

A Coffee Table Is Bare Until Topped With:

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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FIRST THINGS FIRST

NOTHING IN CURRENT AFFAIRS IS MEANT TO BE TAKEN LITERALLY

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THE GENERAL TREND



Things are increasing.
Or at least they appear to be.
Further updates to follow.

DISPATCHES FROM HELL

"To preserve and honor the legacy of South Africa's iconic leader, Nelson Mandela, his home, which was a symbol of his presidency and struggle against apartheid, has now been transformed into a luxury hotel."

— REUTERS AFRICA, FEB. 15, 2022



THE POINT OF CURRENT AFFAIRS

Readers often mistake the purpose of *Current Affairs*. "Is the point of *Current Affairs*," they ask, "to make serious matters seem frivolous? Is this a mere series of lampoons and japes put forth by morally vapid flibbertigibbets?" Ah, how erroneous such a judgment would be. It gets us precisely backward. We aim to take matters often treated as frivolous and pursue them earnestly. The purpose of this magazine is to provide some small amount of assistance to humanity in the avoidance of global catastrophe. Our weapons may be amusing satirical advertisements and tasteful serified dropcaps, but though we fight with unconventional arms, we are no less devoted to winning the war. Those who assume the capybaras and cut-outs are mere frippery will someday find themselves royally embarrassed. About such matters we will presently say no more.

The magazine wishes to extend its gratitude to Jordan Burton and the New Orleans Athletic Club for allowing us to use their gymnasium's pub for the *Current Affairs* Table of Contents.



"A Bar in a Gym?!
In New Orleans,
it is mandatory."

What Is "Social Media"?

"You really should be on social media," the Publisher of this magazine is regularly told. A rotating cast of high-priced consultants invariably produces the same advice over and over: "If *Current Affairs* is to thrive, it must expand its social media presence." "Have you considered TikTok videos?" asked one. Reader, we had not considered TikTok videos. In fact, we must make an embarrassed confession: we are still not sure what Social Media is. We recognize that this marks us out as part of the Old Guard, to be pitilessly mocked by Generation Z for our out-of-touchness. But remember: this venerable periodical was launched in 1912, shortly before the sinking of the Titanic (God Rest Her Soul), and many of the original staff are still with us. We make every effort to adapt to the times—we are now printed in glorious full-color CMYK inks, and occasionally include gratuitous nudity. But if there is one thing Darwin taught us, it is that adaptations are an iterative process. Instantaneous transformations are the stuff of fantasy. Bear with us, in other words. In the meantime, if anyone would care to explain to our editors what a Discord is, we would appreciate you dropping us a line.

PATTERN OF THE MONTH

CUT IT OUT! PASTE IT ON FRIENDS! AND BUILDINGS! PUT IT EVERYWHERE! MAKE IT UBIQUITOUS! THEN TAKE IT DOWN NEXT MONTH AND REPLACE IT WITH THE NEW PATTERN. CONTINUE INDEFINITELY.



CUT OUT CARDS

APOLOGY CARD



I RECOGNIZE THAT I WAS IN THE WRONG BUT I CANNOT FACE YOU SO I AM GIVING YOU THIS

CURRENT AFFAIRS
(a magazine)

Do you need to apologize but suffer from a terrible cowardice and aversion to confrontation? Let us do it for you. Give 'em this.

MEMENTO MORI CARD



NOT A THREAT, I JUST WANT TO REMIND YOU: NO MATTER HOW BIG YOU THINK YOU ARE, YOU ARE STILL MORTAL

CURRENT AFFAIRS
(a magazine)

Some people really need to be reminded that all things pass and that they too shall someday be dust. Give them the card.

