one may participate as both performer and viewer (e.g., YouTube or TikTok) poses a new challenge to consumers and social critics alike: What becomes of intimacy when once-personal moments (proposals, births) are commodified by the camera lens and shared with the world wide web? In the spectacle of social media, we are both the cast *and* the audience. As we relinquish our data to the corporations, we also trade the intimacy that once accompanied private moments for transient digital attention. We feel like we are establishing reality by consecrating it online, but in truth, merely convert life events into commodities—objects for someone else’s sluggish scroll.

And just like the fossil fuels that power jet engines, the visual representations of our lives are nonrenewable, and must ultimately be replaced with an ever-increasing amount of media. Sontag furthers with a passage with obvious parallels to the present day:

*“The logic of consumption provides the ultimate reason for photographing everything in modern, capitalist society. To consume means to burn, to use up—and, therefore, to require replacement. As images are made and consumed, the consumers need more and more of them. Images are manufactured at an ever-faster rate. Cameras are both the antidote and the disease. Photographic images add to the natural world the manufactured images that help to bolster a depleted sense of reality. But by so doing, these images further deplete the real world, making it appear drab and obsolete by comparison.”*

The perception—at least among many teenagers and young adults—that social media is more exciting than the real world seems by now practically a truism. And anyone who uses Instagram can attest to the unending barrage of pictures. In fact, the entire design of the app, its central conceit, is that there is always more to see—more pictures of friends, more sponsored content,

2. *EXTREME WEIGHT LOSS; DUCK DYNASTY; NAKED AND AFRAID; 90 DAY FIANCÉ.* Absurd and ridiculously specific, reality shows blend formerly distinct genres, birthing spin-offs where one might reliably expect entertainment value to be all but depleted. In the reality show economy, perhaps more so than in any other, Steve Jobs’ message about market research rings true: “People don’t know what they want until you show it to them.” Never could we have imagined the unadulterated, rapturous pleasure of watching two random adults scavenge for sustenance in the wilderness of Alaska, all the while being completely, ass-to-the-frost naked.

It would be easy to dismiss the bulk of these shows as crass, but careful observation reveals a certain level of perspicacious social reflection inherent to all “reality” programming, a harbinger of social media. Consider, for instance, *I WANNA MARRY HARRY*, in which female participants competed to woo the then-single Prince Harry. The catch? The man featured in the dating show was actually a paid imposter, who only very moderately resembled the royal in question. Ethical (and possibly legal?) issues aside, the levels of conceit required to cast, film, promote, and broadcast such a production, as well as the self-referential jab at dating shows as a class, implies some kind of directorial and literary genius, if not pure sorcery, that has obvious parallels with modern day “catfishing.” Regrettably, the show was pulled from the air after only 4 episodes.



more targeted ads. Every image, once scrolled past, requires replacement with another.

There is, of course, a psychic toll to turning one's entire life into a commodity, as reality TV icons know all too well. Jessica Simpson, one of America's first true "stars" of reality television, shared just as much in a perceptive and cautionary passage of her recent memoir, *Open Book*, comparing her early 2000s television fame to the now ubiquitous celebrity of social media:

*"Nowadays, I see so many people performing their identities on social media, but I feel like I was a guinea pig for that...How was I supposed to live a real, healthy life filtered through the lens of a reality show? If my personal life was my work, and my work required me to play a certain role, who even was I anymore?"*

Simpson's words should give pause to the countless Americans who define themselves as, or aspire to become, influencers. In hoping to play a certain role, a curated online representation, these individuals allow the possibility of the spectacle to dictate *who they are*, in the very real world. All of us "average" social media users also face the same prospect—objectifying our life, turning physical reality into digital commodity.

When I was young and visited my grandmother in India, I often marveled at how *long* it took her to look at photographs. Handing her a stack of pictures developed at the drugstore, I'd point out the faces of friends or spots around my home (this being a time before video-calling, my grandmother had never seen what my bedroom looked like). As soon as I had discussed a picture, I was ready to move on to the next, but my grandmother would clasp the glossy paper tightly, insisting on studying it longer, often for at least a minute. Perhaps it was poor vision or an unfamiliarity with the content of the images, but I'm tempted to believe that her patience—her insistence on scrutinizing the content of each snapshot—was a product of her era. My grandmother came of age during a time in which photographs were at once posed, momentous, and infrequent. Now, I scroll past more pictures than she might have taken in her entire life while I wait for the subway. My grandmother savored pictures. I burn through—genuinely consume—them.

**T**HERE ARE TWO COMMON REJOINDERS to the contentions set forth above. The first is the contention that life has *always* been lived socially, and to some degree subject to the judgmental, and objectifying, eyes of others. Humans have always performed—donning stylish clothing, applying makeup, speaking in certain ways—and the attention paid to curating an online persona is no different, or so the argument goes.

Yet, an image-based social media marks a meaningful departure, both in the severity of our slavishness to the spectacle, and in its permanence. In the old days, our performances were at least temporary; we wore makeup to a party, then wiped it off at home. If we were ever caught in a compromising position at brunch, fork midway from plate to mouth, the moment would soon pass, and our acquaintances

could have the chance to forget it. Now, virtual representations of ourselves are held, for all practical purposes, eternally on the web. Our friends tread and retread through our libraries, our profile pictures viewed thousands of times. Moreover, the scope of what is deemed off-limits, the time for solitude devoid of performance, has contracted. It's increasingly common for funerals, quiet evenings on the couch, and serene holiday mornings to be subject to commitment into imagery.

The second popular retort is that while at times distracting, social media is an indispensable tool for keeping up with friends and family. This contention, the "necessary evil" school of thought, posits that just like email or traffic, social media is simply something that must be tolerated for the sake of connectedness. Research suggests, however, that there is a finite and relatively low number of relationships which an average person is capable of maintaining: around 150. This figure, referred to as Dunbar's number, is apparently fixed due to the physical limitations of our brain size, even with the supposed help of social media.

And yet, every single person I know has more than 150 friends on Facebook, often more than 1500, and the way in which they interact with those internet personae could hardly be described as nourishment for genuine friendship. The crucial difference between social media and earlier forms of communication is that posting is, at its core, *passive*. Sharing a photo does not necessitate an introduction nor a response. We used to have to *tell* someone something about ourselves. On Instagram, we can *broadcast* the same message. We promulgate, rather than converse. This explains how people who are superficially connected—perpetually internalizing information about each other—can find themselves increasingly alienated. Even though I *know* more about everyone I call a friend, I *feel* far less intimate with them.

"Mallarmé said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph." Several decades later, Sontag's quip seems truer than ever, although one gets a sense that more and more people are posting pictures out of a feeling of obligation, rather than excitement. *I wish I didn't have to take this picture, but...* And while it's never a great sign when people are resigned to and trapped by their technology (another wonderful McLuhan line: "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us") one can view resentment towards the current state of affairs as the first step towards liberation—to retirement from being at once subject and photographer.

As for me, I decided to unfollow Kevin. I didn't want to keep getting updates on his life, not without at least saying hello, and I thought he shouldn't have the pressure of another set of eyes. Not that he was thinking of me, specifically, in the tremulous moments before he popped the question. But I know from personal experience that every post is meant for no one and for everyone, so I thought I'd do my part.

Still, if I ever bump into Kevin in my hometown in the next few years, at a coffee shop or local pub, I hope he'll fill me in on how the wedding went. I would like to be told something new about his life, something I had not already seen online. Maybe he'll have kids. I'm sure he'd show me a picture. ✦



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BY

*Ford*



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- sofa seating
- 10-foot front grille
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"WHEN YOU GET IN AN ACCIDENT, YOU WANT TO WIN"



# Trillions and T

## The selective blindness on endless econ

**T**HE PROUD DEFENDERS OF THE free market economy are eager to tell you about how much wealth it creates. Conservative (and prominent racist scumbag) Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute, for example, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that “capitalism is the best thing that has ever happened to the material condition of the human race. From the dawn of history until the 18th century, every society in the world was impoverished, with only the thinnest film of wealth on top. Then came capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. Everywhere that capitalism subsequently took hold, national wealth began to increase and poverty began to fall. Everywhere that capitalism didn’t take hold, people remained impoverished.”

Of course, as this magazine has reviewed, there are enormous holes in this hoary dogma—the growth in wealth is typically highly lopsided, leading to a hyper-rich ruling class with absurdly privileged lives, tremendous economic power, and by now their own space programs. The giant majority of families own little to no property and therefore must work for a living, and without unions or highly stringent tax systems, there are limits on how rich they can get. Most capitalist societies have major racial cleavages in wealth, and the toil of reproducing the species is not generally recognized as productive work—meaning the traditional “women’s work” of maintaining a house and raising kids is uncompensated, a conspicuous outrage against women.

But one thing that really scrapes my grapes is how conservatives abruptly run away from this central part of their holy catechism the moment that it becomes inconvenient. The forms of this I always notice involve social spending and the environment.

### Cooking the Books

CONSERVATIVES GLOATING ABOUT capitalism’s economic growth will condescend to critics in the blink of an eye, saying they don’t understand the power of free enterprise and the mathematics of exponential growth. But of course, the traditional socialist idea is that capitalism builds up the powers of economic production to relieve the scarcity of traditional society, enabling the material abundance needed for organized workers to take charge of its tremendous power. Marx believed capitalism developed our productive capacities *so that* we could then enjoy socialist abundance. This argument—even though it is hundreds of years old—will still typically stun a reactionary. Conservatives who bragged at breakfast about the market showering us with wealth will decline at dinner to admit that means there is in fact money for universal health care, a crash decarbonization plan, and free higher education.

Many people have noticed how these budget options are covered by the commercial media, which after all are private property owned by giant corporations owned by rich stockholders. Programs of social uplift, like Medicare for All, Build Back Better or the Green New Deal, very consistently have their projected costs reported over decade-long intervals, which brings the totals into the trillions of dollars—\$2 trillion for BBB, \$10 trillion for M4A. A trillion, being a thousand billion, is a number that spooks people, and may make them give up their support for a policy that has incredible popular support considering it has near-zero favorable coverage in the media.

But notably, the main Pentagon budget bill, the National Defense Authorization Act, gets reported upon using its nice *annual* number, an already-insane \$741 billion in the current bill, rather than some ten-year number that would reach into the many trillions.

It really is a kind of incredible transition.

You’re a conservative, writing starry-eyed market-worship. Free enterprise lets you do anything you want, makes your dreams come true, creates “stupendous growth” in the standard of living. You’re just consumed with telling the world about the giant bounty held up by the Atlas of the market. Then the moment some bastard socialist brings up universal health care or student loan forgiveness, you transform into the most miserly penny-pinching austerity-monger.

So the claims of the Right are:

1. Capitalism makes us rich with piles of money, and
2. You can’t have social democracy, that takes piles of money.

### Burning Nature at Both Ends

THROUGH ALL THE GLOATING about perpetually rising standards of living, and the patronizing of critics as not understanding exponential mathematics, it is the market apologists themselves who miss one of the most existential realities. While human economic production can grow exponentially, it is doing so on a planet with finite resources, with no ability to grow itself to accommodate our endlessly spiraling industry.

The very strong tendency is to laugh it off. Economists write about economic side effects, using the language of market “externalities,” which range from secondhand smoke to climate change. As the economy grows at an ever-faster pace, so do its externalities—oceans become more acidic, forests are destroyed in fires, and hurricanes bring floods. But for public audiences, conservatives prefer cute terms like “spillovers” or “neighborhood effects.” Milton and Rose Friedman, for example, in their libertarian classic *Free to Choose* wrote that “Almost everything we do has some third-party effects, however small and however remote.” As



# Trillions

## economic growth



a report from  
*Current Affairs*  
house economist  
Rob Larson

small as a melting planetary ice cap!

Writing in the 1980s, one had a lot more plausible deniability as far as climate goes. More recently, the realities of climate change have become progressively harder to ignore. The libertarian economist Tyler Cowen wrote a typical conservative book about how GDP growth should supersede every other social value. But even he wimpily suggested that “Wealth Plus” should now be the goal, representing more economic production of goods but also with unspecified “environmental amenities.” The lack of seriousness here is pretty stunning—I’d like production of goods just without damaging the environment, and to keep nice ecological services and settings without cutting back on the goods we make from ever-bigger mining, logging, and habitat destruction. Just the vaguest, most fatuous hand-waving.

Like bacteria in a Petri dish, you can grow faster and faster until you run out of agar—then it’s a fast die-off process. It’s funny, we economists are very focused on the idea of scarcity, the limited nature of economic resources relative to all the things we’d like to do with them. Markets are supposed to help us use scarce resources in the most efficient possible way—they don’t, of course, as readers of this magazine are aware. But some economists don’t recognize that the ultimate scarcity is our confinement on a planet. We have no marginal utility of more Earths, and any large-scale economic colonization off the Earth is a very distant prospect, despite Elon Musk’s coke-fueled Twitter claims.

This all may seem an incredibly simple point—conservatives celebrate the endless, accelerating growth of the market but ignore its parallel environmental downsides and don’t want to recognize that the growth of economic production enables social democratic policies that rank among the most popular in the U.S. But you at home can have fun with this—let your right-wing acquaintance, family member or coworker be drawn in by recognition of

capitalism’s stupendous growth. Then as they move into gloating phase, you can blindsides them with the plain implications of this reality for social uplift and planetary survival.

Confronting reactionaries who have doomed the world might be a small comfort.

But putting cracks in those paper-thin right-wing suits of armor might be just what lets in the light of a realistic picture of capitalism and the resurrection of American labor.

Trillions are too important to be left to the billionaires. ✦

**GROWTH FORMULA**

$$f(x) = a(1 + r)^x$$

STARTING AMOUNT      RATE OF GROWTH      # OF TIME INTERVALS

EXAMPLE: \$1,000 at 3% growth for 10 years

$$f(x) = \$1,000(1.03)^{10}$$

\$1,344

Wow, economic growth!  
We'll be rich OMG!!

**DISCLAIMER:**

$$f(x) = a(1 + r)^x$$

STARTING CAPITAL SHOULD BE PRIVATE      LITTLE-KNOWN FACT: ONLY PROFITS MAY COME FROM THIS, NO HEALTHCARE      TIME INTERVAL MAY BE LIMITED BY GLOBAL ECOCLIDE







# DENY UNTIL WE DIE

*Agent Orange killed my father. Did it also kill my sisters? Like a detective, I set out to discover the truth.*

BY MICKEY BUTTS

**F**OR YEARS, I TRIED TO FORGET WHAT HAPPENED to my family in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Now all I want to do is remember.

The first to die was my father in 2003 at the age of 59. He was overweight and living in an assisted living center in Houston. Ever since his service in Vietnam, he'd struggled with too many health problems to count.

My sister Ami died next in 2010 outside of Memphis, at age 39. We were closer than many siblings. One summer when I was in college at Brown, we shared a basement room in a rambling, vegetarian co-op, where she lived barefoot, an Indian bracelet jingling softly around her ankle as she paced the communal kitchen, cooking the rice she largely subsisted on. Her infectious laughter often shook the walls. But when she died, she was paralyzed and unable to breathe, three years after being diagnosed with a merciless neurodegenerative disease called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

In 2020, I helped bury Ami's twin sister, Missie, amid a plague of coronavirus deaths in the sticky heat of a still summer morning, in a country cemetery amid fragrant oaks and wildflowers in the woods of Central Texas. She died of heart and lung failure at age 49, alone

in her apartment in Austin, after a decade-long battle with chronic lung disease, immune system problems, and mental illness that brought her in and out of mental hospitals.

As I watched Missie's ashes being poured into the ground, I led my family in singing the old-time gospel hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee." Farther than ever from God, I was filled with dark thoughts that grew increasingly loud.

I long thought my family's misfortune was unique. But I discovered my family was not alone. In my research, I learned about thousands of other children born with serious health conditions after their parents had served in Vietnam—while siblings like myself who were conceived before the war remained relatively healthy.

More than 50 years had passed since my father enlisted to serve in Vietnam as a U.S. Army nurse. At that point, three out of five members of my immediate family had died prematurely in middle age, each at the cusp of their next decade. I needed to know why.

To find out why my family members died and I did not, I immersed myself, like a detective, in the science behind one of the most expensively and diligently studied—and perhaps most willfully obfuscated—environmental disasters in modern history. I discovered the emerging field of epigenetics, which explains how a father's environmental exposure to toxic chemicals, not just a mother's, can be transmitted to his children's genes without ever changing the DNA sequence, with harmful effects to the body flicking on and off like a light switch, altering a host of bodily processes and functions.

LEFT: The author with his two sisters. Behind, bottom left: A U.S. Army helicopter landed in a forest defoliated by Agent Orange. Behind, top left: the author's father. Behind, center: Vietnamese women photographed by the author's father. Behind, top right: A patient arrives at the Army hospital, photographed by the author's father. All photographs courtesy of Mickey Butts.

I learned that the Vietnamese people, their erstwhile conquerors, and the children on both sides of the conflict born afterward have been collectively stalked by a capricious force that causes random genetic mayhem from birth through midlife and beyond, generation after generation. As with characters in a slow-moving Greek tragedy, a fatal flaw lay not just within the state and society—the flaw engaging in “forever wars,” with their devastating environmental and social costs. A flaw has also spread at the cellular level within the children of war.

## My Father's War

FROM 1967 TO 1969, MY FATHER WAS A CAPTAIN IN THE Army, tending to wounded soldiers in the 85th and 67th evacuation hospitals and in POW hospitals in and around Qui Nhon in Central Vietnam. Nurses like him often worked 12-hour shifts, six days a week, preparing up to 20 soldiers an hour for surgery after they had been evacuated in waves of frequently arriving helicopters, often after being horribly disfigured by napalm, land mines, grenades, and small arms. Nurses had to quickly make life and death decisions during triage about who could be saved, and who would be made comfortable with pillows and morphine while they were put behind screens to die.

In his free time, my father took hundreds of photographs. Their ordinariness belies the carnage he witnessed during the height of North Vietnam's Tet Offensive. My father's photos depict shy Vietnamese children posing on the streets, women in conical straw hats hawking rice and vegetables in village markets, Day-Glo Buddhist cemeteries in the highlands, and sparkling white-sand beaches where soldiers surfed in scenes reminiscent of the Francis Ford Coppola film *Apocalypse Now*.

My father's photographs also call to mind one of his favorite TV shows, *M\*A\*S\*H*, a comedy that harnessed the antics of doctors and nurses working in a field hospital during the Korean War to help Americans process their lingering despair over losing the Vietnam War. One photo of my father's shows a grinning man, shirtless and sunning himself on a makeshift lounge chair made out of an Army stretcher while his friend props up his flip-flopped feet on a sandbag that would normally have been stacked around the field hospital's flimsy walls to shield it from regular mortar fire.

My father helped patch up American and South Vietnamese soldiers as well as communist Vietnamese fighters, sending them all back into combat if they were able. Several of his photos depict urgent scenes of medics hustling dazed soldiers from helicopters into the hospital.

One of the war stories my father told was of sitting at his desk in the nursing station. Hearing enemy fire, he hit the floor. Bullet holes at chest level lined the wall where he had been sitting.

Years after my father's death, I found a blurry photo showing a doctor with a stethoscope treating a Vietnamese man whose eyes were wild with panic. Could he have been one of the Viet Cong soldiers my father had talked about patching up at a POW hospital and handing over to the South Vietnamese forces for what he knew was almost certain execution? Much later did I begin to suspect that my father's nervous laugh when telling these stories suggested that he didn't think

they were really all that funny. To this day, I share the same nervous laugh when talking about something uncomfortable and true.

As I was growing up in Houston, my father sometimes told me and my sisters colorful stories about treating wounded GIs, Viet Cong POWs, and civilians who were drenched in what we now know was the dioxin-contaminated defoliant Agent Orange. The military crop-dusted Vietnam in a fine, calibrated mist in order to flush out the Viet Cong from the dense jungles that protected them and to drive farmers from their villages.

“When they sprayed Agent Orange up in the highlands where your father worked as a nurse in a POW camp,” my mother remembers, “the civilians would come screaming and yelling into his hospital. He'd cut off their clothes before treating them.”

Vietnam was a chemistry experiment gone horribly awry. Herbicides were sprayed at more than 50 times greater concentrations than used on any farm field, and they were many times more toxic to humans, as they were mixed with jet fuels, Agent White, malathion, and hexachlorobenzene, a pesticide in the same class as DDT. Less than 1 microgram of dioxin alone can kill an adult guinea pig. The EPA's maximum dose of dioxin in drinking water is equivalent to 30 drops of Agent Orange in a 13 billion gallon container of water as high as the Empire State Building, estimates Patrick Hogan in his meticulously researched 2018 book *Silent Spring: Deadly Autumn of the Vietnam War*.

The field hospitals where my dad worked were located in Binh Dinh province—the 10th most heavily sprayed Agent Orange hotspot. The Air Force's declassified HERBS tapes show that Agent Orange spraying in Binh Dinh province accelerated sharply starting in February 1967, peaking at 9,000 gallons every few days in mid-1968, before gradually tapering off by the end of 1969—precisely the period of time when my father served there. The nearby Phu Cat airport was among the sites of a nearly \$1 billion U.S. cleanup at several air bases in Vietnam.

Hotspots in Southeast Asia are still heavily contaminated 50 years after the U.S. government blanketed jungles, rice paddies, rivers, and villages with more than 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides, contaminating the region with dioxin, one of the most toxic substances on the planet. Levels of dioxin in fish, ducks, chicken, and beef sold in markets in Bien Hoa, for example, were still highly contaminated with dioxin decades after the spraying ended.

## The Toxic Residue of War

WAR NOT ONLY WASTES LIVES. IT ALSO LAYS WASTE TO THE earth. The U.S. military is one of the biggest polluters on the planet.

The military generates toxic waste in abundance and in an infinite variety: munitions, explosives, jet fuels, pesticides, depleted uranium, lead, and countless other hazardous chemicals. It has burned a lot of that waste around the world in open-air pits. What it hasn't burned, it has dumped. Three out of four of the 1,200 Superfund sites in the U.S. are abandoned military sites. The military spends a billion dollars a year cleaning them up. The military is also helping warm the planet: if the U.S. military were a country, it would rank as the 47th largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, between Peru and Portugal.

Even when the U.S. military departs in defeat—as it did in Afghanistan and before that in Vietnam—wars never really end. The damage





U.S. Army "Huey" helicopter spraying Agent Orange over agricultural land during the Vietnam War in its herbicidal warfare campaign. Wikimedia.

lingers for generations, not just in the land, the air, and the water, but also in the psyches of the soldiers who fought—and as we now know, in their very cells.

The damage continues to this day among the next generation of veterans, thousands of whom have fallen sick and died after being exposed to toxins spread over Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the Middle East after the disposal of chemicals, munitions, petroleum products, plastics, and other hazardous waste materials in open-air burn pits. President Biden's son Beau died from brain cancer that the President believes may have been linked to massive burn pits he was exposed to during his service in Iraq.

Scores of soldiers have experienced mysterious ailments that have tormented them for years, even decades, after they served. Much less well known, however, is the intergenerational genetic havoc that America's wars have wreaked on the American children of those who served.

Take the case of Agent Orange. The chemical cocktail has short-circuited the health of hundreds of thousands of U.S. children of Vietnam veterans, estimates Heather Bowser, a cofounder of Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Alliance (COVVHA). Bowser was born prematurely, missing a leg and fingers, after her father's service in Vietnam.

Many Vietnam vets and their children tell strikingly similar stories. Everything was fine with the kids conceived before Vietnam. But the children conceived afterward were plagued with unusual health con-

ditions that previously did not exist in their families. A private group run by COVVHA has more than 5,000 members on Facebook. Many COVVHA members have reported mysterious birth defects, autoimmune diseases, cancers, fertility issues, and chronic ailments. A common way many people join the group is with a post cataloguing their family's suffering that ends with something to the effect of "Am I alone?"