LET'S PRETEND I HAVE REFUTED YOUR ARGUMENT CARD

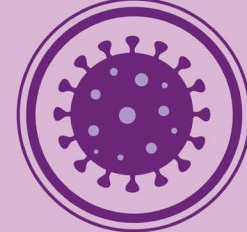


WE BOTH KNOW I COULD HAVE REFUTED YOUR ARGUMENT IF I WANTED TO SO LET'S SAVE TIME AND SAY I DID

CURRENT AFFAIRS
(a magazine)

Life is short and sometimes it would be helpful if the person you're arguing with could just recognize you would have won.

COVID TIME-OUT CARD



HEY COVID! I COULD REALLY USE A QUICK BREAK FROM THIS PANDEMIC STUFF. THAT OKAY?

CURRENT AFFAIRS
(a magazine)

COVID-19 is a pain in the ass. Fortunately, it's amenable to reason, and if you give it the card, it will cut you a break.

COP CARD



THIS NOTE IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOU ARE BEING A BIT OF A COP Remember: *Nobody likes a cop!*

Love,
CURRENT AFFAIRS
(a magazine)

Is someone you love being a bit of a cop, but you can't bring yourself to tell them directly? Cut out the Cop Card

DISPATCHES FROM HELL

"The Moon should be privatised to help wipe out poverty on Earth, economists say"
— THE INDEPENDENT
FEB. 15, 2022

May cause fever, coated tongue, Enni Simpson, I, irritable bowel syndrome, pleasant bowel syndrome, Thripshaw's Disease, and a deepening sense of alienated capitalist hopelessness and headache.



The First Rule of FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

It's not a crime if we do it, but if someone else does it then it's an outrageous despicable authoritarian act of aggression that must be punished with overwhelming force.



CAPYBARAS Defecating on the lawns of the rich



cheat codes

This month's cheat codes are:
ROLLERSKOTER
LOCKOUT
MILKBATH
IDPOLIFEXATE
Current Affairs cannot be held responsible for consequences of deploying the Cheat Codes, which technically constitute unauthorized misuse of the Simulation.

This magazine is available in a luxurious

MAHOGANY EDITION

Inquire at your local news agent.

BY ALL MEANS EAT SPIDERS

IN A RECENT COLUMN FOR THIS MAGAZINE, the editor-in-chief casually described celebrated podcaster Joseph Rogan as a man whose "whose professional background is in getting reality TV contestants to eat spiders." It was also mentioned that Rogan's "previous job was making people drink donkey semen on television." Both of these claims are true; Rogan's job hosting NBC's *Fear Factor* involved exhorting reluctant participants to place countless creepy crawlies in their mouths. But we received a letter from a reader taking issue with the characterization's tone rather than its truth.

To imply, as we perhaps did, that there is something crass and anti-intellectual about spider-eating and jism-guzzling is, the reader says, classist and snobbish. We give ourselves away as elitist Ivory Tower dwellers through the contempt we show for such activities, and it smacks of "out-group condescension." Is this not a magazine that celebrates all people, that believes in a radically democratic vision in which diverse tastes and preferences are celebrated? And yet, by sneering at those who eat worms for money, are we not displaying the very cultural arrogance that led to the election of Donald Trump?

Perhaps we are. So let us clarify officially: While we object to spider-eating on ethical grounds (even the humblest and hairiest arachnid has a right to life), and we are not sure there is a morally sound means of sourcing a jack's seed, we are not rigid cultural prescriptivists who think attending an avant-garde theatrical production is inherently superior to attending a monster truck rally. We can tolerate most things, except the truly intolerable. We believe that discerning judgment and broad-mindedness need not be mortal enemies. We recognize that standards of what is Gross and Weird are in many ways cultural constructs, and shift over time. We would hate for the reader with peculiar preferences to feel judged or despised by this magazine.

We reaffirm, then, our general disposition toward tolerance. Nevertheless, lines must be drawn somewhere, and we continue to insist that some activities are beyond what civilization can tolerate. The experience of listening to Joe Rogan, we maintain, falls into this category. We will endure much we are inclined to find painful, we will open our minds to positions different from our own. If you wish to eat spiders, we will not stop you. But we reserve to ourselves the right to look askance at dim-witted podcasters.