One member of COVVHA is Lori Weber, 44, of Canton, Michigan. Her father, Donald Schoenemann, 73, served in Vietnam in 1967 as a sergeant and reconnaissance specialist in D Troop of the 7–17th Air Cavalry, known at the time as the "Ruthless Riders." Schoenemann would spend long nights in the jungles of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and in Cambodia, crawling through barren fields soon after they had been sprayed with a sticky, sweet-smelling substance that sometimes also rained down on him and his fellow soldiers.

Weber showed me a photo that her father took as he lay in a clearing where his chopper had landed. All around him, the former jungle was withered and desiccated, like straw. The photo helped him prove to the VA that he was exposed to Agent Orange, and the VA later recognized Schoenemann as 100% Agent Orange disabled for Parkinson's disease and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), meaning he has a total disability preventing him from working. He has tremors that are now getting worse, and he can't feed or care for himself.

## Diseases Associated with Agent Orange

The VA recognizes the following health problems as conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange for which veterans are eligible for benefits:

- AL amyloidosis
- Bladder cancer
- Cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus
- Chloracne
- Chronic b-cell leukemias
- Diabetes mellitus type 2
- Hodgkin's disease
- Hypothyroidism
- Ischemic heart disease
- Multiple myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- Parkinsonism
- Parkinson's disease
- Peripheral neuropathy, early-onset
- Porphyria cutanea tarda
- Prostate cancer
- Soft tissue sarcomas

for second-generation Agent Orange exposure. "I am inclined to believe that Lori Weber's father (through his exposure to Agent Orange) ... passed on presumed a genetic mutation to his daughter causing her birth defects and abnormal healing of cartilage and bone," Dr. Paul wrote. Weber says the guilt that her father lives with because of her disability is heart-wrenching. She estimates she has spoken at 18 town hall meetings for veterans around Michigan, and she has met many others like her dad. "Every time I speak, I get off the stage and the veterans come up to me crying and apologizing," she says. "My heart just breaks that they take it as their fault, when it is not."

One more thing Weber noted—which may be purely anecdotal—is that many of the hundreds of vets she has talked to say their health rapidly deteriorated around age 60, and with a lot of their children, things

It turns out that the cartilage of Weber's hip joint had been slowly deteriorating as she was growing up. One day, she was walking down the sidewalk with her third-grade son when she suddenly fell face down, her foot rotated in the wrong direction and her hip dislocated. At age 32, she was diagnosed with all three forms of hip dysplasia, which is a problem with how well the thigh bone fits into the hip socket. She has since had multiple spinal surgeries for her spina bifida occulta and related defects of the spine. In total, she has had 30 surgeries.

Weber's 16-year-old son was born prematurely and has severe asthma, extreme flexibility in his elbows and shoulders, difficulty swallowing, and a painfully twisted neck. Weber had two miscarriages before having him. Weber's endocrinologist, Dr. Sander J. Paul, a professor of internal medicine at the Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine outside Detroit, Michigan, wrote a remarkable letter to the VA in 2014 to support her still unsettled disability claim

worsened around age 30—similar to my father and sisters.

An estimated 2 to 4 million Americans served in Vietnam, along with hundreds of thousands of Australians, New Zealanders, and South Koreans. If each one of the millions of American and other allied veterans had an average of two children after the war, as many as 8 million children of these non-Vietnamese veterans from Vietnam could be potentially affected. If 10% developed health problems, that would total over 1 million children. This doesn't include the estimated 3 million Vietnamese whose health has been seriously affected, and who continue to be born with staggering rates of birth defects.

COVHA cofounder Heather Bowser has traveled to Vietnam multiple times. On one visit, she toured the area where the long-closed 24th evacuation hospital had once operated in Long Binh, near the former Bien Hoa air base. The hospital was similar to the one where my father served, with a nearby air base where flyers took off to spray Agent Orange. She learned that these airmen were oftentimes ordered to dump any remaining chemicals into a nearby river rather than fly back with a full load. It was the same river that supplied the base's water, which was also used to wash soldiers' clothes.

Agent Orange was routinely sprayed around the tents of soldiers and medical staff to control weeds, sometimes by nurses and doctors themselves, and the chemical was often used to clear the ground for the construction of evacuation hospitals and air bases, which explains why the concentrations there are often high to this day.

"Some people think that Agent Orange exposure only came from being in the jungle," says Bowser. "But now we know our men and women were exposed no matter where they were."

Bowser says her dad, Bill, a steel worker in Steubenville, Ohio, died of a massive heart attack at age 50 when Bowser was 24 years old. He routinely saw areas sprayed with Agent Orange: "The area would green up really quick, and then it would be completely dead," she says. "And that's kind of like what happened with the Vietnam veterans as well."

Many Vietnam vets would come home seemingly healthy after the war, but their health was fleeting, like the plants sprayed with Agent Orange. She has seen many young Vietnam vets become ill and die of "old men's diseases" long before their time.

Her mother continued to fight the VA for her father's benefits until they were posthumously awarded in the 2000s. "I honestly feel like the children of Vietnam veterans will be treated in the same manner: Different generations, deny until we die," Bowser says.

## A Toxic Legacy

MY FATHER WAS NEVER THE SAME AFTER HE CAME BACK from Vietnam. A relatively idealistic, cheerful man returned fundamentally changed, my relatives told me consistently. After working nights at the now-closed Letterman Army Hospital on San Francisco's Presidio Army Base, my father was angry, withdrawn, and depressed. He slept all day, and my mother seldom saw him. She remembers raising us kids mostly alone in those difficult times up until their divorce when I was five years old. My father once hit her so hard he partially detached her retina.

Upon coming back to the United States, my father worked for 20 years with veterans locked up in the psychiatric wards of U.S. Depart-



ment of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals. He would describe chaotic scenes restraining patients that were straight out of the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, starring Jack Nicholson as the rebellious leader of a mental institution.

Over his life, my father endured a cascade of health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, peripheral neuropathy, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), immune system disorders, skin problems, and mental health issues. He lost his right foot to diabetes and peripheral neuropathy and underwent triple bypass surgery.

Like many veterans, my dad battled the VA for decades to receive the medical care and disability benefits he felt he was owed for his Agent Orange exposure. And like many veterans, he was consistently denied benefits, until he was mysteriously granted them. Records I have obtained show that the VA would eventually declare my father to be partially disabled from his exposure to Agent Orange, covering his medical conditions dating back to 1986.

In 1991, President George H.W. Bush approved the Agent Orange Act, which required that the VA treat the growing list of diseases associated with Agent Orange and other herbicides. As a result of the related Nehmer class-action lawsuit, the VA would pay an estimated \$4.5 billion in retroactive benefits to Vietnam veterans for health conditions resulting from their Agent Orange exposure, as well as tens of billions of dollars more each year in ongoing benefits.

My father eventually received a rating of up to 60% disability from the VA for the heart disease, diabetes, and peripheral neuropathy he suffered from. He died in 2003 following more than a week in a coma, after being found unconscious in his assisted living room. From what I pieced together, it could have been a prescription drug overdose that killed him.

Out of the blue, in 2014, I received a letter from the VA informing me, in typical government bureaucratese, that my father was owed more than \$63,000 for long-denied Agent Orange disability claims. As next of kin, my sister Missie and I received my father's retroactive compensation more than a decade after he was buried.

## The Diseases We Inherit

IT WAS LONG THOUGHT THAT DAMAGE TO AN EMBRYO caused by environmental exposure in men could result only from changes in the DNA of sperm. That was the main route imagined for the transmission of genetic mutations, since men contribute their DNA to an egg through their sperm.

But scientists are starting to understand that men can also pass down birth defects through what is known as transgenerational epigenetic inheritance (TEI). Dioxin and many other environmental toxins can modify a cell's genetic material without altering DNA, through the regulation of what's known as the epigenome.

Epigenetics is the study of how behaviors and the environment can affect the way genes work, turning genes on or off and changing their ability to form proteins. Changes introduced during the epigenetic process can lead to errors that ultimately cause diseases such as cancer, metabolic disorders, and degenerative disorders; a predisposition for such diseases can then be passed down to offspring, generation after generation.

Linda Birnbaum is a leading U.S. toxicologist and Agent Orange expert who has studied the effects of dioxin and other environmental contaminants for decades. She told me that epigenetics is a "likely mechanism" for male-mediated transmission of birth defects in veterans. Before she retired in 2018 after disagreeing with the actions by the Trump administration's EPA, Birnbaum was the director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), a \$775 million agency that's part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

"I think the military wants to avoid any liability," she says. "They'll do anything they can to do that."

For a long time, there was really no clear human data showing paternal effects from dioxin exposure, says Birnbaum. But a large number of recent studies have shown a clear link between dioxin exposure and mutations in animals. For instance, a 2012 study in *PLOS One* by Mohan Manikkam and colleagues found that dioxin exposure in pregnant female rats caused a multitude of adult-onset diseases not just in a rat's children, but also in its *grandchildren*.

Birnbaum says only one long-term study exists of paternal transmission of genetic defects following dioxin exposure. The U.S. Air Force conducted it on the men who flew the aircraft that sprayed Agent Orange. They flew "low and slow" like crop-dusters over the treetops, straight into enemy fire, taking the most enemy hits of any aircraft in the Air Force. These "Ranch Handlers" were highly exposed to dioxin as they physically handled barrels of Agent Orange and as the clouds of toxic herbicides drifted back into their aircraft while they were spraying over the jungles of Vietnam.

In its longitudinal study of the 2,613 Ranch Handlers from 1982 to 2002, the Air Force failed to find a connection between Agent Orange exposure and any health problems in veterans, as well as between Agent Orange and any birth defects and health problems in veterans' children. It did find an elevated rate of birth defects, particularly of nervous system defects. But a scientist involved in the Air Force's Ranch Hand Study has charged that his superiors altered results and methodology to cause the findings to appear less statistically conclusive, and a 1994 report had faulted the Ranch Hand Study for numerous methodological lapses, including the exclusion of critical data.

To address methodological concerns such as these, the Air Force released the full data set of the Ranch Hand Study to the Vietnam Veterans Association for independent analysis. In a previously unreported study, Emeritus Professor George Knafelz of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that the children of Ranch Handlers with high dioxin levels were nearly twice as likely to have a major birth defect as the children of both non-Ranch Hand participants and Ranch Hand participants having lower dioxin levels. The upshot: Having a high dioxin level was significantly related to having children with major birth defects.

Linda Schwartz, a highly decorated Air Force nurse who treated wounded soldiers evacuated from Vietnam to Japan and who became an expert about women veterans exposed to Agent Orange, confirmed the significance of Knafelz's 2018 findings. As former assistant secretary of veterans affairs for policy and planning under President Obama, the retired Air Force major and loyal "blue-suiter" has testi-



fied more than two dozen times before Congress.

"I have a long and storied history of fighting the Air Force Ranch Hand Study," she told me. "I don't think the study did justice to the Air Force."

## What Remains

IN 2007, MY FAMILY BEGAN TO SERIOUSLY SUSPECT THAT my father's Agent Orange exposure could have also somehow affected my sisters' health. That year, my sister Ami was diagnosed with ALS, a rare and devastating neurodegenerative disease that causes paralysis and near-certain death within two to five years of diagnosis for the vast majority of people. She lived outside Memphis, an hour's drive from where my family once had a farm in northern Mississippi.

The first inkling that Ami had ALS was after the birth of her second child. She couldn't hold up her left arm and started wearing a sling to help breastfeed him. After a painful spinal tap, the doctor bluntly told Ami that she had ALS. It became clear that the diagnosis was correct; in no time at all, she needed a hulking motorized wheelchair to get around. Once on a visit, I cut up food for my paralyzed younger sister and fed her. I bumbled around trying, without much skill, to help transfer her into her bed at night.

Ami passed away in 2010 after suffocating to death. She had just reached the stage where she couldn't quite breathe on her own without assistance, like many ALS patients.

I have now learned that dioxin exposure significantly increases the risk of ALS. The connection between Agent Orange and ALS in the children of veterans hasn't been studied, but scientists know that U.S. veterans from all wars are twice as likely to suffer from ALS, a disease that the military now automatically presumes to be service-connected for those unlucky enough to suffer and quickly die from it.

The death of my other sister, Missie, Ami's twin, came a decade later. She collapsed suddenly in her apartment in Austin, in the summer of 2020, while tethered to the oxygen that she used after nearly dying seven years earlier while in a coma with acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS)—a condition that also affects COVID-19 patients—following a bout of the H1N1 flu. She also cycled in and out of psychiatric hospitals for bipolar disorder. The lung, immune system, and mental health conditions she suffered from are quite common among the children of veterans conceived after their service in Vietnam.

"Your father told me he wished he'd never had the girls," a relative told me about my sisters, after Missie's passing. "Because of his immune system, they were compromised. He was glad you were conceived before he went to Vietnam."

A wave of survivor's guilt crashed over me.

## Cataloguing the Suffering

WHAT MY FAMILY EXPERIENCED IS INCREDIBLY COMMON: children conceived by male veterans before Vietnam were healthy, while those conceived after Vietnam were terribly sick.

A groundbreaking 2016 investigation from ProPublica and *The Virginian-Pilot* found that the odds of having a child born with birth defects and severe health problems were more than one third higher for veterans exposed to Agent Orange than for those who weren't.

Ten years earlier, researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 22 studies of Agent Orange and birth defects, published in 2006 in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, finding an almost doubling of the risk of birth defects on average, with three times higher risk among the Vietnamese, who were often more highly exposed.

A previously unreported analysis that I have uncovered from the advocacy group Birth Defect Research for Children compared 2,189 children of fathers who were Vietnam veterans with 3,778 children of non-veteran fathers. The group found a host of profound differences between the two populations.

Executive Director Betty Mekdeci says that after the group's National Birth Defect Registry was founded in 1990, results immediately began pouring in showing much higher rates of structural birth defects like spina bifida, cleft palate, heart and limb defects, and muscle defects from the children of Vietnam veterans. The group has assembled the largest private registry of the children of veterans in existence.

Mekdeci thinks the links between Agent Orange and structural birth defects may be just the "tip of the iceberg." The more frequent outcomes of prenatal exposure to dioxin may be in the area of immunological, neurological, and neuroendocrine problems—what are now known as "functional" birth defects, which the NIH has also recognized.

Her registry started finding numerous reports of significantly higher levels among veterans' children of functional birth defects such as cancers and tumors; immune disorders such as chronic infections; endocrine disorders such as thyroid disease and diabetes; learning, attention, and behavioral problems; gastrointestinal problems; and allergy, asthma, and skin problems.

At the request of veterans, the group added questions to its registry about the grandchildren of Vietnam veterans. So far it has included about 300 grandchildren. Mekdeci is seeing the same pattern in grandchildren as in the children of veterans.

To determine how dioxin could be affecting the children and grandchildren of Agent Orange-exposed veterans, the VA is currently conducting two long-delayed studies that are among the efforts that Congress ordered in 2016 through the Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act. The studies could signal that the government is once again preparing to expand benefits to millions more people in poor health. That would also potentially open up the government to billions of dollars in benefits and healthcare owed not only to Americans and other allies, but also to the Vietnamese people.

## Final Coda for Survivors

THE AIR FORCE PROJECT TO SPRAY TOXIC HERBICIDES over Vietnam to clear the jungle, destroy food supplies, and force Vietnamese civilians to resettle in U.S.-run camps was an enormous operation, damaging or destroying 3 to 5 million acres of forest and a half million acres of crops—more than 10 percent of Vietnam. It affected an estimated 4.8 million Vietnamese and American troops.

Beginning in the 1980s, millions of veterans have been party to lawsuits and court cases. The largest was a 1984 out-of-court settlement on behalf of 2.4 million Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent



Orange, directed at seven chemical companies that manufactured the herbicides, including Dow and Monsanto, since veterans cannot legally sue the U.S. government for personal injuries suffered while in service, except if they can prove medical malpractice. The companies ultimately agreed to pay \$240 million in compensation to the veterans or their next of kin as a result of an unprecedented mass class-action toxic tort case, the first in American legal history.

Over the years, however, the VA has matched these legal settlements with frequent denials of disability benefits, like it did with my father all of his life. Under legal and legislative pressure it has paired those denials with mysteriously granted additions to the long list of diseases linked to Agent Orange, three more of which Congress approved on January 1, 2021.

One potential avenue for justice among those exposed is the Victims of Agent Orange Act of 2021, proposed by Rep. Barbara Lee in June 2021. The bill has been repeatedly introduced over the years and has had bipartisan cosponsors. It would direct the VA to research Agent Orange health issues among U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers and citizens, and would specifically provide compensation and medical care for the children of male Vietnam veterans who are affected by certain birth defects, as well as the children of Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans whose relatives were exposed. If the U.S. had a social-safety-net and healthcare system that covers all disabled kids without hassle, regardless of income, this legislation wouldn't be necessary. But it is.

Paying for children's health care and living expenses is only the start of what the U.S. government could do. Lori Weber and many other veterans and children disabled by Agent Orange want the government to complete a health study of the children of Vietnam veterans. She says it's only fair that the 18 presumptive birth defects already recognized for female Vietnam Veterans be extended to male veterans so their children can also receive monthly compensation and medical care. Weber would also like to see children covered under the VA program that currently pays for some of the health care costs of the spouses of disabled and deceased veterans.

During his presidential campaign, Joe Biden called for expanding the list of Agent Orange-connected diseases, and promised action to publish long-delayed studies on the effects of Agent Orange in the descendants of exposed veterans. "We have to right this wrong and make sure nothing like this ever happens again," Biden said to veterans.

But the issue is even larger than lending a hand to the millions of innocent victims of war and helping them achieve a true measure of health, dignity, and security. It's about the dirty business of war itself. Claiming ignorance or feigning disinterest is no strategy to protect the planet from the literal and figurative toxicity inherent in waging war. Americans are fooling themselves if they think the military has "gone green" with fleets using biofuels, or with battery-powered drones killing people remotely. As we speak, war is spreading toxins around the world. The health and environmental impacts of wars will continue to be felt for generations to come, long after the wars themselves are over.

Of course, governments like our own will promise to do better in the future. But can veterans and their children ever forgive what's happened in the past, and what continues to happen in the present?



ABOVE: The author and his two sisters.  
BELOW: The author's father outside the hospital in Vietnam.

Writing about a dead child in *Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulkner wrote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Faulkner composed his most famous line from his magnolia-lined home at Rowan Oak in Oxford, where I took walks, sometimes with my sister Ami, as a freshman at the University of Mississippi before I transferred to Brown.

Someday I hope to take part in a performance of one of the many requiems I've sung over the years as a professional choral singer. This time, however, I pray that the requiem will be for the veterans, children, and other victims felled by Agent Orange.

Like the supplicants of ancient religious rites, we will once again intone these words in memory of the dead: "Have mercy on us. Deliver us. And grant us rest." ♣

*Mickey Butts is a writer and editor who lives in Berkeley, California. He has written and edited for a wide range of national and local magazines and newspapers. Learn more at <http://www.mickeybutts.com>.*



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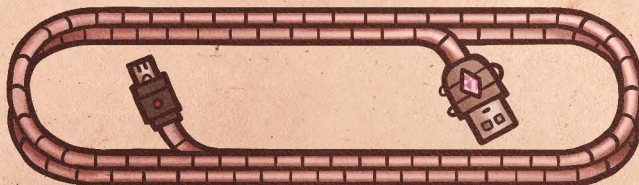
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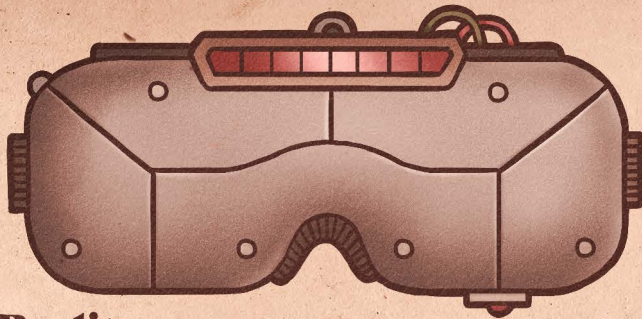
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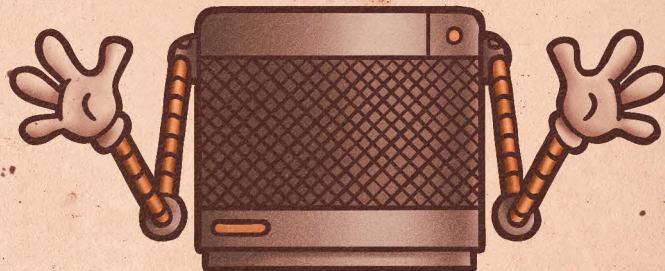
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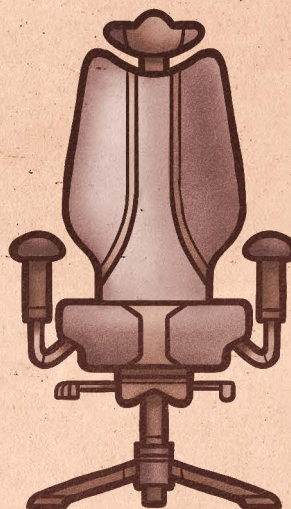
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# MALL OF DREAMS

*Shrek, Unpaid Liens, and  
The American Nightmare*

**by Dan Barrecchia**





**D**URING THE 2020 lockdown, to get some relief from the isolation of living alone, I spent a lot of time driving aimlessly around Northern New Jersey. Usually, I went out without a destination in mind. Quite often I found myself driving past Route 3 in the Meadowlands, a strip of wetlands inhabited by sporting stadiums and marred by pollution and excessive development, and perhaps best known in New Jersey lore for being the place where union boss Jimmy Hoffa is supposedly buried. I reflected a lot on my childhood growing up in a rural-suburban town an hour west of New York City that had nothing but a few lakes and an opioid crisis.

On these drives, I often passed a newly opened monstrosity called the American Dream Mall in East Rutherford. My thoughts would return to 2004, when I was ten years old. This was before the mall existed, when there was just speculative, excited talk amongst my peers about a new “supermall” coming soon. It was going to have an indoor ski slope and would be right next to Giants Stadium, home of my favorite football team. The mall was going to be, by far, the most thrilling place near to us. All year we wondered when it was coming and when we would get to take a class trip there. Forget interactive learning at our planned trip to the Liberty Science Center—we wanted snow tubing and cotton candy.

Fast forward roughly sixteen years. Five governors, four presidents, ten warmest years on record, two economic recessions, and one global pandemic later—in this time, I had grown up (somewhat), lived on my own, traveled the country in a rock band, found and lost love time and again, and seen a thing or two—and finally, the

oversized shopping center was open. Over a decade and a half, the project had lost investor after investor, went through several name changes, caused the deaths of two construction workers, and remained a half-built eyesore for Manhattan commuters—or as Chris Christie put it, “a disgrace to the eyes as you drive up the New Jersey Turnpike.” Like most New Jersey residents, I had long ago given up any expectation that the mall would be built. But after an overly drawn out and tumultuous construction, the mall of my childhood dreams, now named the “American Dream,” has opened.

The original “American Dream”—the promise of equal opportunity for everyone and wealth for all who work hard enough—is a fiction. This “American Dream” is increasingly unattainable for the vast majority of Americans. The bottom 80% of Americans own only about 14% of the country’s total wealth, while the top 1% own about half of it. Americans owe almost two trillion in student debts. The federal minimum wage has stagnated since 2009, stuck at \$7.25 an hour, while the cost of living becomes more expensive every year. Over the course of the pandemic alone, U.S. billionaires have seen their wealth increase by roughly 70%.

Demand for products is manufactured by the corporations that sell them, then propagandized to us through the media outlets that they own and advertise on. We are a gaslit culture, coerced into and force fed a way of life that serves nothing but the bottom line for the richest few.

What’s more, the majority of our elected officials have been corrupted by corporate money. Time after time, they prop up the institutions that profit off of endless consumerism and debt paid by people trying to earn the unattainable American Dream. Although the playland of politicians, Washington, D.C., is not actually on swampland, the “metaphor gets its clout from the notion that Washington was built in an actual physical swamp, whose foul landscape has somehow nourished rotten politics.” The American Dream Mall, built by corporate greed despite public concerns, exemplifies this “swamp” phenomenon perfectly, and provides a fitting symbol of how the idea of the “dream” is a cruel euphemism for corrupt capitalism in fetid swampland.

I have long outgrown the childhood version of myself that could find a place like the American Dream Mall amusing. But at some point in 2020, the isolation of lockdown had started to get the best of me. I found myself curious, after all these years, to see the inside of the American Dream Mall. I remembered how excited I once was for the place to be built. I decided to do something for my inner child, to disprove the cynic in the adult me and reaffirm the innocence of my younger self. As unappealing as I found the mall to be each time I passed by it, I decided it would be wrong not to at least give the finished product a look. Yes, the mall was a complete waste of material resources and space, and it glorified the consumerist tendencies ultimately destroying our planet. But, similar to the way in which tragedy often becomes spectacle, I decided I wanted a clear look into the cold plastic heart of an empire in decline. Part of me wanted to believe in the dream, even if for a few hours. And so, on a snowy winter day in early 2021, I finally worked up the gumption to make a visit.

## A Nightmare Decades in the Making

THE STORY OF HOW THE AMERICAN Dream mall came to be begins in 1994, the year I was born. The Mills Corporation first came up with the idea of a Meadowlands mall in the mid-90s. Due to EPA restrictions and conflicting priorities with nearby stadiums, the mall’s original concept, to be built on a protected conservation area, never came to be. A few years later, the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority was on the lookout for a developer to start a project next to the Continental Airlines Arena after word got out that the New Jersey Nets might no longer use the Arena as its home. The Authority feared a loss of occupancy and needed something new that would draw people to the complex. Having had success with their “Xanadu” mall in Barcelona, Mills Corp. jumped on the opportunity, partnering with Mack-Cali group, and broke ground in 2004, expecting to open their new American version of Xanadu’s doors a couple years later. Somewhere during the early stages of development, things were not going as planned, and Mills sold the entire project to Colony Capital in 2006. In true New Jersey fashion, this is where things got shady. Missed payments caused lenders to withdraw, withdrawing lenders caused retailers to drop out of the plans, and at one point, a wall even collapsed on the indoor ski slope due (ironically enough) to record snowfall, causing even more delays.

But the more the place failed to get built, the more money the state and investors wanted to sink into it. Over \$1 billion in taxpayer money, along with several billion more in private loans, have been spent over the course of its construction. Even with the obvious decline in retail sales across the country, the powers that be wanted this mall to exist.

There had been some resistance from local municipalities along the way, and this prolonged the development of the project. Local mayors and townspeople worried about increased traffic and pollution to the already congested area, which is an important ecological home to 125 bird species and is already prone to flooding. But regardless of public opinion, the insatiable appetite of local governments, private developers, and retailers pushed on, though nobody seemed to believe it would actually be a success. After years of stagnation and loss of public interest, by 2011, multinational development and finance corporation Triple Five took reins of the incomplete project. Triple Five Worldwide, creator of the two largest malls in North America (The Mall of America in Bloomington, MN and the West Edmonton mall in Alberta, Canada) was finally able to make the impossible happen.

To push the project over the finish line, Triple Five made an easy payment of \$20 million to the mayor of East Rutherford, James Casella, for his town’s new police station, and an issuance of millions of dollars in tax exempt bonds to nearby municipalities. Finally, with local governments paid off, the American Dream mall was open for business in late 2019—almost two decades since the first construction workers broke ground and just months before a global pandemic was about to hit. The developers giving out all of this money presum-





"THE AVENUE," THE LUXURY WING OF THE AMERICAN DREAM MALL

ably did not foresee the financial trouble they were about to face.

In 2020, Triple Five defaulted on their Mall of America monthly mortgage payments twice. To add to it, they pledged 49% of The Mall of America and Edmonton Mall as collateral for the American Dream Mall's construction loans. Now, multiple construction companies have filed unpaid liens against Triple Five, stating they are owed millions in construction fees.

But when interviewed about the mall by the *New York Times* in 2019, Triple Five's president said that:

*"...anyone who doubted the project's viability should remember that [the company president's] family used its other mall properties as collateral and 'invested substantial amounts of our own personal money into this project.' 'We believe we are visionaries,' he said. 'And sometimes to be a visionary, to step outside of the norm, you have to think big.'"*

Some might think it strange or delusional to call it "visionary" to build another energy-guzzling mall and entertainment center in the midst of a climate crisis. But such cynics clearly do not understand the American Dream.

*1. As one NJ man put it in an op-ed: "As a historian and avid skier, what I find so jarring about the American Dream Meadowlands is the dissonance of its name and the timing of its completion. Its doors are opening just as malls around the country are shuttering, and as economic inequality and climate change have rendered the postwar vision of the American Dream—modest but real prosperity, a better life for all and little luxuries like the Saturday ski trips that brightened my youth—ever harder to attain for ordinary Americans."*

## In the Mall

HAVING JUST WATCHED *2001: A SPACE Odyssey*, I entered the mall inspired to think of it as being a little like the film's spaceship, with its sinister HAL 9000 computer—a giant hubristic artificially intelligent vessel that took on a mind of its own and refused to shut off. (I was under no illusion that by going to the mall, I might find the "power down" button that would stop the ship from crashing.) I weaved my way through small crowds of skiers and snowboarders fully suited, ready to hit the "slope."<sup>1</sup> It struck me that humanity is on the path to messing up the planet so badly that maybe someday the only places to see snow will be at indoor ski slopes. Will the elite who escape to Mars replicate northeastern winters in their space pod cities? But maybe, I thought, and subtly hoped, I was wrong about it all. Maybe there would be something magical about this place that I could not foresee. I would reserve my judgment until I had seen the whole thing, all three million square feet of it.

Entering the retail section of the mall—which takes up about 45% of the total square footage—I noticed an eerie emptiness. More than half the space was still unused. Towering ceilings overhead, arching over three generous floors, absorbed echoes from the



small crowds. The swarms of masked patrons made their ways in different directions. There were hundreds of people, but it felt like much less. This place was monumental, built for tens of thousands, not mere hundreds (turns out it was getting only a quarter of its expected traffic at the time)—and these were masked faces and empty eyes. Muffled voices lost in the massive expanse of it all created a sort of white noise, a static. People wandered aimlessly, it seemed. I felt everyone shared an unexpressed feeling of not knowing why they were there.

The mall was like Las Vegas, an atmosphere similar to a casino. Bright fluorescent lights, people scuttling about rapidly, absurd overstimulation provoking suspension of disbelief. There was no room for thought. Your surroundings did the thinking for you. I could have sworn they were pumping oxygen in through the vents. Like all good casinos, its effectiveness was in making you believe anything could happen at any moment, forcing you to be present in its all encompassing chaotic plastic fantasy. It is only fitting that the centerpiece of the mall was a large fountain pool with a grassy knoll island, covered in Alice in Wonderland-esque mushrooms and magic gnome statues. It all seemed very out of place. As I observed the centerpiece, trying to figure out what was off about it, over the loudspeaker I heard a gentleman's voice interrupt the music that had been lightly playing in the background: *"If you are not feeling well, please go home and dream with us another day"*.

Just then I realized that this wasn't just Triple Five's dream, or governor Phil Murphy's dream, or Mayor James Casella's dream—this was our dream. We, too, the mallgoers, were supposed to contribute to the fantasy. The voice projected the workings of a handful of real estate developers and politicians onto the collective hopes of everyone at the mall that day.

In a sense, the voice on the speaker was right. This scenario was something I could have only imagined in a dream. Retail shopping in a 3 million square foot mall in the midst of a global pandemic, while hundreds of thousands of people were dying, was, in fact, surreal. This was not just a reminder, but a coercive suggestion provoking you to think that it was up to us, the individual, to dream. We were a society of individuals, not a collective. Thus, it was our individual responsibility to solve the pandemic. Forget about the immense systemic failings of our government and institutions to address the root causes of why they collectively failed to prevent and respond to the catastrophic plague we were living through. We were being told to navigate ourselves out of this, all while remaining loyal consumers.

*So, if you are not feeling well, go home—just don't give up on the dream.* So much for reserving my judgments. If only I could just believe. Yet, I couldn't help but think Triple Five knew something that I still did not. The ostentatiousness of my surroundings, the glow-in-the-dark mini golf, the socially distanced shopping for pointless items manufactured on the other side of the planet by people being paid slave wages... But I didn't want to let my inner child down. I wanted to find some "magic," to not lapse fully into cynicism. If my presumptions about the greed and carelessness in which the mall was built upon were right, if this place was truly as pointless as I thought it was, it was a tragic end to the dream I actually did hold

as a ten-year-old. Perhaps the theme parks on the other side of the mall would be better.

I made my way deeper into the maze. Signs pointing to Angry Birds mini golf guided my journey. (Angry Birds, my north star.) I remembered a quote I had read from an executive at Triple Five when asked about the mall: "It would have been much better if American Dream would have burned down or a hurricane had hit it, financially, because we would have been covered by insurance." As I walked past empty unopened stores and closed off vacant sections of the mall, I got the feeling I was in a movie in which the actors had no interest in participating. In fact, the "actors" were secretly hoping the movie would never actually be released. I remembered the gnomes and the mushrooms, and that there had been something off about them. I realized what it was. They were all off-white, as if they were generic unpainted arts and crafts projects just picked up from Michaels and carelessly placed on a turf island. No one had even bothered to give them any color.

Just then I looked up and there he was, in all his glory and unequivocal grandeur: Shrek. A huge replica of the green ogre riding a tube down a water slide towered over the people beneath, grinning somewhat menacingly. I was so caught up in my thoughts I hadn't realized that I had made it to the other side of the mall. A Nickelodeon theme park and a Dreamworks water park made up the massive expanse in front of me. They were immense, comprising over 50% of the mall's entire square footage. There were huge glass dome parks that looked like a scene straight out of the movie "Biodome," but instead of plants, the small stadium-sized dome water park, closed off to the public, was filled with huge waterslides and wave pools. It was glorious, yet deeply unsettling in its overbearing size.



AN INTELLIGENT SPECIES WOULD UTILIZE this immense space and vast amount of resources and materials for something more geared toward human and environmental needs. In fact, the man credited with designing the modern American shopping mall, Viennese architect and socialist Victor Gruen, never intended for shopping malls to be anything like they are. He was:

*"... a strict opponent of shopping centers that offered nothing beyond consumerism; he was a champion of holistic, environmentally friendly city planning focusing on the needs of individuals. Shopping malls were conceived to be third spaces, social gathering places in addition to the established social environments of home and work. Gruen hoped to recreate the experience of shop-lined streets mixed with cafes and restaurants, just as he remembered from his native Vienna."*

Instead of building this Dream mall, which sells us more things we don't need, we could house the homeless, build huge greenhouses for growing food, build a hospital, design the space around publicly determined needs, or, better yet, just leave the area, the swampland, natural. Contrary to the human-centric notion of swamps as ugly, unlivable places—places that throughout history had to be "drained" and controlled and dominated by humans—swamps are



important areas of biodiversity that we would do well to preserve and protect (especially since increased development over wetlands contributes to flooding).

Ah, but, this is what America does best: spend decades' worth of resources and taxpayer dollars on things only meant to serve wealthy investors that no one else really needs. No one except ten-year-old me, back in 2004, before I knew what things really were.

But ten year olds eventually grow up. They eventually leave childhood to become adults, to realize the world doesn't revolve just around them, that they have to take other people's considerations into account. The mall wasn't created by ten year olds. It was created by a society whose culture and values are *like* those of children in that these values seem not to have evolved past some primitive and environmentally destructive phase, that of consumer capitalism, which operates in a perpetual state of profit-seeking despite obvious harm to humans and all other forms of life on earth. I thought the mall would show me my inner child, or nurture my inner child. Instead it reminded me how fucked we are if we don't find a way to evolve beyond this toxic way of organizing our society around profit.

## Shrek and Tony Soprano

**A**S BASHFUL AND RUDE AS HE MAY HAVE BEEN, Shrek had many redeemable qualities. He was humble, courageous, kept to himself, never asked for more than what he deserved, and in the end, was willing to adapt and make altruistic decisions that were best for everyone around him. Shrek may be featured prominently in the Mall, but the culture that created the Mall has more in common with Tony Soprano, the main character in HBO's *The Sopranos*, set in New Jersey. Tony has a deep seated denial of the past and an unwillingness to change that fuels his narcissistic pursuit of personal gain. Tony, always referencing the values of 1950s America to justify his backwards, sociopathic personal attitude, has zero self-awareness. For example, he tells his daughter, Meadow, "You see, out there, it's the 1990s, but in this house, it's 1954" when scolding her about trying to have a conversation about sex. Like the American Dream Mall, he lives in delusion about his sociopathy, convincing himself he has values.

At least Tony's life had an ending. An abrupt one. Whatever happened in *The Sopranos'* famous cut to black final scene, the bandage was ripped off. But the developers of the Dream mall want 30 seasons. The American Dream will persist, whatever happens to us or the climate, just as future developments will get pushed through in the endless pursuit of profit.

That's why this colossal New Jersey mall exemplifies the cold plastic heart of our declining empire so well. Most of us, regardless of our position on the political spectrum, share a feeling that things are not right in our country, but the two political parties in power simply refuse to do anything substantial about this state of affairs. There is no end to the ever-expanding corporate bottom line that many of our institutions rely on for funding, and what else is this mall but a physical embodiment of the greed our nation has been promoting and rewarding for decades? It is nothing new.

Profit and military aggression will always come before basic human needs. This is why we have little to no ability to collectively handle a pandemic. This is why Joe Biden is still bombing Syria. Taxpayer dollars will always be carelessly spent on things that don't serve taxpayers.

As I left the mall, I couldn't help but feel a sort of grief. Not just for the innocence of my 5th-grade self, but for pre-pandemic life, whatever it was. Deep down I knew this place was *wrong*, and it was painful to witness its careless, shameless, wasteful grandiosity. Visitors who weren't feeling well were told to *go home and come dream another day*. They weren't being wished *safety*, and once they got out of the mall, they'd go back to their lives, which might or might not include health care or the ability to actually isolate or otherwise stay safe during the pandemic. Mainly, mall goers were being reminded to keep consuming.

I myself was healthy, but living paycheck to paycheck, with little extra spending money—not the ideal consumer. I did not manage to find the "power down" button. I didn't transcend into an eternal being and witness the ever-expanding creation of infinity, as David Bowman did after defeating HAL in 2001. I just walked around aimlessly for a bit, convincing myself I was looking for answers to questions I already knew the answer to.

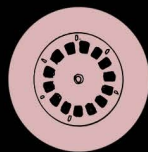
What I was really looking for was something to validate the innocence in myself. Going to the mall, then, was a coping mechanism I used amidst a shut down world that I felt could collapse any day. I was hoping that by diving into the belly of the beast, I would find some glimmering speck of hope to convince me that things weren't as bad as they seemed. I didn't find that. What I found was a giant dead zone made up of expensive materials that will probably outlast our civilization—as long as it doesn't collapse into the swamp it was built on. A modern Atlantis, eventually. Going to the mall did provide me with closure, though, the freedom to mourn the loss of my childhood innocence and the loss of my faith in the American Dream. It also gave me the freedom to imagine a society that's different from ours, one in which we actually take care of each other and the world around us. ✚





# CONSUMER GORE

The malls of America are dead, but not completely so. This one is in fact undead, stalked by a family of zombie shoppers searching for the flesh of fellow consumers to consume. Unfortunately, a few live human beings have succumbed to their shopaholism and returned to the mall in search of sales. Can you find a hiding human for each zombie to eat, and also the objects they need to satisfy their spree?



POWER  
CORP





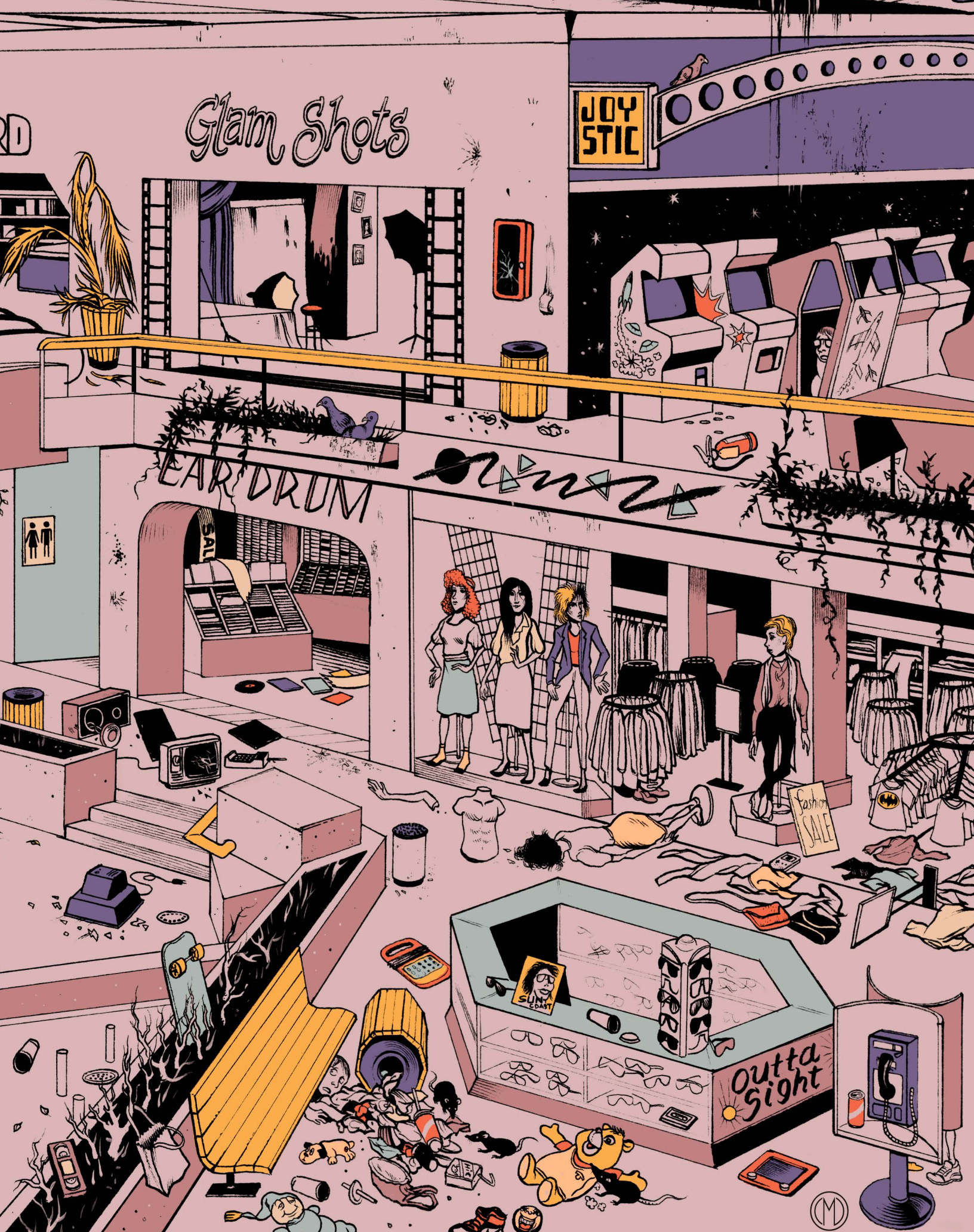
# Glam Shots

JOY  
STIC

# EAR DRUM

fashion  
SALE

Outta Sight





# HOW THE STATE CREATED FAST FOOD

by Alex Park



IN RESPONSE TO HUNDREDS OF FAST-FOOD WORKERS' strikes and protests over the last seven years, fast food executives have emerged as some of the most reliable defenders of government apathy toward the working poor.

When California raised its minimum wage in 2016, following a series of fast-food worker protests, former McDonald's CEO Ed Rensi called it an attempt to subvert "economic reality" and compared the unions that backed the move to the Soviet central planners of old. Andy Puzder, CEO of the parent company of Hardee's and Carl's Jr., joined in to make his own impassioned plea against a change. "This is the problem with Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton and progressives who push very hard to raise the minimum wage," he said. "Does it really help if Sally makes \$3 more an hour if Suzie has no job?"<sup>1</sup> (President Trump later nominated Puzder to lead the U.S. Department of Labor, but Puzder eventually withdrew himself from consideration due to lack of GOP support.)

In the United States, about 197,000 fast food restaurants employ about two percent of the workforce.<sup>2</sup> Fast-food workers are systematically underpaid and suffer disproportionately from a lack of universal healthcare: 87% of American fast-food workers do not have employer-provided health benefits—more than twice the rate of the general population—and at least 20% live below the poverty line.

We often think of these statistics as the consequence of the shrinking of western governments, a scaling back of the state à la Ronald Reagan's assertion that "government is the problem." But the same governments which started, in the late 1960s, slashing health and welfare programs that maintained a standard of living for the working poor, and then accelerated their cuts in the 1980s, simultaneously expanded their powers to help business. The shift was anything but coincidental: as scholars like Philip Mirowski and Quinn Slobodian have written, the prevailing political philosophy of the time—what critics call "neoliberalism"—advocates for a strong state, one that expands the domain of the market at every opportunity. As Mirowski writes, the foremost political goal of neoliberals "is not to destroy the state, but to take control of it, and to redefine its structure and function, in order to create and maintain the market-friendly culture."

"Contrary to the dichotomies and rigidities that characterized classical liberalism with regard to its proposed firewalls between economics and politics," Mirowski goes on to say, "neoliberalism has to be understood as a flexible and pragmatic response to the previous crisis of capitalism (viz., the Great Depression) with a clear vision of what needed to be opposed by all means: a planned economy and a vibrant welfare state."<sup>3</sup>

1. In the same interview, Puzder spoke of his aspiration to open a restaurant staffed entirely by robots. "They're always polite, they always upsell, they never take vacation, they never show up late," he said in an overt comparison to the human employees he was looking to replace. "There's never a slip-and-fall, or an age, sex, or race discrimination case."

2. The figure—equivalent to about one for every 19 people—is up almost five percent from ten years ago. None of the crises of the last year and a half have slowed the trend. As the *WALL STREET JOURNAL* put it last October, "Big, well-capitalized chains"—like McDonald's—"are thriving while small independents struggle to keep their kitchens open."

3. For more of Mirowski on neoliberalism, see his 2013 book, *NEVER LET A SERIOUS CRISIS GO TO WASTE: HOW NEOLIBERALISM SURVIVED THE FINANCIAL MELTDOWN*. For a worthwhile look at neoliberalism and globalization, specifically, see Quinn Slobodian's 2020 book *GLOBALISTS: THE END OF EMPIRE AND THE BIRTH OF NEOLIBERALISM*.



The result is a government that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, attentive to the moneymakers' every need and neglectful of everyone else's. In response to any cry for help from the working poor, defenders of the status quo could always make the same refrain: the government can't help you. Helping you isn't the government's problem.

So what can fast food tell us about the evolving role of the state in a capitalist society, in America and around the world? A great deal, it turns out: as well as being a throughline in many of the world's health and environmental problems, the fast food industry is a showcase of the entire market-centric state's biggest hypocrisies.

**F**AST FOOD IS AS GLOBAL AS CAPITALISM ITSELF, AS the industry's biggest players now earn most of their profits outside the United States. McDonald's entered the Caribbean and Latin America via Puerto Rico in 1967 and Costa Rica in 1970, and Asia, via Hong Kong, in 1975. In 1971, KFC became the first foreign fast food chain in Africa, opening a restaurant in apartheid South Africa. KFC now operates in 24 countries across the continent, having added Rwanda to the list in 2020, and Sudan, Gabon, Senegal, and Madagascar the year before.

Raw materials are essential to the industry's success, and every place it goes, the industry depends on state intervention to ensure steady supplies. In developing countries, fast food has been both a beneficiary and a proponent of both industrial agriculture and liberalized trade agreements which make it cheaper to buy goods from the far side of the world than from up the road. Every chain now dabbles in protein alternatives to meat. (The McAlloo Tikki burger has been a bestseller in India since it was introduced in the late 1990s.) But meat remains the industry's primary offering to the public, and tracing meat production reveals a vast system upon which the fast food industry rests. From farmers who grow corn and soy, to factory farms that buy those crops and feed it to chickens and cows, to slaughterhouses that turn those animals into meat, to franchise-owned restaurants that fry that meat and serve it to customers, the stages of making a McPicanha in Brazil or a Colonel Burger in Kenya are remarkably similar. The world's biggest fast food companies, like McDonald's and Yum! Brands (the parent company of KFC, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut), lie at the center of an immense web of trade and finance, most of which is utterly invisible to the typical customer, and all of which depends on government support.

Because of—not despite—consistent government intervention in the industry, we might call fast food the quintessential neo-liberal cuisine. Tracking how the world's public institutions have lined up to aid the industry's expansion and have rolled back their support for the people they are responsible for protecting, can help us understand how one of the most destructive ideologies of our time has shaped our world.

But to start, let's consider the most obvious component of the entire fast food web: the restaurants—specifically, the restaurants in inner-city America.

### *The Restaurants*

**F**AST FOOD AS WE KNOW IT BEGAN IN THE 1950s, WITH the arrival of McDonald's in America's suburbs. Even then, the industry owed its success to the government, with its expansion across suburbia predicated on the new highways of a postwar infrastructure boom. But after a decade, those cradles of white consumerism had become saturated, so the industry went looking for new frontiers in America's inner cities. This would be the first step of the industry's eventual world takeover. It could not have been a more opportune time: mass unrest was afflicting the inner-city neighborhoods of Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and other cities in the early 1960s, and the federal government was becoming more interested in the social and economic conditions which had preceded the violence.

Washington interlocutors quickly identified joblessness and poverty as root causes of the decade's unrest. "Unemployment of human resources," the author of an influential 1965 study wrote in a memo to the White House that year, "is leading to hopelessness, anti-social anger, and violence." As the historian Chin Jou writes in her 2017 book, *Supersizing Urban America: How Inner Cities got Fast Food with Government Help*, this viewpoint dovetailed with a prevailing and paternalistic attitude toward the urban poor that was common among both policymakers and business leaders of the time. At a conference in 1968, for instance, Robert M. Rosenberg, president of Dunkin' Donuts, Inc. said that by owning a business, "the minority entrepreneur" could undergo "a radical change—a change in values, a change in the educational opportunities he set up for himself and his family, and in the responsibility he showed for his community."

"The implication," Jou writes, "was that fostering such community paragons would form a bulwark against future urban unrest."

In 1964, the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) launched the Equal Opportunity Loan program to provide money to small businesses in economically distressed (and overwhelmingly Black) urban areas. As technically-independent business owners, fast food franchisees, or the people and companies who owned the actual restaurants, qualified easily. (Decades after the program first began, they still do.)

But the SBA's assistance wasn't a mere loophole exploited by a handful of franchisees. It was a campaign to provide startup funds to fast food entrepreneurs. In the 1970s, the agency issued 215 separate low-interest loan guarantees worth \$32 million (equivalent to \$157 million in 2021) to McDonald's franchisees alone. For entrepreneurs moving into difficult new terrain, the support was foundational to their success.

Why did the federal government help out? As Jou explains, federal officials believed that owning a business had become a complicated affair requiring a range of skills, so it was unrealistic to expect Black people with limited education to start businesses from scratch. As part of a franchise system, a new entrepreneur could benefit from the parent corporation's marketing campaigns, employee training manuals, and supply chains. All the government



seemingly needed to do to address endemic joblessness and poverty was to approach the situation like a football team dependent on its star quarterback: give the fast food industry the ball and let it run.<sup>4</sup>

Neoliberalism was still a fringe ideology at the time the SBA's fast food lending program began. But after another period of national unrest following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, Congress started to scale back the federal anti-poverty effort, and with it, the belief embedded in America's social agenda since Franklin Roosevelt, that government could help poor people at all. What remained of federal poverty alleviation programs eventually folded under the umbrella of criminal justice.

One can see in the SBA's fast food lending scheme a prototype for a new kind of government. As the government's role in helping the poor diminished, business emerged as the new savior almost by default. Government became less of a service provider and more of a *facilitator* for the private sector. In that schema, a large corporation like McDonald's could be the government's partner, if not its master.

### *The Corporations*

**J**UST AS THE SBA TIED THE RECOVERY OF INNER-CITY America to the success of fast food franchisees, beginning in the 1980s, state governments began to tie their employees' retirements to the publicly-traded corporations which ruled the industry.

Fast food companies, unlike the restaurants themselves, are predominantly white-collar affairs. Their primary function is to coordinate the disparate tasks that go into running a restaurant chain—like supply, marketing, and lobbying the government for more permissive advertising regulations and a low minimum wage—while staying as far removed as possible from the tedious work of frying chicken and flipping burgers.

Officially, franchisees and fast food companies are in the same business. But while franchisees offer a whole menu of products, their corporate masters offer essentially one: capital stock, the instrument which allows investors to make a corporation's financial success their own. And these days, some of the largest stockholders are government entities.

In the United States, a multitude of government-controlled pension schemes invest the retirement savings of nearly 20 million state and local employees, from college professors to prison guards. Historically, most of that capital was bound to the world of government and corporate bonds, where a low but guaranteed rate of return made for relatively safe investments. But as neoliberal ideas began to register in sweeping policies, state governments changed their rules, allowing public pensions to shift more money into the higher-risk world of stocks. Pensions would help underwrite the stock market with trillions of dollars in investments, and in exchange, the stock market would float the pensions.

Today, virtually every public pension fund in the U.S. invests in

stocks, and most of the big ones invest in fast food. California's Public Employee Retirement System (CalPERS) and its sister fund for teachers (CalSTRS) are the two largest pension schemes in the United States. Together, they hold more than a billion dollars in the stocks and bonds of McDonald's, Yum! Brands, and their larger, publicly-traded franchisees in Asia and Latin America. Both funds are government entities, wholly controlled by the state of California.<sup>5</sup> The New York State Common Retirement Fund, the third largest pension fund in the United States, has more than \$450 million invested in Yum! and McDonald's. The State of Wisconsin Investment Board, the government agency behind the eighth largest pension fund in the country, has around \$94 million invested in the same companies.

Though American pension funds rank among the industry's largest and most loyal backers, public pension investment in fast food is an international phenomenon. Perhaps no government is more deeply involved than Malaysia's. Through a collaboration between a public pension fund and a state-owned investment group, the government is the majority shareholder of QSR Brands, a nominally private company which is the exclusive Yum! franchisee in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and (with a local partner) Cambodia. But beyond owning more than 1,300 KFCs and Pizza Huts, QSR Brands is also the restaurants' supplier. Through its poultry abattoirs, an industrial bakery, sauce plant, and commissary, it provides nearly all the food its restaurants need, from chicken, to pizza dough, to coleslaw.

Even ostensibly "ethical" pension funds have made huge bets on fast food. Norway's sovereign wealth fund, Norges Bank Investment Management, has around \$1.7 billion currently invested in McDonald's—slightly more than one percent of the company's stock—making it the company's seventh-largest shareholder. ABP, the largest pension fund in the Netherlands and the fifth-largest in the world, has nearly \$600 million invested in the company, and more than \$100 million in Yum! Brands and Yum China. Pick a U.S.-invested government fund anywhere in the world, and you're likely to recognize at least one fast food brand on their list of holdings.<sup>6</sup>

With so many corporations to invest in, what makes fast food so appealing? About six thousand companies currently trade their stock in the United States. Most are very small, very risky, or so slow-growing that their share prices rise little with each passing year. Small players, like the ones who get their stock tips from Reddit, are free to invest in any of them: they're using their own money, so the risks are theirs to take. But pension funds, like other institutional investors, have fewer options. Since they manage other people's money, they have to avoid too many risky bets. At the same time, they can't be so risk averse that the money doesn't grow over time. And since they're investing huge sums of capital, they tend to prefer the large companies that can absorb them.

5. University endowments have followed the same path. The University of Texas Permanent University Fund, one of the largest university endowments in the world, listed more than \$7 million in Yum! Brands and Yum China stock and nearly \$4 million in McDonald's bonds on its most recent list of holdings.

6. Since many pension funds both purchase stock themselves and entrust private-sector asset managers to mind their wealth, their holdings disclosures alone generally do not reveal the true extent of their fast food investments.

4. For a thorough examination of Black franchisors entering the ownership fold, see historian Marcia Chatelain's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2020 book, *FRANCHISE: THE GOLDEN ARCHES IN BLACK AMERICA*.



When you add up the criteria, the number of companies that might even interest pension fund managers is far less than 6,000, but fast food companies are among those that qualify.

We might understand fast food's appeal to investors in the same way we understand its appeal to customers. For new customers, especially in developing countries where foreign brands are scarce, the allure of fast food comes from partaking in a global phenomenon, the chance to eat the same food in Lusaka, Zambia that one eats in Johannesburg, South Africa, or, for that matter, in Tokyo or Tel Aviv. For people who grew up on the stuff, like most customers in the United States, fast food is passé, the daily bread of working people too busy and too tired to eat anywhere but in their car. But the quality that thrills rising middle-class consumers in Africa and bores health-conscious commuters in America is exactly the one most enticing to investors: fast food is ubiquitous, or, in the parlance of the business school graduate, it "operates at scale." Better yet, it's growing, converting new people into "customers" and new countries into "markets" daily.

And, since the industry is dominated by companies whose equities (stocks) and debts (bonds) are readily available on dollar-denominated exchanges, investors can easily buy those assets and partake in the industry's success. It's for this reason that any organization investing a billion dollars or more on someone else's behalf would be hard pressed to avoid putting at least some of it in a company like Yum! Brands or McDonald's. It's also why the holdings lists of the largest private asset managers (like BlackRock), public pension funds (like CalSTRS), and endowments (like the Gates Foundation Trust, the technically-separate investment group that underwrites the Gates Foundation) largely resemble each other and almost universally register investments in fast food.

**I**F YOU'RE LIKE ME, PERHAPS YOU SEE A TWINKLE OF possibility here. Sure, BlackRock doesn't care about anything but profits, but a pension fund like CalSTRS is an instrument of the state. It represents teachers—*teachers!*—and it manages more capital than most Wall Street firms, so why doesn't it stand up for the public at large and hold the corporations it invests in to account?

There and again, pension funds do take a stand against corporate wrongdoing, like pollution, corruption, or human rights violations. But decades of dependence on corporate success have made them the corporate world's collaborators. At times they act as critical friends of their corporate investees, but never as adversaries. Like other institutional investors, public pension funds summarize their responsibilities with a two-word phrase: "fiduciary duty," a legal term which means they're bound to put the interests of beneficiaries above any other moral obligation. Of course, pensioners have a lot of interests: clean air or a more equal society. "Fiduciary duty" covers none of that. In practice, the one thing that matters above all for a pension fund is the share price. While many funds have a code of ethics, "fiduciary duty" generally subordinates everything listed on the code to the cause of maximizing the value of the fund's investments. Funds can (and sometimes do) criticize the corporations they invest in, but never so much that their voice alone would make

the companies' share prices fall, or even dip.

In becoming dependent on corporations' success, the pension funds have allied with them against the public. When Fight For 15 activists stormed McDonald's headquarters in 2014, outraged that the company's leading executives made millions while so many of its workers struggled to survive, CalSTRS sided with McDonald's, calling their pay scheme "quite reasonable." When an international consortium of unions called on Norges Bank Investment Management and ABP to pressure McDonald's to do more to bring down rates of sexual harassment among its workers, the Norwegians dismissed the grievance on technical grounds and questioned why the unions would ask them for help at all.

### *The Suppliers*

**W**HEN DETRACTORS TALK ABOUT FAST FOOD, THEY often talk about how it's predictable. Everywhere you go, the same logos, the same experience, the same food. But to fans, the consistency of fast food isn't one of its flaws but one of its major appeals. And as it expands into new regions, the industry extends those qualities throughout the agricultural systems upon which it relies. In turn, those systems extend their own reach into new frontiers.

The dry landscape of South America's Gran Chaco, one of the most biologically diverse regions in the world, is an especially dismal example. According to one 2014 paper, the region was losing natural vegetation at a rate of about 2.5 acres per minute. Most of what has replaced it is soy—a single crop, planted in rows and harvested by machines, most of which is exported, primarily to Asia. Vast areas, nearly untouched by humans a generation ago, now resemble the carefully managed agro-industrial farmlands of Iowa or Illinois. Conversion has led to such a dire collapse in genetic diversity in the Gran Chaco that scientists estimate that if it were left completely untouched, the region would still need between 300 and 3,000 years to recover.

Soy can make tofu, or meat substitutes. More commonly it's combined with corn to feed chickens, pigs, and cows, and to make oil to fry their meat in. To the technocrats and financiers behind the industrial agricultural system, whatever form the soy ultimately takes isn't any more important than the multitude of problems that accompany its production and distribution around the world. At its root, the kind of agriculture practiced in the Gran Chaco, the Cerrado, the Pampas, and the other ecologically critical biomes where soy fields proliferate is about extraction, or turning nature into capital. The same is true further up the chain of production, in Poland, Shandong province, China, and other places where factory farms and slaughterhouses turn much of that soy into meat, largely to supply the fast food industry.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, fast food has also had consequences for human health around the world. Junk food contains alarming levels of sodium, fat, and sugar, and overrides the benefits of healthier foods, like fresh fruits and vegetables. The rise of processed foods in developing countries, like the rise in the United States, has contributed to serious health problems in the world population.



**W**HILE IT'S POSSIBLE TO FIND CHICKEN AND BEEF almost anywhere in the world, finding meat that adheres to the standards of Yum! Brands or McDonald's and in the quantities they demand is no easy task. As the industry extends its reach into the developing countries where it sees the most opportunity, it needs suppliers that can support it just as readily as the suppliers in the countries where it already has operated for decades. Franchises can usually import meat, and often do from major exporting countries like Brazil, but ever-shifting trade restrictions necessitate a local supply, if only as a backup plan.

The trouble is that meat producers in those regions often lack the capital and technical knowledge required to become McDonald's or Yum! suppliers. Fortunately for them, one public agency is offering assistance. In the last two decades, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector lending arm of the World Bank Group, has invested tens of millions of dollars in meat companies in developing countries. Poultry has been a major focus area in recent years, and the bank has invested in rising producers in Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Many of these companies happen to be KFC suppliers.

As it does for all its clients, the IFC has provided these companies with a cornucopia of assistance—not just loans, but also technical advice and connections to other banks. IFC support also confers legitimacy to a project, as applicants have to pass a mandatory human rights and environmental evaluation process which, once completed, functions like a Good Housekeeping Seal which the company can add to its list of accolades when seeking out additional investors.<sup>8</sup>

Even without a declared strategy of financing fast food suppliers, it's easy to see how the IFC aligns itself with the industry. According to one recent declaration, when financing agribusiness, the IFC looks for companies that support “efficient food systems” which “drive economic development.” Descriptions of the ideal clients shift with the latest development fads, but the IFC generally favors companies that utilize imported technology and operate at scale. When entering a new country, fast food companies look for suppliers that can offer a consistent product to a large and growing number of restaurants. Not surprisingly, they tend to pick ones that utilize imported technology and operate at scale. In developing countries, where industrial operations (like meat production) are often dominated by a few wealthy families, the menu of companies that meet this standard tends to be limited, so whether or not they coordinate their efforts intentionally, the IFC and fast food companies are often destined to choose the same companies to partner with. Put another way, the IFC has a certain worldview. Fast food just happens to fit perfectly within it.

<sup>8</sup> It will come as no surprise to anyone who follows the meat business that locals sometimes object to IFC support for these projects. In 2018, a group of people living in the vicinity of Ukraine's Vinnytsia Poultry Factory, the flagship operation of local conglomerate MHP, filed a complaint with the IFC and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (another public underwriter) alleging the poultry giant had polluted the surrounding air and water. Local activists have also been variously beaten and framed for drug offenses. MHP supplies Ukrainian KFCs through another plant near Kiev.

**P**UBLICLY FUNDED BUT TECHNICALLY INDEPENDENT OF a single government's authority and not subject to clear accountability, multilateral institutions like the IFC excel at channeling the will of a clique of wealthy governments, creating the illusion of broad consensus. Accordingly, they can justify their approach as service to “the market,” as if the market were a mystic entity that exists outside the realm of politics.

The foreign aid agencies of wealthy nations also heap assistance onto meat companies that have the potential to become fast food suppliers. A few even solicit the industry's advice on new schemes. At a steakhouse in Washington, D.C. in 2011, Raj Shah, then the head of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), convened a group of business leaders, including the chief lobbyist for Yum! Brands, to discuss a new agricultural development program in Africa. Later that year, Shah personally invited Yum!'s CEO to speak at a “Partnership Forum” in Washington to discuss the company's benefits to food security in Africa. (He ultimately did not.) At the same conference, Shah delivered his own speech, titled “Embracing Enlightened Capitalism.”

“In order to meaningfully address poverty in developing countries,” he said in that address, “we have to help companies find profit opportunities, not photo opportunities.”

When I was in Ghana some years later, I spent hours talking with consultants for USAID and USDA who were attempting to rebuild the local poultry industry so that it could better compete with a tide of cheaper Brazilian imports. They were rarely the first to broach the subject, but when I asked about KFC, they became visibly excited. As the leader of one group told me, the possibility of becoming a KFC supplier was the carrot he lured poultry companies with when they needed encouragement as their profits diminished in the face of free trade agreements the U.S. government insisted upon.

I spent months researching that project, and one of the most interesting things about it was how little Yum! Brands was involved. The company's supply chain scouts traveled to Ghana frequently, but their involvement in the project was limited to a few meetings. And yet, to hear the U.S. contractors describe it, KFC's handful of restaurants in the country would be a guiding light for this nation's poultry producers, and its corn and soy farmers behind them. It was an ideal to aspire to, the zenith of modern agriculture. The whole plan depended on keeping the cost of chicken feed low, and so the greatest burdens fell on the smallest farmers. If they just bought the most expensive seeds and turned over more of their land to feed crops, like corn and soy, the U.S. contractors said, the farmers could sell their crops to the poultry companies up the road. The poultry companies would raise their chickens for less, and KFC would buy their chicken locally instead of importing it. Everyone would be connected to the virtuous cycle, and everyone would make money. What no one wanted to talk about was what would happen to either the poultry producers or the soy farmers if, despite their efforts, KFC kept importing their chicken anyway.

**O**NE STANDARD CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES IN international development is that they are a form of “neo-colonialism.” Critics typically highlight the one-sided nature of neoliberal policies at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which have forced poor countries into a state of dependence, maximizing exports of a single crop or



mineral while opening their borders to a deluge of cheap imports of everything else. But just as colonial rule necessitated local collaborators, so, too, does the neoliberal order. Just as rising middle classes in poor countries take to fast food as a symbol of their newfound status, the governments in those countries want to attract fast food and its underlying “job-creating” machinery.

One operation in West Africa is revealing. In 2005, as the Zimbabwean government was forcing white farmers out of the country as part of Robert Mugabe’s “land reform” program, the president of Nigeria saw an opportunity. Wanting to take advantage of the exiled farmers’ international connections and technical expertise, he began offering them land in Kwara State. In a region where few farmers could get assistance of any kind, the local governor provided millions of dollars in loans to the newcomers, worked the phones to fight the bureaucracy, and even dispatched the riot squad to suppress protesters. Among the farmers who took up the offer were four men who combined their 1,000-hectare plots for a total area two-thirds the size of Manhattan. The year they moved in, they formed a company, Valentine Farms, to raise poultry.

Seven years later, Country Bird, a South African poultry producer and IFC client, bought Valentine Farms. One of Country Bird’s first moves was to introduce a training scheme to “assist and develop indigenous farmers”—the ones living on Valentine’s land, who had lived there before Valentine arrived and would continue to live there after—“with commercial farming techniques.” As Country Bird’s executive director explained in 2013, the “indigenous farmers” wouldn’t just live on the company’s land. They would grow soy for Valentine’s chickens.

By the end of 2016, Valentine planned to raise a quarter million birds every week. Country Bird had lined up some buyers for it, as well: the rising number of KFCs a few hours south in Lagos.

## *Rendering neoliberalism visible*

IN HIS 1962 BOOK *CAPITALISM AND FREEDOM*, ONE OF THE seminal documents of the neoliberal movement, Milton Friedman laid out his disagreement with one of the most widely circulated quotations of the day. The message behind John F. Kennedy’s line, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country,” was fundamentally wrong, he wrote. “The free man will ask neither what his country can do for him nor what he can do for his country. He will ask rather ‘What can I and my compatriots do through government’ to help us discharge our individual responsibilities, to achieve our several goals and purposes, and above all, to protect our freedom?”

Since its early days growing along U.S. interstates, the fast food industry has thrived by asking how it can grow larger “through government.” But just as fast food has found ways to leverage government to its benefit, the world’s public institutions have also looked for ways to help it. There is a shared worldview between the industry and its allies in the public halls of power. Together, they tend to work as a single entity, sweeping aside the needs of the many while making every effort to uplift the needs of capital.

The blurred line between business and the state is one of the hallmarks of neoliberalism. Despite proponents’ claims that they’re defenders of a distinct thing called “the market,” the truest form of a

neoliberal society is one where market, state, and society converge. In their vision, state agencies like the SBA, public pension funds, and the IFC—which shower corporations and their ancillaries with public funds—are behaving exactly as they are supposed to. Neoliberalism’s omnipresence has made it hard to recognize—we are fish swimming in its waters, unaware that there might be something else out there. Challenging the notion that “there is no alternative,” as Margaret Thatcher said when promoting the United Kingdom’s march into the abyss, first requires us to see how this ideology has shaped our world.

Look closely: the answers are right there at the bottom of your lunch bag. ✦

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# MANUFACTORY VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY

*Current Affairs* has been criticized in recent months for the "uniformity" of its perspectives. Out of a grudging concession to the supposed need for "viewpoint diversity," and because the publisher of this magazine (by whom I am employed) is one of those types who values "robust discourse," I have reluctantly agreed to allow a single page (this one) to be guest-edited by Todd Robertson of *The American Magalogue*. — NATHAN J. ROBINSON, EDITOR IN CHIEF

NOTE FROM TODD ROBERTSON, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE AMERICAN MAGALOGUE: This article originally appeared on the U.K.-based website *Mummy Wumys's Super Duper Advice Blog*, a parenting website which in recent years has come to focus primarily on left-handed issues. As the numbers of people identifying as "left-handed" have skyrocketed, left-handed activism is an ever more extreme and powerful faction in British politics, closely aligned with *Antifa* and the Marxist *Black Lives Matter* movement. In a horrible blow to free speech, the writer of this piece was effectively silenced for expressing common sense views rooted in a Biblical understanding of handedness. She has been branded a "LHERE," or left-handed exclusionary radical feminist, and the woke mob has cancelled her via a number of vicious and uncalled-for criticisms. I of course disagree with the writer's views of feminism—feminism is a cancer which seeks to destroy the traditional family—but her silencing is a terrifying omen of what may happen in the United States if we do not clamp down on left-handed activism as aggressively as possible. I have chosen to reprint it in the name of continuing this crucial conversation despite the efforts of powerful handedness-activists to silence all dissent.

THE DEBATE ON LEFT-HANDEDNESS MIGHT AS WELL BE a 2003 hit single by Britney Spears,<sup>1</sup> because it's toxic.

It has gotten so toxic that many are frightened into silence. When we see how those who speak out are treated—from speaking invitations rescinded, to abuse from supposed "left-handed activists" on Twitter—it's easy to decide to keep one's head down and keep quiet. Things have gotten so extreme that in many parts of Europe and North America, everyone is too scared even to ask whether they should stop driving on the statistically more dangerous side of the road, lest they be branded a bigot. It has created a free speech crisis, with many well-respected academics and progressive writers having become persona non grata for espousing an apparent impermissible perspective on this subject.

So why am I writing this now? Because recent events have forced me, like many others, to think much harder about these issues. This is not a matter of lefthobia. I do not have any problem with left-handed people: I know and love many left-handed adults, who just want their lifestyle to not be subject to abuse, discrimination, and persecution. [Editor's note: it is not discrimination to refuse to employ left-handed people and in fact these supposed left-handed "rights" (an irony in itself) constitute anti-Christian discrimination. If they were rights they would be in the Constitution.] The current explosion of left-handed activism, however, seeks not just to secure the rights of left-handed adults, but to redefine how we think about handedness. While for decades the progressive position on handedness was that adults should be free to use whatever hand they would like, contemporary left-handed ideology goes much further. Left-handedness, activists insist, is innate. It is bigotry, therefore, to question the validity of self-identification or to object to children as young as four being labelled "left-handed" simply for picking something up with that hand.

The number of self-identified left-handed people in the U.S. has skyrocketed. [Editor's note: skyrocketed!!!] According to University of Chicago psychologist Jerre Levy, in 1939,<sup>2</sup> the year Amelia Earhart was declared dead, "2 percent of the population wrote with the left hand. By 1946,<sup>3</sup> it was up to 7 1/2 percent. In 1968,<sup>4</sup> 9 percent. By 1972,<sup>5</sup> 12 percent." In one study, while just six to seven percent of people over forty claimed to be left-handed, this "jumped to well above ten percent" for the 18-to-39 age group.

The same pattern is true across Europe. I know what you're thinking: Europe isn't real, Euroasia is a continuous land mass, but let's indulge the myth for a moment. [Editor's note: Europe is real and the birthplace of civilization.] A Swiss study found younger people were twice as likely to consider themselves left-handed as older people. It is hard not to be concerned. Left-handed activists often claim this is due to increasingly tolerant modern attitudes, meaning more "naturally" left-handed people feel comfortable being public with their identity. Yet there has not been a comparable explosion in other parts of the world, where numbers remain steady. In South Korea, Mexico, China and Japan, less than five percent of people are left-handed. There are no recorded cases of left-handedness in North Korea.

In the eighteen years since "Toxic" went to number one in six countries and top five in nine more, left-handedness has become a trend. [Editor's note: "Toxic" peaked at number nine on the *Billboard Hot 100*.] Celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner, Lana Wachowski, and Elliot Page claim a left-handed identity, and entire online communities are devoted to left-handedness. In one subreddit for self-identified left-handers, a user wrote they were having trouble adjusting to using a left-handed comput-

er mouse, writing that they became "disoriented" and lost "80 percent of their skill." Replies encouraged the user to continue regardless, advising that "it can take a long time to learn the coordination." These insular echo chambers reinforce left-handed identification, like some kind of hollow enclosure used to produce reverberation, even when real-life support systems urge caution. Questioning kids often feel pressure to be left-handed in order to fit in. So-called "right-handed" (i.e., not left-handed) people are easily dismissed as prejudiced.

Social contagion and peer influences are obviously at play in the rising numbers of self-identified left-handed people. Indeed, some school teachers have noted a pattern of left-handed identification where multiple siblings, and even entire families, become left-handed-identified. While activists insist that no one could be convinced to be left-handed, are we supposed to simply accept as happenstance that there are so many incidents of multiple siblings in the same family claiming to be left-handed? Indeed, many friends of mine have pulled me aside to voice concerns, in hushed tones, that their left-handed relatives may be forcing their children to use left-handed scissors.

When very young children adopt this left-handed identity, it sets them down a path that is very difficult to get off. If a child learns to write with their left hand—a comparatively messy, difficult process—they rarely can switch back to the right hand. [Editor's note: please go to The American Magalogue's online store for tickets to our *Pray the Left Hand Away* seminars. Buy now!] It's no wonder I receive more and more emails and messages and carrier pigeons every day from those who, now adults, regret their decision and are critical of parents, teachers and medical practitioners who enable or encourage early left-handed identification. Most of us aren't aware of it, but there is such a cult-like belief in innate, internal handedness-identity in our institutions that society is marching blindfolded into a brave new world where victims are increasingly children who will one day tell their stories of regret.

Of course some children will use their left hand. Like a monkey with two bananas, it's natural that we make use of more than one hand. Many handedness-critical folks like myself used both hands interchangeably in childhood, without contemporary identity politics' pressure to label oneself. But in the vast majority of cases, children who exhibit left-hand preference in childhood grow up to be right-handed adults. In spite of this, many left-handed activists believe adjusting to predominantly using the left hand as early as possible is necessary for the well-being and mental health of genuinely left-handed kids. What kind of message is this sending: that if you find writing, drawing or throwing with your right hand difficult, it is literally the incorrect hand to use? It's hard to see how it helps anyone—least of all left-handed people—for left-handedness to be reduced to a "feeling" about what hand you prefer.

Where previous generations were required to pass through robust systems before living left-handed in adulthood, the current left-handed activism contends that all one has to do in order to be left-handed is to "feel" left-handed. This is not some fringe perspective we can afford to ignore, like disliking Britney Spears' acclaimed song "Toxic." Uncritical left-handed acceptance is treated as gospel in college campuses and, increasingly, by school teachers and childcare providers. I recently received an email from a mother whose young son's preschool teacher "informed" her that he is left-handed, despite his mother having seen him use his right hand to peel a banana and scratch the right side of his nose on multiple occasions. For parents who are not as well-versed in these issues as myself, this is an anxiety-inducing kind of indoctrination that they may not have the knowledge and wherewithal to fight back against. It is only a matter of time before countries add left-handedness as a protected category in hate crime legislation, meaning it would be an offense not to shake someone's preferred hand. Courts may soon deem it permissible to fire someone for "lefthobic" views, including such common sense positions as right-handedness being preferable to left-handedness. Considering that left-handers happen to have lower life expectancy and higher rates of schizophrenia, this isn't just a case of agree to disagree, it's a matter of denying facts to spare the feelings of a minority.

One arena where the debate is actually being had, as opposed to the mainstream discourse that stifles all dissent, is in sports. It helps that this is more clear-cut than, say, the bathroom issue. (Many left-handed activists have demanded an additional door handle so that the door can be easily opened with the left hand from both sides. Some even lobby for right-hand side toilet flush levers to be replaced by centrally-placed flush buttons.) It is obvious that left-handers have a natural advantage in sport, a fact denied only by extremists on either side. This is true across a huge variety of sports. Pele, Diego Maradona, Babe Ruth, John McEnroe: all left-handed. Rocky Balboa might be fictional, but he's certainly left-handed.

One can firmly defend a person's right to live with the hand preference of their choosing yet look at the statistics of left-handers' disproportionate success in sport and believe that objections should not be summarily dismissed with cries of "bigotry." Increasing numbers of

people are questioning if left-handers should be allowed to compete in right-handed sports. To paraphrase left-handed tennis player Martina Navratilova, it seems to many that the current rules reward cheats and punish the innocent. Despite claims from left-handed activists that no one would pretend to or be convinced to identify as left-handed for their own advantage, we are already seeing evidence of this in the sporting world. Phil Mickelson is openly right-handed, but transitioned to playing golf left-handed at a young age. Can anyone doubt this played a role in his winning the PGA at the freakish age of 50 years, 11 months, making him one of the oldest winners in golf history, besides the seven others who were also over 50? Yet Mickelson's handedness is reported as a simple quirk, or even, as Golf.com frames it, a helpful strategy for aspiring golfers: "This is why right-handed Phil Mickelson swings lefty (should you do the same?)"

How can we dismiss the concerns of right-handed athletes that it is unfair for left-handers to participate in their competitions when it has clearly become necessary for right-handed athletes to feign left-handedness to succeed? Mickelson continues to live right-handed outside of his sport. If no action is taken, it seems clear that right-handed sports will be taken over by a giant race of purposefully developed left-handed sportspeople.

I'm sympathetic, of course, to genuine cases of athletes exhibiting persistent left-hand preference in childhood who wish to play sports in the manner that corresponds to their handedness identity. [Editor's note: these individuals should simply decide to no longer be left-handed, resolving the conflict.] But the current system is clearly unsustainable, robbing right-handed athletes of their rightful opportunities to win championships and receive awards, and possibly to gain sports scholarships and other benefits.

BUT FOR ME, AS A MOTHER, THE DEBATE AROUND left-handed issues is not and has never been just about sports and bathrooms. It is, fundamentally, an issue of women's rights. There is now a demand from some activists—many of them not left-handed themselves; many of them men—that the class of women itself must effectively be erased.

Men are 23% more likely to be left-handed than women. It has become clearer and clearer to me that this is the central issue. There is a conflict between the demands of left-handed activists and the hard-won rights of women. What is the contemporary left-handed movement if not an attempt to rebalance the scales back in men's favor? [Editor's note: We believe, based on good evidence, that it is in fact a Marxist *antifa* plot hatched by Joe Biden and AOC; see "The Secret Hand Behind Handedness" in our print issue.] This is just another part of the backlash against feminism, using the handedness of the vast, vast majority of women—the right—to reframe us as an oppressor class. Is it any wonder the whole concept of left-handedness as an innate identity emerged in parallel to second-wave feminism? The movement is an attempt at erasure, to rewrite history as mean of 'right-handed women oppressing poor, innocent left-handed men.

It no longer surprises me that the main objections I've gotten for my views on these complex issues are not from my left-handed friends, but from supposedly "woke" right-handed men. To paraphrase "Toxic" by Britney Spears, guys like that should wear a warning. There is a perverse glee that otherwise progressive men seem to take in shouting women down, as long as they can do it under the cover of "left-handed rights." I have nothing but respect for the tiny percentage of the population who are left-handed, but it's clear their "movement" demanding "a fair and equal society structured for everyone" has always secretly been another way of telling women to shut up.

For engaging in this debate, I have been the subject of a series of harassment campaigns, including vexatious legal actions, police visits, magazine articles misrepresenting my positions, threatening letters hand-delivered to my home. Anything and everything has been tried to silence me and prevent people from hearing the reasonable fears many right-handed women have about the impact of this ideology on their hand-based rights. I have also lost work. As a result of my sudden financial insecurity, my marriage was placed under such a severe strain that my partner and I finally agreed to separate.

If you believe that, for instance, my friend Steve is lefthobic, a man who has devoted his work and much of his fortune to the vulnerable, the bullied, the forgotten and the abused, then you are under a spell. If you believe that left-handers can fairly compete against right-handers in their sports—including club and ball sports—then you are under a spell. If you believe that children as young as three years old can declare an identity that puts them on a pathway for life, then you are under a spell. As Britney Spears warned us in her hit single "Toxic," we have taken a sip from the devil's cup. We're losing our heads, spinning round and round. It's dangerous. But unlike Ms. Spears, I'm not loving it.

1 Britney Spears is right-handed.

2 Sixty-four years before Britney Spears released "Toxic."

3 Fifty-seven years before Britney Spears released "Toxic."

4 One year before the birth of Cathy Dennis, writer of the song "Toxic."

5 The year Cathy Dennis, writer of "Toxic," turned three years old.



# THE AFTERLIVES OF **CHE**



by Peter Taylor

AT THE CULMINATION OF A MONTHS-LONG  
Amanhunt by the Bolivian Army and the CIA,  
Che Guevara's last words were simple. "Shoot, coward," he cried into the face of his executioner. "You are only going to kill a man." Seeing himself as a small piece of a larger socialist project, the guerrilla warrior apparently had no lingering interest in his own life (or at least, an unconquerable flair for the dramatic). All that Che cared to envision on death's doorstep was the immortality of an international revolution, one that



would bring an end to Yankee imperialism and usher in an age of global communism.

Or so we're told.

Jon Lee Anderson, the author of *Che: A Revolutionary Life* and long considered Che's authoritative biographer, admits that this scene is likely more legend than fact. In a text otherwise notable for its deep research and intensive reflections on the Argentine's personal and political legacy, Lee's decision to conclude his biographical behemoth with a scene based more on myth than fact reflects the height to which Che has ascended in the popular consciousness, for leftists and non-leftists alike. But what exactly does the face of the Argentine revolutionary represent, and what can we learn from his life and death?

For some, Che represents revolutionary potential, a direct symbol of the political ideologies the guerrilla fighter espoused during his life. Historical admirers range from writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Susan Sontag to *bona fide* revolutionaries like Stokely Carmichael and Nelson Mandela, Che's bedfellows in armed struggle. In this regard, Che seems very much a figure of his time and place, when guerrilla warfare appeared the only effective tool to challenge the reigning dictatorships of South America and the violent power of US imperialism.

Beyond his identity as a socialist revolutionary, Che has also taken on a more general historical status, particularly in the Latin American countries where he spent significant time. In his native Argentina, numerous high schools bear his name, while some *campesinos* (Spanish for a rural peasant-farmer) in Bolivia, the site of his final guerrilla campaign, revere him as *San Ernesto* (*Saint Ernest*), surely influenced by his resemblance to Western cultural depictions of Jesus Christ. Nowhere is he more revered, however, than in Cuba. In the country where his myriad efforts and influence helped establish the Castros' socialist state, Guevara seems to have taken an uncritical spot in the pantheon of historical figures, similar to the way the United States' Founding Fathers are revered. Che graces the head of every 3-peso banknote, and young students recite "*Seremos como el Che* (We will be like Che)" daily, just as U.S. students grow up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance each morning before school.

Others on the broad left talk of Che in more measured terms, qualifying any praise with criticism or even suspicion. In an assessment of Che's legacy in *Jacobin* (itself a kind of crib sheet for his excellent book *The Politics of Che Guevara*), Cuban-American scholar Samuel Farber called Che "an honest and committed revolutionary" who nonetheless possessed a "monolithic conception of a type of socialism immune to any democratic control and initiative from below." On the other hand, some on the right consider Che Guevara nothing

but a mass murderer. Referencing the legend of his demise, Álvaro Vargas Llosa of the libertarian think tank the Independent Institute wrote, "Guevara might have been enamored of his own death, but he was much more enamored of other people's deaths."

More than half a century after Che's execution at the hands of the Bolivian Army and the CIA, awareness of his revolutionary accomplishments and failures has paled in comparison to the attention he receives as a pop culture icon. Countless novels, biographies, films, and even musicals depicting the revolutionary constitute the broader pantheon of Che, all on top of a wealth of traditional scholarship. There were even plans to market a Che-themed perfume, though it appears to have been canceled upon criticism from the Cuban government—a fitting fate for a perfume named after someone who frequently refused to bathe as a function of a kind of socialist asceticism. But the most significant vehicle for Che's legacy is without a doubt the omnipresence of his face.

Taken by Cuban photographer Alberto Korda, *Guerrillero Heroico* is surely one of the most ubiquitous photographs in the history of the medium. The subject of art exhibits, the source of endless parodies, and even the inspiration for a Madonna album cover, the image graces everything from street art to t-shirts, its recognizability having long since transcended its subject's rich legacy. Some invoke the image literally, plastering it on protest signs or graffitiing it under bridges as a symbol of left-wing dissent. For many, however, the *Comandante* is hardly even a political figure, more associated with the notion of rebellious youthful adventure than with revolutionary struggle. Perhaps some who see his face don't even know who he was or what he stood for, content to let symbolism transcend history and biography (I once saw a t-shirt with Che's silhouette and the caption "I have no idea who this guy is"). Che decried both individual veneration and the culture of capitalist commodification, yet the system he died fighting seems to have done a fine job profiting off his image, just as the image of avowed communist Frida Kahlo has been packaged and marketed to consumers of #girlboss aesthetics. Nonetheless, his omnipresence decades after his death remains a testament to Che's enduring power as a symbol of revolution and dissent.

**S**O WHAT CAN THE MODERN LEFT LEARN from the life of the twentieth century's most visible political icons—a man who lived only to age thirty-nine? Is he merely a figure of his historical moment and an example of the limits of armed struggle, or do his life and example offer some kind of deeper insight into the socialist struggle?



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*I believe in the armed struggle as the only solution for the people who fight to free themselves and I am consistent with my beliefs. Many will call me an adventurer, and I am, but of a different type, of those who put their lives on the line to demonstrate their truths.*

— CHE GUEVARA, LETTER TO PARENTS

Born in Rosario, Argentina in 1928 to a middle-class family, the young Ernesto Guevara counted girls and rugby among his primary interests. A chronic asthma defined much of his childhood, just as it would eventually challenge his stamina on later guerrilla campaigns. When his asthma kept him off the rugby pitch, Ernesto read voraciously, imbibing everything from the works of Walt Whitman and William Faulkner (Guevara would later posit that the United States' literature was the empire's only redeeming quality) to the economic and political philosophies of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, both of whom he would later go on to venerate.

When he decided to study medicine, his personal vision for his medical career demonstrated a grandiosity similar to the way he would later direct his political efforts. "I dreamed of becoming a famous researcher," he wrote, "of working indefatigably to find something that could be placed at the disposition of humanity." It's clear that from an early age, the future warrior had grand ambition and a significant ego, but he hoped to channel both into changing the world for the better. So how did Ernesto, a middle-class asthmatic medical student in love with literature and science, turn into Che, the famous communist revolutionary bent on armed struggle, which he believed was the only way to topple Yankee imperialism and pave the way for a global socialist order?

His transformation began when he decided to fulfill another ambition: the urge to explore. In January 1953, the 23-year-old took time off from his medical studies to travel his home continent with his friend Alberto Granado, a 29-year-old biochemist who also longed for adventure. A journey taken by a middle-class student like Guevara could have been self-indulgent. Guevara and Granado, however, spent their time not in comfortable accommodations but in humble places, encountering

humble people. Beginning in Buenos Aires, the duo spent nine months traveling in haphazard fashion up the continent, including a multi-week stint volunteering their scientific and medical talents at a leper colony in Northeast Perú. Along with the ubiquitous representation of Che's face, details from these travels form the basis of the Che legend as depicted in the 2004 biopic *The Motorcycle Diaries* (which I highly recommend, if only to see heartthrob Gael García Bernal and the beautifully shot scenes of the young vagabonds riding through rural Chile or traipsing through a tourist-free Machu Picchu).

Guevara would go on to recount his experiences in his memoir *Notas de Viaje* (published in English as *The Motorcycle Diaries* and the primary basis for the film). In an oft-quoted passage, Guevara writes of an encounter with a *campesino* couple looking for work. The couple experienced persecution as members of the Chilean Communist Party:

*The couple, numb with cold, huddling against each other in the desert night, were a living representation of the proletariat in any part of the world. They had not one single miserable blanket to cover themselves with, so we gave them one of ours and Alberto and I wrapped the other around us as best we could. It was one of the coldest times of my life, but also one which made me feel a little more brotherly toward this strange, for me at least, human species ... the communism gnawing at his entrails was no more than a natural longing for something better, a protest against a persistent hunger transformed into a love for this strange doctrine, whose essence he could never grasp but whose translation, "bread for the poor," was something which he understood and, more importantly, filled him with hope.*

On one hand, the sympathy Guevara expresses in this passage is admirable. For the young adventurer, the victims of capitalism no longer existed as abstract referents in the Marx

and Engels texts he had already devoured. He saw actual people who would stand to benefit the most from—and who had joined a movement fighting for—the worldwide political revolution that Guevara had already begun to believe was necessary. On the other hand, Guevara's assumptions about the *campesinos'* grasp of communism could be seen as condescending. By saying that the *campesinos* “could never grasp” the “essence” of communism, did he mean that material or intellectual deficits prevented them from understanding communist theory? Or did he just mean that their physiological needs gave them an understanding of “bread for the poor” that was just as instructive as any complex theory?

In any case, Guevara's observations represent a turning point in his personal development, whereby his experiences in the real world confirmed and deepened his understanding of his developing political beliefs. Guevara was already familiar with and an adherent of Marxist theory, but it was his motorcycle journey that laid the true groundwork for the revolutionary he would become. “The person who wrote these notes died upon stepping once again onto Argentine soil,” Guevara writes in the forward to *Notas de Viaje*. “The person who edits and polishes them, me, is no longer. At least I am not the person I was before. The vagabonding through our ‘America’ has changed me more than I thought.”

**G**UEVARA DID GO ON TO OBTAIN his medical degree upon his return to Buenos Aires, but he did not pursue a career as a medical researcher like he had planned. After graduating, he traveled more through Latin America before settling for a time in Guatemala, where he was impressed with the ongoing agrarian reforms of President Jacobo Árbenz. His time in Guatemala gave him a taste of what he already viewed to be the greatest obstacle to the revolution: U.S. corporate and military power. In a pattern familiar to students of U.S. imperialism, the Árbenz government attempted to seize land belonging to the United Fruit Company for more egalitarian redistribution, only to be countered by a multi-pronged CIA operation that ended in a coup. (It was no coincidence that Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was an attorney for and stockholder in the United Fruit Company.) Emboldened upon viewing imperialism in action, Guevara made his way to México to begin training as a guerrilla. There, he met two young men planning a movement to overthrow Cuba's repressive dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Their names were Fidel and Raúl Castro.

Guevara recognized revolutionary potential in the Castros'

bristling 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement and agreed to join them. Seeing Cuba as an ideal opportunity for a vanguard communist state and the potential testing ground for his notion of guerrilla praxis, Guevara wanted to be at the forefront of the socialist struggle in Latin America. He went on to find his revolutionary stride in the hills of the Cuban *Sierra Maestra*, the launching point for an armed movement that battled the Cuban army and eventually ousted Batista's dictatorship. It was also in Cuba that Ernesto Guevara took on the moniker “Che,” a nod to an Argentine interjection that translates roughly to “hey” or “look.”

Given the title of *comandante* and a place as Fidel's right-hand man, Che became known within his guerrilla forces for two traits above all: for demanding extreme discipline from his fellow combatants, and for working to expand their literacy. For every anecdote of his teaching a young Cuban to read, there's another one of him punishing his soldiers for negligence, insubordination, or dissent—sometimes fatally. Anderson highlights a particularly chilling excerpt from Che's diaries where the *comandante* hardly hesitated in executing a guerrilla turned traitor named Eutímio Guerra. “The situation was uncomfortable for the people and [Eutímio],” Che wrote, “so I ended the problem giving him a shot with a .32 [caliber] pistol in the right side of the brain, with exit orifice in the right temporal [lobe]. He gasped a little while and was dead.” Che was determined to usher in communism at any cost; if those who stood in the way had to die, so it would have to be. Che retained this attitude during the construction of the new Cuban government after Batista's ouster, during which he ordered the executions of countless rank and file members of the preceding government. For Che, killing was just a part of the job, a textbook example of an attitude where ends justify the means.

Che's sizable body count—in the hundreds, by some estimates—remains his critics' greatest fodder, and for understandable reasons. Che's dogmatic commitment to violence was excessive and unjust, a hypocritical blind spot for someone who claimed to believe in the imperative of a just world. Contrary to popular right-wing and liberal talking points, however, Che does not appear ever to have killed any “innocent” people, if we take that term to mean civilian bystanders. “I have yet to find a single credible source pointing to a case where Che executed ‘an innocent,’” said Anderson, whose research writing *Che* spanned three years and various diverse sources. “Those persons executed by Guevara or on his orders were condemned for the usual crimes punishable by death at times of war or in its aftermath: desertion, treason, or crimes such as rape, torture, or murder.” In Che's view, all his (numerous) victims were direct political or military targets, individuals whose deaths were necessary casualties of a just war, the excesses of which would ultimately be vindicated by the



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new world they would help build. In this vein, Che advocated violence not as a sadistic show of state force or a display of personal power, but as a revolutionary tool, one that he asserted was the only true method by which revolutionaries could usher in a just and egalitarian world.

In his introduction to the graphic novel adaptation of his Che biography, Jon Lee Anderson asks, “How do we explain Che to youngsters who, unlike those of us who lived through the sixties and seventies, can’t imagine picking up a gun to fight for their ideals?” To truly understand Che’s violent approach, however, it is important to understand the historical context. Decades of organizing and electoralism throughout Latin America had only drawn the violent retaliation of local and international elites. Furthermore, Che had seen firsthand in Guatemala that even the most tepid land reforms of

ilarly ideologically rigid. Like many other orthodox Marxists of the era, Che considered the great sociologist a scientist whose conclusions were tantamount to unbreakable laws in a reverence unmatched even by the loudest voices on Leftist Twitter. In 1960, Guevara wrote:

*There are truths so evident, so much a part of people’s knowledge, that it is now useless to discuss them. One ought to be “Marxist” with the same naturalness with which one is “Newtonian” in physics, or “Pasteurian” in biology, considering that if facts determine new concepts, these new concepts will never divest themselves of that portion of truth possessed by the older concepts they have outdated.*

In his adherence to Marx’s notion of scientific theory, Che rejected other variations of socialism. For Che, a socialist world would only ever look one way, and any other experi-



the decidedly non-communist Árbenz government would be fought tooth and nail by both the local bourgeoisie and the powers of Yankee imperialism. Particularly to generations of Americans who grew up learning whitewashed glorifications of the Civil Rights Movement’s nonviolent civil disobedience, Che’s commitment to the avenue of armed struggle may seem outdated or questionable. But in the context of the Cold War, armed struggle—with all its concomitant excesses—seemed the most realistic and effective liberatory tool in the face of increasingly militarized capitalist empires. This outlook places Che squarely among numerous contemporaneous revolutionaries, people like Fred Hampton of the Black Panthers and Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress, himself a revolutionary figure whitewashed in the years after his release from prison and election to the South African presidency. Che’s violence is criticizable, deplorable even, but any assertion that Guevara was nothing less than a bloodthirsty mass murderer constitutes an argument completely bereft of historical or ideological context. Instead, his conviction recalls the words of poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who in 1958 wrote, “I am waiting/for the war to be fought/which will make the world safe/for anarchy.” Rather than wait, Che took it upon himself to attempt to wage that war. If he was successful, he might prepare the world for justice and peace.

Beyond his commitment to armed struggle, Che was sim-

ments were doomed to fail. His biggest blind spot in this regard was his disdain for workers’ strikes within a communist state and for any efforts to increase collective democracy. As far as Che was concerned, there was no need for other forms of worker power, such as unions, in the context of a Marxist workers’ state. Antagonism towards the state, in Che’s view, was the pinnacle of contradiction. As with his violent approach, Che’s dogmatic commitment to Marxism-Leninism makes more sense within its historical and regional context, where the communist states of the USSR and China seemed to be the most reasonable alternatives to the overreach of American imperialism and the western capitalist order. For Che, a truly robust democracy would do more harm than good; democracy was a distraction from the hard work required to build and maintain an egalitarian order through a strong workers’ state. (For a more detailed analysis of Guevara’s politics, see Farber’s *The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice*.)

At the end of the day, perhaps Che’s biggest flaw was his voluntarist outlook—the belief that the primary, if not sole, obstacle for the establishment of communism would be the will of the people and the State. If the people fought and worked hard enough, Che believed, communism would come naturally, no matter the external factors. In this vein, Che advocated personal self-sacrifice in service of the broader



collective as the quickest road to a functioning socialist society. He encouraged Cubans, for example, to give up their Saturdays to work for free in the factories or fields as a kind of donation to the revolution. Always practicing what he preached, he became known among Cuban workers for volunteering his labor, a model of the socialist ethic he espoused. A true revolutionary, he thought, would be happy to subvert their individual desires in service of the greater socialist project—an attitude he apparently demonstrated in his final moments, if he truly did say, “You are only killing a man.”

For Che, the early success of the revolutionary movement in Cuba was an impetus to export armed struggle across the world. He hoped to repeat his success starting in the Congo, but when that failed he moved on to Bolivia, where he ultimately met his end. You could blame his failure in Bolivia on numerous external elements, most obviously the lack of cooperation from the Bolivian Communist Party and the presence of the CIA and the U.S. Army Rangers, who wanted to prevent Che from turning Bolivia into one of the “two, three or many Vietnams” that Che hoped would “flourish throughout the world with their share of deaths and their immense tragedies, their everyday heroism and their repeated blows against imperialism.” But Che’s voluntarist outlook, where he thought he could simply pop up in Bolivia and incite a revolution among the local proletariat merely through his presence, ignored the myriad complex factors and regional particularities that defined Bolivia—his guerrilla unit’s ignorance of local Indigenous languages, for example, was a real impediment to organizing the Bolivian proletariat. Che was unable to understand how the local *campesinos* didn’t trust him, some of them even going so far as to turn into informants. Though his espoused strategies had worked in Cuba with the Castros, he was unable to export them elsewhere. He was captured and executed on October 9, 1967.

Since his demise, the notion of warfare as a path to revolutionary power has become a leftist praxis subordinate to the nonviolent civil disobedience methods of movements like Black Lives Matter or the electoralist bent of politicians like Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn. In this sense, Che’s revolutionary legacy may seem frozen in time, one whose vision and ambition remain admirable but whose strategies have been relegated to the past, more as anecdotes than models. From this vantage point, it would seem easy to relegate Che’s memory to movies and t-shirts, or books and longform articles, rather than to consider him a real revolutionary inspiration for modern times.

To write off Che completely, however, would be to write off his greater example of commitment to justice. Take, for instance, the roots of his socialist ethic, which ultimately stemmed not from theoretical knowledge or political anal-

ysis but from a deep love for humanity and a hatred of injustice. “At the risk of seeming ridiculous,” he wrote in one of his manifestos, “let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.” Or consider his final letter to his children, which he ended with one last piece of advice: “Above all, try always to be able to feel deeply any injustice committed against any person.” Say what you will about his tactics, his dogma, or his ego: those are the words of someone who knew the shape of his heart, someone who wanted himself and others to bear witness to human suffering in the hope that such acts would become a catalyst for change.

It is undeniable that Che Guevara lives on. But which Che? Is it the hopeful young adventurer who opened his heart to victims of brutal injustice throughout Latin America and the world? The voluntarist guerrilla fighter whose strategies made sense in context but now seem largely outdated? The rigidly ideological intellectual who refused to tolerate dissent, even among the guerrillas who fought and died at his side? Does Che remain a symbol of principled anti-imperialist antagonism, or has the commodified ubiquity of Che’s image—the dorm room posters and t-shirts of angsty college students like me—ultimately superseded his political and personal legacies?

**L**ET’S RETURN TO CHE’S FINAL MOMENTS, when he awaited execution in a Bolivian schoolhouse. Perhaps he wasn’t thinking of the immortality of the communist cause but was instead pining for his children, or craving a final cigar. We will never know for sure. The legend persists, however, precisely because of what it says about the Left. In our best and most honest moments, leftists recognize that the projects of equality, freedom, and justice will always be bigger than any one person, no matter how large some of their proponents may loom. In this instance, the causes that Che fought for outweighed him. It doesn’t matter that Che died before his dream of an egalitarian world could be fulfilled. All that matters is that such a dream lives on because figures like Che declared that it would.

What if, then, instead of treating Che as a symbol of leftist idealism, we began to recognize his example as a lesson for the present and the future? On one hand, we can be more open-minded, more self-critical, less dogmatic than he was, remembering that the socialist struggle will always be variable, and certainly never easy. More importantly, however, we should follow the spirit of his example, if not the letter, daring to love our fellow humans, daring to dedicate our lives and souls to their uplift, and, above all, daring to dream big and bold in the face of a world that will only change if we make it. ✚







# Living The Dream

by Nathan J. Robinson

**L**AST NIGHT (12/3/21), IT WAS CUBES OF sour candy. Each cube had words imprinted on it. The words formed jokes, and when you took a piece of candy out of the bag you were supposed to tell the joke to whoever was standing next to you, even if they were a complete stranger. This trend had swept the nation. The consensus in the press was that these were some of the funniest jokes ever written, even though they had been produced by an algorithm.

I was standing in a large, warmly-lit classically-designed opera house, with a bag of the cube candies. I was taking them out of the bag one by one and placing them on the seats so that patrons could enjoy them when they returned from the intermission. A friend from long ago stood watching, and we argued over whether the jokes had actually been generated by an “algorithm.”

“They pull the words out of a hat at random. That isn’t an algorithm. That’s pulling words out of a hat,” said my friend, with an unusual degree of bitterness in his voice.

“You’re not just arguing with me,” I replied. “You’re arguing with the *New York Times*.”

The dream continued for some time afterward. But that is all I can recall.

I have been keeping a dream journal since 2013, and writing down everything I can remember, massaged into prose. I never embellish the dreams, but I am certain that the process of writing them down imposes an order or logic onto them that was not present in the actual experience. The diary is, however, as close as I can get close as I can get to an accurate record of what went through my mind at night. (Some excerpts of the diary

are scattered throughout these pages.)

People to whom I have shown my dream diary are sometimes dubious that it could really be what I remember. It is too clear and detailed. But I write it immediately after I wake up, and I have found that when one writes the dream down, the immediate focus on trying to “save” the dream from dissipating makes it possible to preserve fragments that would never normally be recollected. Other dream diarists, too, have produced similarly vivid and specific accounts of what they have gone through in the “zoo of the mind” that is the dreaming experience. As Sidarta Ribeiro writes in the wonderful *The Oracle of Night: The History and Science of Dreams*:

*“The task will seem impossible at first, but quickly an image of a scene, even if it’s faded, will come to light. The dreamer must cling to this, mobilizing their attention to increase the reverberation of the memory of the dream. It is this first memory, albeit perhaps fragile and fragmentary, that will serve as the initial piece of the jigsaw, or the end of the ball of yarn to be unrolled. Through its reactivation, the associated memories will begin to be revealed. On the first day this exercise may produce no more than a few scattered phrases, but after a week it is common for whole pages of the dream diary to get filled up.”*

Indeed, unrolling a ball of yarn is exactly what it is like. The night before last, the first thing I remembered was that there had been an airport. Then I remembered that in the airport, I had been instructed to take a “special” flight, one only accessible through a vertical tunnel made of ropes. Then I remembered that as I clambered up, children who could not handle the height tumbled down past me. I remembered what happened when I got to the top, which was that a gate agent informed

The filing cabinet is full of eggs. Each egg is a personnel file. If you smash it, the person dies.

me the flight would only take cargo, and handed me a hoagie as “compensation.” Those who say they do not remember their dreams should try the exercise of writing them down; they may preserve more than they expect.

One of the main questions about dreams that interests people is: what do they *mean*? Across many civilizations, dreams were seen as prophecies or instructions. A visit in a dream could tell a person what to do, and they would take it as a direct instruction to be followed seriously. It’s easy to see why dreams could be taken for divine inspiration, since their sources are so mysterious. Even contemporary neuroscience struggles to produce good explanations as to the *purpose* of dreams. They are a deeply weird phenomenon; bizarre, disjointed, impossible images that parade across our mind as we sleep. They must have some kind of *meaning*, they must make some sort of sense.

Oneirologists (those who study dreams) have collected endless dream reports documenting the dreams of people across cultures. It is said that there is nothing more boring than someone telling you about a dream they had, but diving into dream databases can be fascinating. There are some common “plots.” The anxiety dream (showing up to take a test one hasn’t studied for), the falling dream, the teeth-falling-out dream. Extreme pleasure (finding something more wonderful than anything one has ever seen in real life) or extreme terror (being more afraid of something than one has ever been in real life) are common. So is the fruitless pursuit of a goal, such as trying to get somewhere or open something or recover a lost object, or traveling through a building with end-

less doors.

Nightmares can be more unsettling than anything Hollywood has yet come up with. One dream report tells of a realistic “amputation assembly line” in which people lined up to have their limbs lopped off. I myself once dreamed I was among a group of prisoners being taken to be pulverized by a colossal hammer, hundreds of feet tall. Knowing that everybody is in danger but being unable to act is common. So are grotesque images, like looking into the neighbor’s pool to find a tiny doll next to a decomposing baby, or opening the front door to find a friend covered head-to-toe in live grasshoppers. What makes nightmares even more upsetting, though, is that they are often deeply personal. Examples from dream report databases include a person impersonating the dreamer’s mother trying to kill them by inserting long pointy fingers into their ribcage, and watching one’s child be killed or maimed and being unable to do anything about it (e.g., seeing one’s son getting on a plane and then watching the plane blow up). The dream, unlike a film, is first-person, and so with horrors like “being attacked by an amorphous dark thing,” “finding a glowing stranger in one’s bedroom with a terrifying smile on their face,” or “watching a friend blow up like a parade balloon,” we feel like we are *really* undergoing the experience in question. I dreamed recently of being trapped in my bed and unable to move, and I was convinced that I had woken up from the dream and was still trapped, creating a sensation of extraordinary terror, before finding out upon waking that this first sensation of “waking up” had only been another layer of the nightmare.

**D**REAMS CAN ALSO BE SOURCES OF extraordinary inspiration. They are capable of producing deeply upsetting horrors, but also showing us incredible shapes, architecture, and music. Because they take our existing thoughts and put them together in novel ways, even scientific insight can come in dreams. Mendeleev saw the arrangement of the periodic table of the elements in a dream, Niels Bohr saw the structure of the atom, and Friedrich Kekule discovered the structure of benzene after a dream of snakes swallowing their tails. Elias Howe is said to have perfected the sewing machine needle after a dream in which he was about to be eaten by cannibals—their spears had tips with holes in them, which inspired the design of the needle. Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* all came in dreams. Paul McCartney dreamed “Yesterday”—it is common to dream of a beautiful song that nobody has ever heard before, but when McCartney woke up and remembered it, he was convinced he must have plagiarized it from somewhere. After searching endlessly and realizing the song must have sprung from his own mind, he recorded the hit that



became the most covered pop song in the world.

On Twitter, people sometimes post attempts to recreate strange memes or products that existed in their dreams. One user had a dream in which people ate a food called “King’s Hand,” a “hollow [human] hand made of M&M cookie, filled with Greek salad.” He chronicled his exhaustive quest to recreate the (disgusting) dessert, which other users replicated. (The “King’s Hand” now has its own Wikipedia entry and was featured on the *Today Show*.)

Dream report databases show that many people experience the same kind of anxieties in their dreams. Many these days are COVID-19 dreams, in which someone’s relatives suddenly become sick. But even when the underlying emotions are shared, each individual can have totally unique nightmares that show the mind at its most creatively unsettling: thinking a man is going to cut your fingers off, trying to turn on a faucet that is covered in ants, discovering that one’s damask curtains are really demons, floating on one’s bed in the middle of an ocean and killing a fish—only to discover that the fish was in fact a beloved pet.

The bizarre, unexpected, and primal qualities of dreams appear to be present across many different societies. A database of dream reports from an Amazonian indigenous people, the Mehinaku, recorded in the 1970s, shows that, while their dreams are constructed out of the material of their social world rather than ours, they are not unrelatable. The reports are brief, but include dreams like: “frightened by sight of rectum of a spirit,” “cradled and nurtured bird,” “eaten by a giant spirit-fish,” “searched for piqui fruit with comrade,” “wanted to have sex with a girl but had no eyes to see her,” “had sex with a woman whose flesh was rotten and breaks open during intercourse,” “learned that son of distant kin will be eaten by spirits,” “removed penis, washed it, put it back on,” “bitten by tocandira ant,” “pursued by ghost of dead mother, cannot escape,” “refused food and therefore stung by stingray.” The same plots we see in Western dreams (running frightened, being anxious, being attacked by animals, becoming mysteriously sick, drowning, having sex) turn up in the dreams of the Mehinaku.

Starting around 2016, people across the United States began to have dreams about Donald Trump. This wasn’t unexpected, since dreams are made from the stuff of life, and as Trump was in the news a lot, it was natural that he would make his way into people’s dreams. (There were a lot of Obama dreams in 2008, and plenty of Ross Perot dreams in 1992. I myself once had a dream in which Bernie Sanders confessed he did not wish to run for president, and planned to run away from his campaign to hide in a tunnel. “Nobody can make you be president,” Dream Bernie told me. “Not if you don’t want to be. It’s a free country.”) New York psychotherapist Martha Crawford has compiled thousands of Trump dreams, and categorized their content (e.g., “Dreams of Hubris and Inflation,” “Dreams of

Humiliation and Hair,” “Dreams of Caretaking and Infantilization,” “Dreams of Impingement and Intrusion on Daily Life,” “Dreams of Psychopathy and Violated Norms,” “Dreams of Propaganda, Double-speak, and Surveillance.”) What is remarkable is not that Trump shows up, but what the dreams show about people’s feelings about Trump, and how as a result the dreams often end up producing amusing political satire.

Some examples of Trump dreams:

- The dreamer is watching Trump give a speech and is the only one who can see that behind the podium, Trump is masturbating onto a copy of his speech. The dreamer is secretly filming Trump doing this and intends to take the story to the press, but is frustrated afterward at how uninterested the media is in revealing it to the public.
- A common dream involves Donald Trump stealing food off a person’s plate: “We were eating McDonald’s with Trump. Trump took one bite out of all the chicken nuggets so that no one else could have them.”
- “I had a dream that Donald Trump made olives illegal because he thought they were ‘weird.’”



## The Wires Dream

A doctor—or possibly a mad scientist disguised as a doctor—removes the left half of my face, leaving a giant hole. I stare into the hole and realize my skull is mostly hollow, with a few internal wires and electrodes here and there. I become depressed about having an empty head.

“I am just a machine like any other,” I scream.

**“I am nothing!”**

“Wires are not nothing,” the doctor replies.

Each note you strike on the grand piano causes a different plant to sprout. The plants themselves are the symphony.

- Trump in a shiny sequined dress asking if he looks better than Hillary Clinton.
- “Trump blew up Philadelphia to build a statue of himself.”
- “At a party [Trump] was mixing different types of taco seasoning to pour into a beer.”
- “Trump slapped me across the face and I yelled ‘You hit me?!’ And he immediately said ‘No, I didn’t.’”
- “Donald Trump had decided that to be a well-respected president, he had to come up with a really good Public Service Announcement. The result was an advert featuring a group of people dressed as human organs, led by a pancreas, walking in slow motion, all cool and stuff, down a wide corridor while the altered Eagles lyric “warm smell of Colitis, rising up through the air” played. Suddenly everyone—Democrats included—was praising Trump for calling attention to a tragic disease that affects millions, while I was the only one screaming ‘THAT DOESN’T EVEN MAKE ANY SENSE!!!’”
- “i had a vivid dream the other night about Donald trump somehow brainwashing ppl through a stage show/play/movie thing to eat everything and think everything was a sweet/candy? and ppl died bc they were eating furniture.” [sic]
- “Trump gave me a million dollars but they were fake.”
- “I had a dream that the White House wouldn’t let Trump actually work so everyday he would just make himself a paper crown and go to the mall to get a Wetzel Pretzel.”
- “Donald Trump was my father and secretly faked an assassination attempt on his own life so that my siblings and I would learn to love him better.”
- Trump announced National Donald Trump Day, introducing a new currency with “a grotesque caricature of his

face on it, and the motto was ‘Everyone Can Dream.’”

- “Dreamed that we won a Trump-brand cruise to Italy and when we got there, we realized they’d driven us in circles and dropped us off at an Italian restaurant down the California coast, and I turned to Blake and sighed, “I don’t actually know what I expected.”
- “Trump was mad NASA wouldn’t turn the Hubble Telescope around to spy on immigrants.”
- The dreamer describes a scene of Dickensian poverty in which Donald Trump, attempting to appear philanthropic, is handing out food to the poor. When the dreamer gets to the front of the line, Trump hands them two cold potatoes.
- A frequent dream-type among students involves discovering that Donald Trump is one’s teacher. An example: “had a dream trump was my social studies teacher and at the end of every class, he gave us all fucking PORKCHOPS to take home to our families.” Another: “Trump was my English teacher and I was failing the class because every time we got an essay assignment I would write ‘This Man Is Horrible’ all over the fuckin paper.” Another: “dreamed Trump was the headteacher and he wouldn’t let me study feminism because he said feminists are witches.” Trump has guest-taught Bible study and psychotherapy classes in people’s dreams. One person found themselves in a class about Trump in which the syllabus had been written by Trump himself.
- “I dreamed last night that Donald Trump was dying and I was called to the White House to provide spiritual direction to him in his final days, but I couldn’t get him to pay attention to anything I was saying. He kept saying he wanted to take me out to eat Trump steaks.”

The dreams are not always whimsical. Some involve disturbing accounts of being assaulted or raped by Trump, occasionally with Trump dressed in a manner that makes the experience even more disturbing (e.g., clown mask). One reported a traumatic dream in which they remembered Trump had molested them as a child. Others report strange dreams in which Trump is kind to them or validates them, such as by telling them they are good and loved or praising their handicrafts.

Sometimes people dream that Trump is an infant child they have been tasked with taking care of. (“I applied a MASSIVE nicotine patch to Donald Trump’s back while he slumped over my knee like a giant, clammy baby.”) Some have dreamed that Trump has tweeted out maps of their houses, causing them to receive death threats.

Some of these dreams could happen with anybody who happened to occupy the Oval Office. Dreams are, after all, bizarre, and in the 1990s plenty of people surely dreamed that Bill Clinton was their teacher. But what is remarkable is how many



## The Eagle Dream

The auditorium was filled with students for the end-of-term celebrations. Many pompous administrators gave long-winded speeches. When it was my turn to speak, I told everyone I had something rather special to show them. I directed their attention to a pair of hundred-foot stepladders that I had placed side by side, with a tiny platform across them, just shy of the ceiling. I began climbing one of the ladders, with a microphone in my hand and a live eagle tucked under my arm.

When I got to the top, I held up the eagle.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said into the microphone, "this is a bald eagle, symbol of America. It has a beak, as you know." I kissed the eagle's beak. The eagle began to look alarmed. "What we are here to do today is to show how clever this eagle is, and how well it can fly. Now, you all know that if I dropped the eagle from this platform, it would not fall to the ground, but would simply fly away." The audience did not react, but stared at me in awed silence. "But what," I continued, "would happen if we replaced the eagle's wings with Muppet wings?" I began to remove the eagle's wings. "It is my position," I declared, "that the spirit of America is so strong in this bird that it would fly even with useless wings." The eagle struggled against me, but I managed to pop the wings off. Into the bird's empty sockets I placed "muppet wings," felt wings that looked like they had come from a Muppet instead of a real bird, which were decorated all over with green tinsel. "Ladies and gentlemen, as further proof that this eagle will fly, let me inform you that this eagle is Jewish. He thus has thousands of years of noble history to give him strength. Now, fly!"

I move to the edge of the platform and drop the frightened eagle. It plummets to the floor with a splat.

The audience instantly erupts in anger and begins moving toward the platform. I make a rapid descent before they manage to channel an electric current through the ladders. When I reach the bottom, I cannot figure out how to turn my microphone off.

of these reports effectively *parody* Trump's particular character traits. His gluttony, his self-absorption, his bullying, his tackiness, his shameless implausible lying—all of it is hilariously satirized in the unconscious mind. The dream of the potatoes captures well Trump's pseudo-philanthropy through the corrupt Trump Foundation. The dream in which Trump creates a PSA about colitis and receives bipartisan acclaim for it not only satirizes Trump's questionable sense of the public interest, but the tendency of Democrats to be so eager to reach across the aisle that they will do it in the name of an absurdity. In dreams, Trump makes up new words to the national anthem, or takes credit for ending the Boer War, or crashes the dreamer's wedding. But Trump *has* actually crashed a wedding—he wandered unannounced into one at Mar-a-Lago, took the microphone, and gave a bizarre speech about Biden and China.

DREAMS ARE EXCELLENT AT capturing certain emotional truths. A remarkable book called *The Third Reich of Dreams: The Nightmares of a Nation (1933-1939)*, collects reports of dreams that people had during the early days of Nazi Germany. A Jewish journalist, Charlotte Beradt,



took them down before she was forced to flee the country. They are often strange Kafkaesque "bureaucratic fairy tales." For instance, a man dreams of a new "Regulation Prohibiting Residual Bourgeois Tendencies." A Jewish woman dreams of trying to find her apartment and being told it no longer exists, another dreams of trying to be verified by a "Bureau of Aryan Verification." One woman dreams "of a snowy road strewn with watches and jewelry. Tempted to take a piece, she senses a setup by the 'Office For Testing the Honesty of Aliens.'" Interactions with prominent Nazi officials were a frequent dream subject, such as this from a middle-aged male factory owner:

*"Goebbels was visiting my factory. He had all the workers line up in two rows facing each other. I had to stand in the middle and raise my arm in the Nazi salute. It took me half an hour to get my arm up, inch by inch. Goebbels. Goebbels showed neither approval nor disapproval as he watched my struggle, as if it were a play. When I finally managed to get my arm up, he said just five words—'I don't want your salute'—then turned and went to the door. There I stood in my own factory, arm raised, pilloried right in the midst of my own people. I was only able to keep from collapsing by staring at his clubfoot as he limped out. And so I stood until I woke up."*

The dreams of war survivors show that traumatic violence does not just affect people in their waking life, but condemns them to a life of reliving that violence in their sleep. One data-

To punish a waiter, the patrons do the Dance Of The Palms, turning the entire restaurant into a forest.

base collects a series of dreams from a Vietnam veteran, many of which involve being bayoneted, castrated, or bombed. A frequent theme in his dreams is starting in a mundane place (his apartment, a golf course), only to hear the sound of helicopters and be back in Vietnam. A few of the veteran's dreams:

- *I am in my apartment in the Bronx, sleeping. I hear noise in the foyer. Two dolls, hanging from a door knob, have come to life. I speak to the male doll and the female doll and feel happy. I have made two friends. Then we are outside in a country at war. The terrain is hilly and partially wooded. Helicopters appear and fire rockets which explode in a suppressed manner. On impact the force of the blast shoots out to the left and right. We begin running. A fighter plane appears overhead. I expect it to strafe us. Unexpectedly, it pulls up from a power dive and on the upswing drops a cloud of white powder or gas, which we run from. We are spotted or captured by police.*
- *I have done something for a man who seems to be in some sort of trouble. I am somehow like a spy. I go with another person and we demand to be paid. In fact I am quite adamant. I say 'You will pay me now!' I am given a great sum of money. I am aware that others want to get me and take the money. Therefore, I must escape. I am running. I am found. The ones who seek me begin to shoot at me. I dive behind a big machine gun and fire back. A star of David, as if superimposed, descends upon the scene.*
- *In Vietnam, as a witness, I view war at close range. The first thing I see in the crowded street is an AK-47, stuck into a wall by its bayonet. There are angry words written on its stock, but I cannot remember them. All around, Vietnamese men are frantically fighting, shooting back over a wall or barrier. I am lying on the top of a bunk bed, sorting through the belongings of someone. This person, apparently dead, had collected stamps. Paging through a small album, I see many American air mail*

*stamps I recall from my youth. Suddenly a man nearby is shot and falls. I see the bullets kick and sting the dirt near him. Two nurses, wearing red and white striped dresses, come to his aid. They are completely vulnerable, turning their backs to the enemy. I am amazed at their bravery or foolishness. One nurse in particular attends to the man, who is mortally wounded.*

- *I am on a great snowy mountain with someone else. Two trained horses must run down the mountain as if it were an obstacle course or test. They perform tricks and must endure hardship. They are very powerful. They do not hesitate at the unexpected, but immediately improvise.*

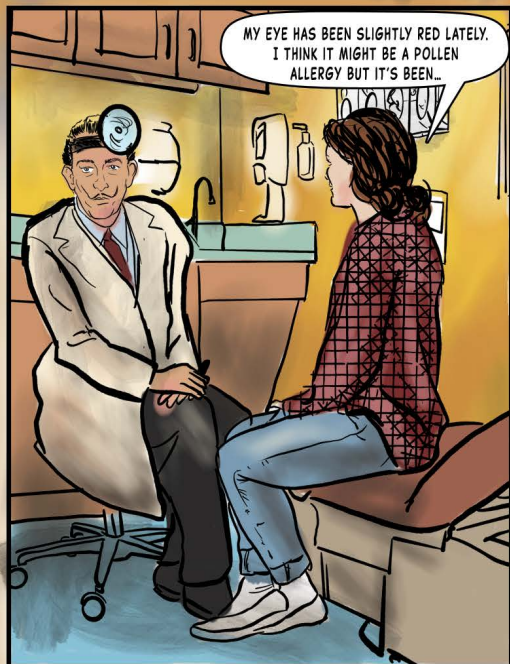
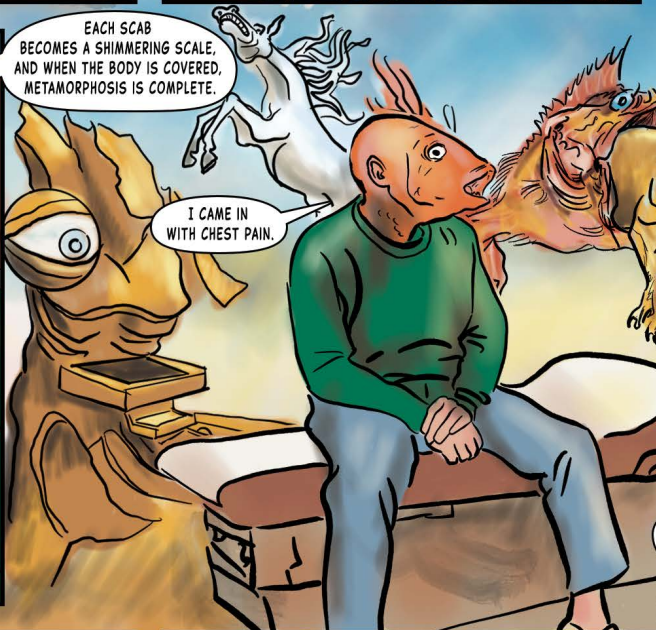
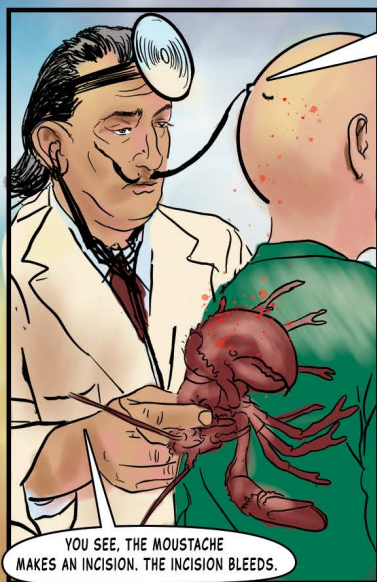
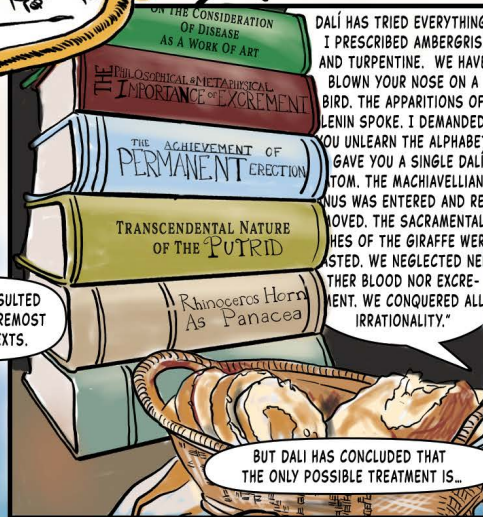
Weird dreams, such as the one with the horses, cry out for interpretation. *Why* these animals? *Why* this scenario? The most well-known dream interpreter was Sigmund Freud, whose mammoth 1899 book *The Interpretation of Dreams* is a foundational text of psychoanalysis. Freud claimed he could "prove that there exists a psychological technique by which dreams may be interpreted, and that upon the application of this method every dream will show itself to be a senseful psychological structure which may be introduced into an assignable place in the psychic activity of the waking state." He promised to "explain the processes which give rise to the strangeness and obscurity of the dream, and to discover through them the nature of the psychic forces which operate, whether in combination or in opposition, to produce the dream."

*The Interpretation of Dreams* is highly unsatisfying in achieving its stated objectives. Freud's interpretations of his own dreams and those of his patients are often ridiculous and unpersuasive. Freud being Freud, he often finds a way to make it about sex. When an unmarried male patient dreams of revulsion at putting on his overcoat, Freud explains that the overcoat is in fact a *condom*, because a condom is a kind of overcoat, and if it is too thin, it is in danger of bursting, thus an

The ocean is being overrun with copper sculptures of tortoises. They are the "new climate change." If we do not stop them multiplying there will be no sea next year.



# Salvador Dali MD





The road is filled with tall, spindly golden birds. Like herons. They are almost translucent. All of them are dying slowly.

unmarried man has reason to be anxious about bursting condoms, which is clearly what the patient was dreaming of. In another passage, reporting on a female patient's dream in which she fell down on a Vienna street, Freud explains that "when a person of the female sex dreams of falling, this almost regularly has a sexual significance; she becomes a 'fallen woman,' and for the purpose of the dream under consideration this interpretation is probably the least doubtful, for she falls on the Graben, the place in Vienna which is known as the concourse of prostitutes." When Freud brings up a woman who dreamed she broke a candlestick, one already knows that he's going to explain that it is about male impotence.

These sorts of speculative, unfalsifiable interpretations, which Freud offers without giving a way to determine how to test if they are "true," are part of why Freud's status as a serious psychologist suffered over the years. But while it is easy to make fun of Freud, and his specific dream interpretation method (which we might call "figure out how this is really about a penis"), he deserves credit for taking dreams seriously and trying to show why they might tell us something meaningful and be something other than arbitrary. Freud's quest to find a particular "meaning" of each dream was an attempt to do the impossible, but he was right that dreams often reveal preoccupations and anxieties that are clearly on our minds even if we have shunted them out of our conscious thoughts.

Sometimes it is clear where we are getting the stuff dreams are made of. If we go to see a horror film about a severed hand that chases people, and then dream that night of being chased by the hand, it is easy to see how our day provided source material for our nightmare. The ex-soldier who dreams of Vietnam has a stockpile of traumatic memories that can be recycled into new

unpleasant experiences to haunt him at night. But others seem to come from nowhere. Why are there jokes printed on the candy in my candy-jokes dream? Why are there ants on the faucet in the ant-faucet dream? I have a recurring dream in which I am driving along a bridge across the water in Florida, and I see that the bridge has a gap in it ahead, and I try to drive quickly enough to make it across the gap, but I inevitably fail and fall into the water. Does this mean anything? It *could*. But does it? Sometimes the dream does seem like it's *trying* to tell us something; the Goebbels dream quoted above, for instance, could easily be taken to mean that one would struggle in vain to satisfy the Nazis, and the only thing one would get for one's effort would be humiliation. But is this a "real" message or just something projected onto it?

Freud tried to come up with explanations, ways to make sense of the seemingly arbitrary, and we can see easily how an "interpretive" approach would be applied. Take, for example, this dream from a seventh grade girl:

*"I am walking home at night through a dark alleyway and I look back and someone is following me. I can't tell who it is, so I am scared and I start walking faster. The person behind me starts walking faster too. Then I start running and the person following me starts running. Then I see a light up ahead and I run to it and stop. Then the person also stops in the light, so that I can see who it is, and it was my friend David (he is one year older than me and he was my boyfriend for a little while). So when I saw it was him, I said to him, 'Oh thank God it's only you.' And then he says, 'Why are you glad it's me?' and he pulls out a knife and stabs me."*

The interpretive approach would try to figure out why it was David in particular who stabbed the girl. Does she secretly distrust him? Does he represent something she fears? But attempts to glean insight like this are doomed. We don't know whether there is something about David that made him secretly the murderer. Perhaps it is that she trusts and likes David so *much* that the most terrifying possible thing her mind could come up with was a betrayal by David. Because there is no way of testing any proposed interpretation against any other, the exercise is doomed.

I suddenly find myself having to explain why my corporation has lost billions of dollars. I did not even know I had a corporation.



Are dreams useless, then? Not at all. Ribeiro, in *The Oracle of Night*, concludes with a strong case that dreams are essential for offering guiding visions, because they allow us to see things that are very different from reality, as if they were real. It is no coincidence of language that Martin Luther King, Jr. offered a “dream.” Ribeiro says that facing the challenges of the 21st century will require those who take their dreams seriously, who try to remember them and find guidance and possibility in them. Ribeiro even sees a role for the nightmare. The nightmare allows us to see vividly what *could* be; like the tour of Christmas future offered to Ebenezer Scrooge, it offers one a way to truly feel what could be:

*“In order to avoid our cultural ratchet proceeding uncontrollably toward global collapse, we need broaden our perspective. We must urgently recover the capacity to imagine the worst consequences of our most ingrained habits. The science of biologists, chemists, and physicists needs to walk arm in arm with the wisdom of shamans and yogis, not to be massed against it. The lucid dream, in its vastness, has the potential to be the mental space that will allow us to imagine solutions to the most challenging problems, from the destruction of the water sources to the dichotomy between mind and brain, from the accumulation of microplastics to the devastation of Amerindian peoples and Black populations by COVID-19, from persistent police brutality to persistent male supremacy, from an epidemic of suicide*

*to the accelerating deforestation of those unspoiled lands that remain, from extreme inequality to widespread corruption, from the most destructive addiction of all—money—to the carnage of the breeding and cruel slaughter of animals, from predatory capitalism to the end of almost all jobs, very shortly, when the robots conclude their triumphant arrival.”*

The dream is mind-expanding and breaks us out of existing ways of thinking and seeing, allows for new connections, new insights. We see relationships between things and people we hadn’t thought of before, we unearth feelings we had that we didn’t know we felt, we enter a world of the beautiful, mysterious, terrifying, and unexpected. To dream is to end each day by entering an alternate reality where anything is possible and nobody knows what will happen next. While I have had my fair share of nightmares, and while my dreams often contain a sense of futility and humiliation (I try to explain my politics and fail, my employer is upset with me for sending them photographs of cowboys instead of the tests I was supposed to grade), I would not want to live a life without dreams. To step into this strange realm each night is a privilege. I have seen things there I will never see in my waking life. I have felt things I will never get to feel, become things I will never become. Anyone who does not wish for things to always be exactly as they are now should regularly wander through the world of dreams. ✚



## Police Officer Training Corps

I am a trainee police officer. The other officers do not respect me, because I am the only one in our contingent who refuses to wear pants. Sometimes I wear a tracksuit, which my colleagues insist is also inappropriate.

We are divided into two groups. Half of us will be Death Squads, half of us will be Parking Enforcement. I am Parking Enforcement. “Hello, my prestigious friend,” says a Death Squad member to me. I look at my naked legs in shame.

Despite all of this, I am confident I will eventually solve the Mystery.

## The Vine Dream

I keep feeling a single long hair growing from my back but I cannot see it in the mirror. I ask my mother to yank it out. When she pulls it, it turns out to be a large vine growing from me. When she pulls harder, it is revealed to have deep roots in my body, and a number of my organs come out with it. Fatally disemboweled, I hold the plucked vine in my hands and run my fingers over it.

“Looks kind of like a stalk of wheat,” I murmur as I die.

## A Free Country

“Do you know what the definition of a free country is?” the speaker asked, pointing at me.

I mumbled that I did not.

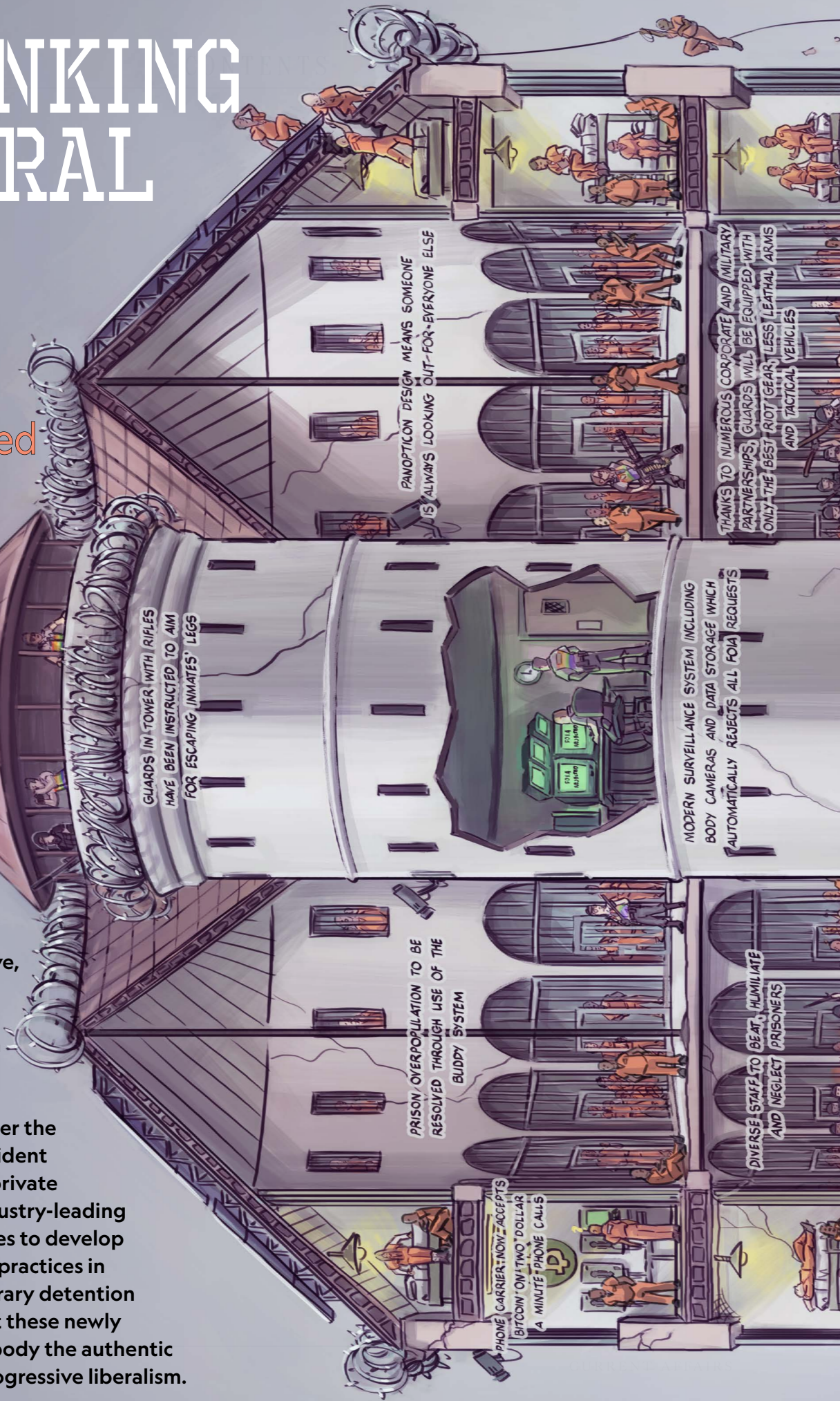
“A free country is one where you can jerk off thinking about anyone you like. Even Stalin.”



# RETHINKING CARCERAL SPACE

GEO Group  
Presents the  
Trauma-Informed  
Detention  
Facility

In recognition of the fact that mass incarceration in the United States is deeply problematic, the Department of Justice has launched a new initiative, the "Rethinking Carceral Space" Project, to overhaul the country's prison system and provide inmates with facilities that embody the country's core mission. Under the leadership of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, this public-private partnership works with industry-leading providers of carceral services to develop recommendations for best practices in reimagining the contemporary detention facility. We are hopeful that these newly redesigned spaces will embody the authentic values of contemporary progressive liberalism.







ENVIRONMENTALLY  
FRIENDLY  
COMPOSTABLE  
TOILETS

LGBTQ INMATES ARE  
ENCOURAGED TO WEAR  
PRIDE APPAREL

CAFETERIA WILL SERVE A WIDE VARIETY OF  
CULTURALLY DIVERSE, EXPIRED AND ROTTEN FOODS

THE SOLITARY CONFINEMENT UNIT IS A GREAT PLACE TO  
PRACTICE SELF-CARE AWAY FROM DISTRACTIONS

PRISONERS WORKING IN THE FACTORY  
NOW MANUFACTURE COMPONENTS FOR ELECTRIC  
CARS FOR 64 AN HOUR

IN AN EFFORT TO BE RESOURCE CONSCIOUS,  
NOW NOT ONLY WILL THE PRISON  
SHUT OFF AIR CONDITIONING DURING  
HEAT WAVES, BUT WATER AS WELL

DIVERSITY TRAINED PAROLE BOARD NOW  
DENY PAROLE EQUALLY TO PEOPLE OF  
ALL BACKGROUNDS

WHILE MEDICINE IS STILL NOT AVAILABLE TO  
INMATES, THE MEDICAL CENTER NOW STOCKS  
SRIRACHA IN ADDITION TO KETCHUP  
FOR STERILIZING WOUNDS

STATE OF THE ART THERAPY CENTER TO HELP INMATES DEAL WITH  
PTSD BROUGHT ON BY THE DAILY TRAUMA OF INCARCERATION

HOLES IN FLOORS AND CEILINGS  
ARE EXCELLENT FOR TRUST FALLS!

DEFERRED MAINTENANCE PLAN WILL ALLOW  
FOR MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY WITHOUT HAVING  
TO RAISE TAXES







# Of Towers and Toilets

## *A Tale of Two Developments*

BY YASMIN NAIR

SOMETIME IN 1972, BOB AND JUNE MELTON moved from Illinois to what they believed would be the lovely new township of Rotonda, Florida. Eager to finally escape brutal midwestern winters, they had bought a house sight unseen for what seemed like an exceptionally reasonable amount. When they arrived, they discovered that their new home was nowhere near finished and they would have to stay in a condominium for months while the house was still being built. One day, June Melton visited the site to check on its progress. What she found startled her: workmen were installing a toilet bowl in the middle of a doorway.

The bowl was not in the middle of the door *to* the bathroom. It was not *next* to the doorway. It was in the middle of a doorway that had nothing to do with the bathroom, an un-bathroom doorway, if you will, through which people would have to walk to get to other parts of the house. When Melton complained, a workman replied, presumably with a shrug, that it was “low enough to step over” (the words drip with shrugginess).

The Meltons’ ordeal is recorded in Jason Vuic’s *Swamp Peddlers: How Lot Sellers, Land Scammers, and Retirees Built Modern Florida and Transformed the American Dream*, a deeply detailed history of Florida land “development” (as we will see, the word in this context positively quivers and shakes with irony). The book exposes the land scams that went into making the Sunshine State what it is today. Starting in the 1950s, developers created an “installment land sales industry” and began selling pieces of land to northerners for as little as \$10 down and \$10 a month. The money was to go towards homes in rapidly developing planned communities, with futuristic names like Rotonda and aspirational ones like Port Charlotte (not near a port but a harbor), Cape Coral (not much coral), and Palm Coast (very few palms, mostly swamp and pines).

What most people got instead were houses that were barely put together with spit and glue. Vuic cites the author Jack Alexander writing about “crooked lines, walls without framing, slabs poured and houses built with garages on the wrong side, and roofs *that hadn’t been fastened to the walls*, bad in any case but lethal in a storm.” All of this went on for decades, aided by a complex nexus of corrupt politi-

cians, greedy developers and credulous consumers—many of whom sank lives’ savings into un-homes. The words “raw sewage” often crop up in Vuic’s account—as it did in or near various allotments.

Fifty years later, in 2021, a segment of Chicago’s Jackson Park—one of the last remaining jewels of public parkland designed by Frederick Olmsted and Calvert Vaux (also the designers of New York’s Central Park)—is being ripped up in order to make way for a 235-foot tall, 20-acre Obama Presidential Center (OPC), in partnership with the University of Chicago. The project and the university are located in Chicago’s historically Black and mostly underserved South Side. For the past six years, the OPC has faced numerous legal challenges. Complainants have pointed out that, among other things, it could easily have been located in any one of several nearby neighborhoods with vast, empty buildings; it will create massive traffic congestion by closing Cornell Drive—which used to run through the park; and it is largely an engine of gentrification. The park has had landmark status, but the city has leased the area to the OPC for 99 years for \$10 (it appears that ten is the magic number in land scams).

The OPC’s precise function is unclear. While many assume that it will be the Obama Presidential Library, it is in fact becoming an un-library. It will not have resources for researchers, not even documents Obama’s administration has made public—except those it borrows occasionally from the National Archives and Records Administration, the federal agency that oversees presidential libraries and museums—and then only for display. The Obama Foundation, the entity that fundraises for the project, will also pay for the digitizing of nearly 30 million pages of unclassified records “so they can be made available online,” according to a 2019 report in the *New York Times*. Nothing about this process is clear: as far as we can tell, documents related to the Obama administration might as well be hurled into a very deep hole in Alaska. Called a “museum tower” (short museums are so silly and early aughts), the OPC will include, according to the *NYT*, “a two-story event space, an athletic center, a recording studio, a winter garden, even a sledding hill.”

What else could the OPC house? It may be home to Michelle Obama’s inaugural dresses and any outfits that she deems not worthy of being worn any more. It will, like every other museum, surely house

a gift shop which might sell precious one-of-a-kind salad bowls made from the wood of trees decimated in the construction process (a view of this outrage is hauntingly captured in a photograph in the *South Side Weekly* photo essay, “Remembering the Jackson Park Trees”).

**W**HAT IS THE POINT OF THE OPC? A 2018 FAQ document released by the University of Chicago (and since yanked from the web, available only on Wayback) claims that it will bring 800,000 visitors to the area each year. *If you build it, they will come.* The OPC also claims, through spokespeople like Valerie Jarrett, that it will generate “\$3 billion in economic activity for the city through construction and its first decade of operations.” The Foundation claims it will create 5,000 jobs, though the FAQ only claimed 1,500, and most of these are likely to be the temporary sort, to do with contracting and construction work on the building itself. While such are not to be sneered at (and are often well paid and unionized), they are not what drive long-term economic recovery in an area that still faces infrastructure issues like inadequate public transit and access to groceries. At best, there might be long-term jobs with custodial functions. The OPC speaks often of internship and “leadership training” programs but, again, with that persistent lack of specificity. In the FAQ, the University insists that in benefiting the city, “The Obama Presidential Center will be an intellectual resource, a source of great economic benefit, a key addition to the network of civic partners throughout the city, and a catalyst of new opportunities for the people of Chicago.” This is the sort of thing a visiting Space Alien bureaucrat might say to trembling earthlings, seconds before their planet is blasted to bits to make way for a new Interstellar Highway, as in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.

Like an errant toilet seeking purpose in a doorway, the OPC as rendered in plans squats uselessly and without windows in the middle of a historic park. Its creators try to justify its existence in any way possible, throwing out meaningless terms to appease both critics and increasingly suspicious supporters: Jobs! Youth Leadership! Training! Opportunity! Opportunities, in the plural! Did we mention: *opportunities*? Meanwhile, the actual cost for the project has begun to reach stratospheric levels. In August of 2021, days before breaking ground in the park, the OPC revealed that its initial estimate of \$500 million for the project had, ah, um, ballooned somewhat. It would in fact need \$700 million just to build the building, \$90 million “to collect artifacts, design exhibits and prepare the OPC to operate at opening” and “\$40 million to operate the center for one year after construction is completed.” What kind of a building takes \$40 million to operate? One built by an egomaniac ex-president who thinks that his legacy can only be enshrined by decimating a historic landmark. At that cost, it ought to at least serve as a landing strip for alien ships needing a refueling station.

Though divided by half a century and several miles, the developments in Florida and the southern corner of Chicago are intimately connected. In each case, there is a relentless drive to demolish public land in favor of private enclaves, to render land and life useless unless they can be made use of as generators of capital, of unbounded income for the few while the many, human and nonhuman, are

displaced or made extinct.

Consider the words of David Axelrod. Speaking to *Politico* about the onset of the OPC in the park, Axelrod said: “The thing that strikes me is how little used it is. I think this will bring more people to the park, and it will enhance it.” In other words, for Axelrod, the park is *underutilized*. If only it could become something else, not an actual park unblemished by buildings that could be enjoyed by the residents of a crammed city but something that would be used more. But what is a public park to be used for if not to give respite to tired city eyes, to give citydwellers a connection to the vastness and complexity of nature without having to leave their jobs and lives behind for days? How is a park little used when its point is simply to exist on its own terms?

Reading his words, I was reminded of a moment in Vuic’s book, when he describes a group of developers who came upon the gorgeous scenery of a gulf and saw not immeasurable beauty which, if left unspoiled, might simply bring pleasure to all who gazed upon it but...millions of dollars from home investors. To them, of course, this was *underutilized*: what use was a beautiful landscape, a breathtaking vista, if it could not be gazed upon from a stunning home created by a celebrity designer for a very, very rich millionaire? Or a hundred?

In 2017, Chris Christie, then governor of New Jersey, ordered all state-run beaches closed during a government shutdown—and then took over Island Beach State Park with family members during the Fourth of July weekend. Aerial photos taken by the *Star-Ledger of New Jersey* show Christie’s entourage surrounded by miles and miles of empty beach, tiny ants in a vast sandpit for them to play in. The beach, after all, would surely have been *underutilized* if not for the First Family’s incursion. And so there they were, frolicking on the beach while the rest of the state was left to find means of entertainment and rest elsewhere.

Years ago, when I lived in Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood and within walking distance of Foster Beach, someone responded to my critiques of gentrification by telling me that I didn’t deserve to live in the area given my tax bracket. In many parts of the world, city planners carefully arrange housing blocks so that there are no great divergences in income levels among residents within a given neighborhood. In the United States, land is *underutilized* even when it’s a beautiful, massive *public park* because only rich and mostly white people deserve the pleasure of spaces that exist for no reason than to be there. If a neighborhood offers easy access to a lake, it should only be available to those willing to pay a lot for such: not some renter schmuck who lives off a freelancer’s wages. What matters to developers—and Axelrod, like his former boss, is a developer—is that land be of use *to them* as a source of capital. Their concern is not so much that land is underutilized but that it should not fall into the hands of people who won’t pay for it: it’s not the land that’s useless and without value but the people (and animals) that dare occupy it without capital investments of some sort.

## The Obama Presidential Center: An Origin Story

ALL OF THIS RAISES THE QUESTION: WHY, OTHER THAN THE fact that he’s a massive egomaniac who thinks nothing of decimating valuable and precious parkland, would Barack Obama even have chosen this site in the first place?



AGILE  
STAFFING  
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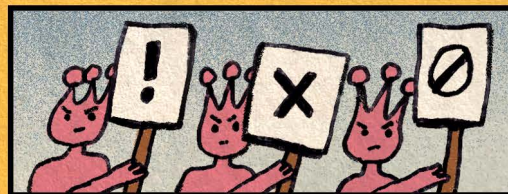
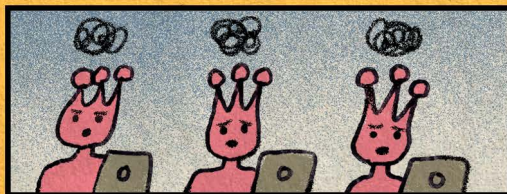
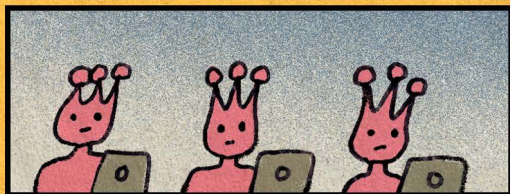
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FAMILIES GAZE IN AWE AT THE OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL OBELISK (AND THE INSPIRING WORDS PRINTED ON IT) IN THIS OFFICIAL RENDERING

Certainly, the OPC is historic because Obama is the country's first Black president. But it is also historic in a different sense: Obama is the first president to have launched a bidding war in different states for a building to house his legacy. His options were Columbia University in New York, the University of Hawaii, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Chicago. For some observers (including me), it was obvious that he would choose Hyde Park—not so much because of his or Michelle Obama's connection to the area (she grew up on the South Side, he began his political life here and once taught as adjunct faculty at the university) but because this neighborhood offers the most possibility for the kind of reckless development that reaps large profits for a few under the guise of building and expanding community resources. And it includes the University of Chicago, which has built up a long and notorious reputation for avaricious gentrification for almost as long as it has been in existence. The South Side of Chicago has suffered from underdevelopment and neglect, but this is exactly why the university has been quietly buying up tracts of land on all sides. Between 2008 and 2014 alone, it bought up 26 properties in the neighborhood of Washington Park (also the name of another Olmsted-Vaux park), once thought to be the site of what was then still (dupliciously) called a “library.” With an \$11.6 billion endowment, the university is not lacking for funds.

The process began in 2017 and has been clouded in controversy and a lack of transparency. The OPC, despite being not-a-library, was able to slide into existence without much press coverage because the Trump years focused people's attention on a man whose spectacular failure as an American president meant that liberals and progressives were unlikely to look too critically at the last one who seemed like a god in comparison. Only in Chicago did people actually scrutinize what the OPC claimed to offer, in a testament to the still-lively historical thread of activism that has long characterized a city that gave us the eight-hour day and the five-day week. And some of the most vocal critics were people in and around Hyde Park, a neighborhood whose life in the shadow of a university that is now also its biggest landlord and employer has been a long and complicated one.

Mike Nichols—*that* Mike Nichols, who directed *The Graduate* and other films—once said of the neighborhood where he met his equally famous comedic partner Elaine May that “Hyde Park is where white and Black unite against the poor.” That's a brilliant description and summation of the place. Hyde Park is the most racially integrated area in Chicago, but that's a low bar in a city so racist and segregated that it operates like a plantation. The Chicago Transportation Authority (CTA) deliberately makes it nearly impossible for people from the mostly Black and brown south and west sides of the city to get to the mostly white north side, for instance. Cou-



ple all that with a long process of disinvestment in non-white areas, the fact that everyday racism persists at 1960s levels, that majority Black neighborhoods face heightened levels of violence—and it's understandable that "Black flight" has been persistent for several years now. Hyde Park and some of its nearby neighborhoods like Bronzeville and South Shore have in the meantime long been home to an affluent and middle-class Black population (Margo Jefferson's famous *Negroland: A Memoir* is a clarifying account of her life in the area as part of the Black upper class). For them, development is an asset that drives up their housing values and helps to maintain what they see as an exclusive enclave of their own.

While even many Hyde Parkers assume that the neighborhood has always been wealthy, it has in fact historically been home to a mix of classes and races, with a strong segment of working and middle-class people. It's only in the past decade or so that the university, which even decides what businesses should exist here, has taken on a much more explicit role in gentrifying the neighborhood, enabled in part by newer local politicians who give in to its demands. In recent years, it has set about building expensive designer apartment complexes for affluent students, their gleaming towers in contrast to the older Victorian and modernist buildings that were more common (the university was explicitly designed, from its inception in 1892, to resemble Oxbridge: like Chicago, which struggles with being the "second city," it has a massive chip on its shoulder).

Hyde Park has been unique among Chicago neighborhoods in that there have been multi-generational families living here: children who left for jobs or college would return to the place of their childhood and live near parents and grandparents, creating a community whose collective memory is different (and more left-leaning) than most, especially most college towns. That is changing now as rents and housing prices have gone out of range for all but those with substantial wealth: the housing market is currently geared towards wealthy students and faculty and administrators, outpacing even rents in the rest of the city.

None of this has been a smooth transition, and there have been in recent years several shootings and other acts of violence that threaten to burst the bubble in which many Hyde Parkers have tended to live. In the last month alone, there were two shootings in broad daylight and one resulted in the death of a Chinese UChicago masters graduate. This was not the first time that an international student had been shot dead. International students, who pay a lot more tuition than students from the U.S., are an important source of money for the university but also bring international prestige as it seeks to maintain its position as a "world-class" institution.

All of this—along with the world-shattering pandemic—threatens the equilibrium fondly imagined by the Obamas and the university: they clearly conceived of the OPC as the center of, in essence, a massive hedge fund operation. The university has been rapaciously buying up land in order that it might eventually and literally cash in on its investments. The Obamas were to bring the full force of their massive international elite network to the table and act in collusion with an already prevalent and powerful Black elite to thrust out undesirable populations of Black, white, and any other people whose incomes did not match their vision for the larger neighbor-

hood. For instance, the OPC is near the small but delicately beautiful Japanese Garden, created during the 1893 World Columbian Exposition (also known as the 1893 World's Fair). With its koi pond, herons, pavilion, and a Yoko Ono sculpture *Sky Landing* just outside its entrance, it's a perfect place for receptions. It has always been open to the public at any time of day and night. In August, the Chicago Park District installed permanent gates, closed from dusk to dawn, claiming that this was to prevent vandalism and cruising. It's hard not to imagine, given the timing, that such moves are yet another way for the OPC to slowly encroach upon more public lands to claim them as its own.

## Where the Alligators Roam

HOW DO WE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE BUILT AND THE unbuilt, between nature and artifice? It may seem like there's a simple answer: brick and mortar constitute the built and artificial, trees and lakes are of nature as we understand it.

But in fact, those distinctions are not that easy to make, especially in Chicago and especially in the area around the proposed OPC—and even in the gulfs of Florida with its threatened yet still fertile swamplands and natural habitats. Jackson Park was designed in 1871 and then extensively remodeled in 1893 for the World's Fair: it may comprise objects we recognise as nature but they were very deliberately planted there in accordance with a man-made plan. Certainly, over more than a hundred years the Park and surrounding areas have become a valuable ecosystem that is home to various species of birds and animals. Certainly, the OPC should have been built or housed in an area which already has several usable buildings—for instance, one or two or more of the *fifty* Chicago public schools (housed in spectacular buildings) in the area that were closed by former mayor and Obama henchman Rahm Emanuel. But how might we think of matters like development and the use of land without falling into nostalgic ideas about original possession (and without ignoring the fact that, well, all of Chicago is land stolen from the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Nations and others)?

The archeologist Rebecca Graff has spoken about losing valuable artifacts of the Columbian Exposition to the construction of the OPC, which sits on the old sites. Speaking to *Chicago* magazine, she marveled at the amount of objects that she had already uncovered:

*"Plaster isn't supposed to last 125 years underground, but with all the columns, it looked like we were doing an excavation in ancient Greece. There were also bits of artifacts from the building: broken plates, pretty little cruet tops from oil or vinegar, buttons—all sorts of odds and ends."*

History isn't just "ancient" as we understand it: it's in a constant state of motion, always emerging from the here and now, thrusting itself into the future and the near-present with all the curiosity and eagerness of an ancient tree's roots slowly working itself back to a surface it has never known but wants desperately to encounter.

In Florida, the 1950s rush to scam as many unwary prospective homeowners as possible has been blunted somewhat by the fact that there is a limit to how much can be bought and subdivided into tiny lots and that even a corrupt state like Florida (Illinois may

be its closest rival in the level of corruption) can only allow so much chicanery for so long. In the meantime, several land scammers like the Mackle brothers became, like the Trumps in New York, generationally wealthy and bought themselves respectability. Today, the influence of environmentalists has meant that newer developments are held to greater scrutiny. But even then, the conflicts between the built and the unbuilt continue.

In Babcock Ranch, one of the more recent developments (plans to develop the area from an actual ranch to a city began in 2005), one father faced the conundrum that his elementary-school-aged son and other children in the area would be making their way to school past retaining ponds filled with alligators (part of the ranch's reservoirs). His solution was to teach the very young child to drive: every morning the boy would load even younger children into the car and drive it up to the bus stop a mile away thus avoiding any four-legged denizens curiously searching for a morning snack.

In Chicago, there are no alligators but there are frequent shut-downs of lakesides on the south side because of the level of water contamination, something that rarely happens on the north side. The OPC and the Obamas pretend that, somehow, the mere presence of a behemoth of a building and all its empty promises of jobs and opportunities will magically transform a city and an area that has, from its inception, been grounded—like the country—in slavery and genocide. The OPC provides the illusion that centuries of neglect can be wished away with a sledding hill and a museum campus devoted to a purpose that no one can divine but which will exist, as conspicuous as if it were in fact a large golden toilet in the middle of the park.

But what if we thought of land differently, in terms of its “use”? Why are we afraid of our children being eaten by alligators when it's

the alligators whose usable areas have been taken away by us? Why not let them eat the occasional child, as a peace offering? Why is it not okay for Southsiders to have vast tracts of “useless” land to walk through? How might we think about swamps in Florida, where alligators and flamingos “uselessly” meander through their everyday lives, being turned into homes so badly constructed that there are toilets in doorways and houses built with their roofs barely attached to the walls? How might we think about land and its “use” differently, without the rapacious forces of brute capitalism? ✦

*Yasmin Nair lives in Hyde Park where she frequently walks in Jackson Park, dogless. She's currently working on her book, **STRANGE LOVE: THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND WHY IT NEEDS TO DIE**, as well as several shorter pieces on the Obama Not-A-Library. Her work is available at [www.yasminnair.com](http://www.yasminnair.com).*

## For further reading

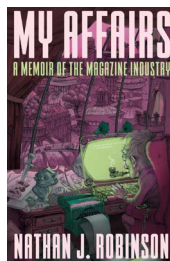
- Leonard C. Goodman, “The Obama Center And The Fight To Preserve Jackson Park.”
- Hugh Iglarsh, “The New Ozymandias: Twilight Reflections on The Obama Center.”
- Michael Lipkin, “The Way Things Work: Land Ownership.”
- Kate Mabus, “The University's Expansion Into Commercial Real Estate Wavers Between Economic Catalyst And Gentrifying Force.”
- Michael Murney, “It's Not About Obama.”
- Yasmin Nair, “Obama's Birthday Bash Is For Neoliberal Elites.”
- Rick Perlstein, “There Goes the Neighborhood: The Obama Library Lands on Chicago.”

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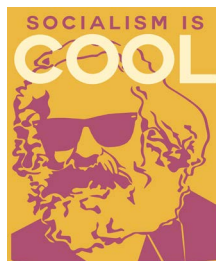
*The holidays are fast approaching, and if you are anything like the editors of Current Affairs, you have several dozen nieces and nephews all of whom are clamoring for stocking-stuffers. Unwilling to be perceived as neglectful and uncool, you will do your damndest to appease them. But what shall you supply these gluttonous youngsters with? This is where the Current Affairs online store proves most handy. Load up on Current Affairs products and watch the faces of the young light up with delight.*



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# WHERE WE GO NOW



**2** 021 HAS NOT BEEN A VERY GOOD YEAR. Not for the country, not for the left, not for *Current Affairs*. The coronavirus pandemic drags on and on without end, new variants continuing to spawn and taunt us. To those of us who had such hope last year in the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, 2021 has been especially dire. Disease and despair stalk the land, and it is unclear where we go next.

But we at *Current Affairs* remain confident in

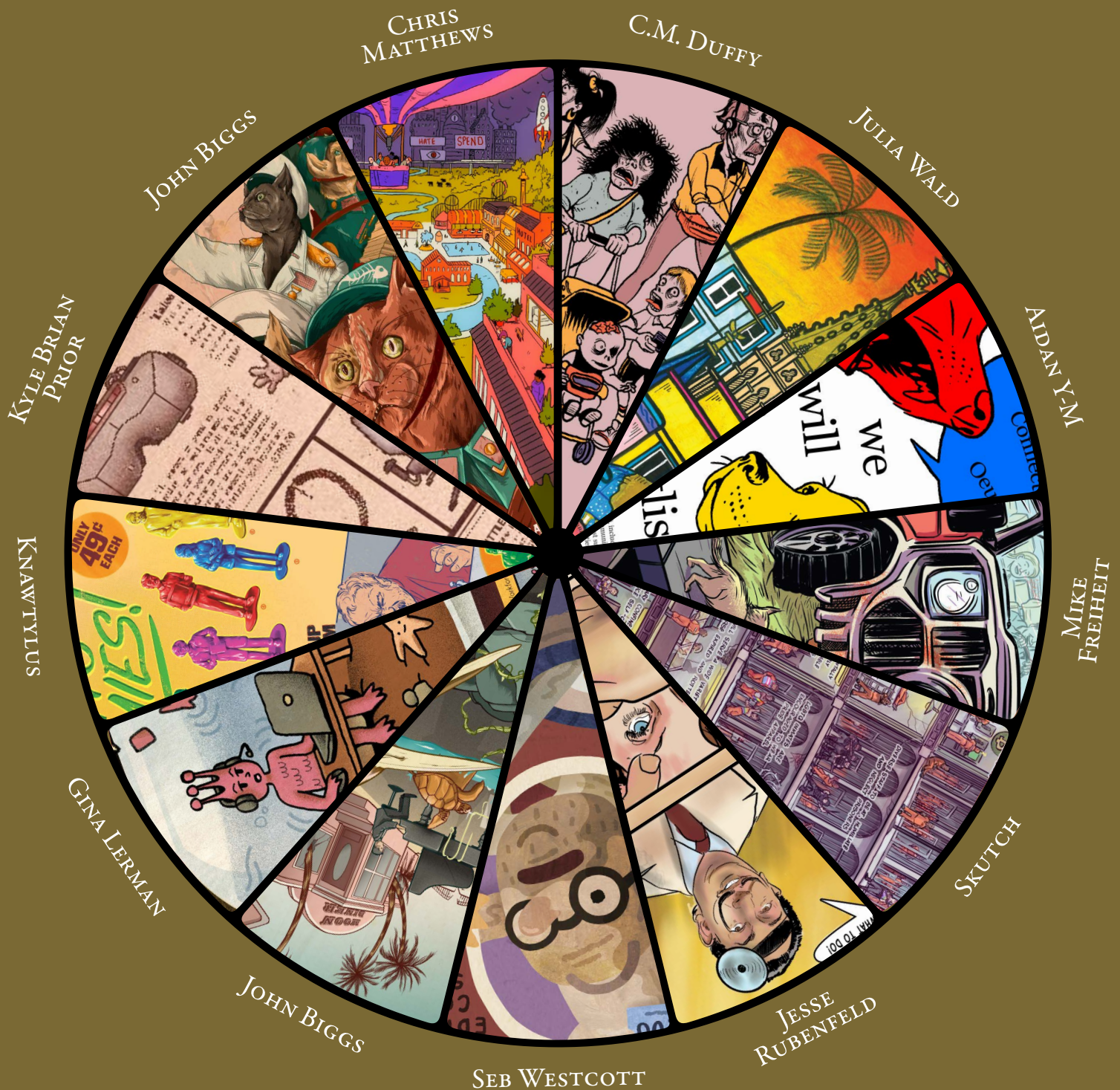
the future. We have to. Magazines do not give up. They keep publishing regardless. We will be with you, come what may. We will retool and attempt to always improve our work, and do a better job of embodying the values we wish to see spread in the world. We hope you will bear with us on this wild and frightening hot air balloon ride, which begins here in the Flawed Neoliberal Present and hopefully makes its way across time and space toward the Great Utopian Tomorrow, where the bands play on roof-

tops, lazy rivers carry us from place to place, the monorails are always on time, the sound of fountains and waterfalls is never far away, and we still have arguments, but we do it in outdoor cafes where the coffee is always hot and strong.

Reader, we understand that the times can be bleak. But we remain confident in the possibilities for the human species, which has pulled off miracles before and may yet do so again. We will be with you for the long haul, striving always to be better and do more. Onward!



# The Illustrators



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