WE BLAME THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Introducing The "Both of Those Things Are Bad" Principle

We have happened upon a very useful tool that can provide assistance in the analysis of both foreign and domestic policy: it is called the **Both Of Those Things Are Bad** principle. For instance, when one is called upon to decide whether the expansionism of Vladimir Putin or the expansionism of the United States and NATO are to blame for the ills in the world, one can use the principle to reply that **Both Of Those Things Are Bad**. We sometimes assume that the enemy of our enemy must be wise and thoughtful, since they share our taste in enemies. But it could be the case that both enemies and enemies of enemies are quite appalling, albeit in differing ways. One is often called upon to make binary choices in politics: do you want sweatshops or unemployment, free market capitalism or authoritarian communism? The wonderful little principle we have discovered allows us to wriggle free of these dilemmas, by pointing out that two opposing things can be bad at the same time.

HELP US BUY MORE CORRIDORS AND FROSTED GLASS PARTITIONS

At some point in your time on Earth, you may have seen the offices of a magazine depicted on screen in a film or miniseries. The intrepid reporter checks in with the editor in chief at *Manhattan Swank*, offering the Scoop of a Lifetime. The editor in chief is skeptical but gives the eager newbie a few days to "see if there's anything there." A race against the clock begins!

What matters here is not the plot, concerning which one ought to give not the slightest fig, but the physical space in which matters (fictitiously) unfold. The magazine's offices are invariably vast and airy, with glass partitions between Departments, seas of floating interns, and interminable corridors down which to strut having Important Thoughts. You are given the sense that Manhattan Swank is a periodical that knows its place in the world, and that that place is a high one indeed.

But here in New Orleans, the *Current Affairs* offices are a different world. The exposed brick walls are crumbling to dust. Desks are littered with Chomsky books, empty yoghurt tins, and half-finished taxidermy projects. The carpet can barely be glimpsed, so littered is the floor with old newspapers and discarded page proofs. The various crannies and cracks are inhabited by mice and even owls (who are known to steal page proofs right before press time). The place is a darkly-lit warren of cramped chambers, many of which are only knee-height and must be crawled through skillfully to reach certain departments.

Some of these ills can be attributed to editorial slovenliness. But much is the product of "architectural determinism," the process by which buildings shape the life that occurs within their confines. No commitment to cleanliness can overcome the structural factors pushing CAHQ inexorably toward messiness.

THE UPSHOT IS: we must have funds. Vast funds. Funds sufficient to turn tunnels into corridors and corridors into glorious palatial foyers. We must knock down what is left of our brick walls and install gleaming glass partitions, and hire a team of full-time partition-polishers to keep them gleaming. Without these improvements, how can we hope to compete with the Big Guys in places like New York City? And reader, don't you want us to crush them? Surely you do. But to do so: we must have an airy contemporary space in which to work! Without it, matters are hopeless.

Please consider donating today: <http://currentaffairs.org/donate>

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THE MAKING OF THE SELF-MADE MAN

by Tara Isabella Burton

FEW MEN EMBODY THE LATE NINETEENTH century's particular blend of technological optimism and vitalist mysticism quite like the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison. "The Wizard of Menlo Park," as the papers termed him (rival monikers included the "Jersey Columbus" and "The Napoleon of Science"), Edison was not merely the inventor of some of the modern era's most vital devices—the phonograph; the electric bulb—but also one of the Gilded Age's best-known celebrities. Edison was as canny at playing the press as he was at actual scientific development (Edison's initial 1878 public display of the electric bulb was in fact something of a hoax; it took several more months before the bulb could burn more than a few seconds), and in the public imagination he became equal parts capitalist impresario and occultist magician, scientist and showman. *The New York Sun* and *The New York Herald* alike lauded him as a singular genius, capable of harnessing the new and mysterious powers of this newly-illuminated

modern age. "School-girls write compositions on Edison," one contemporary journalist wrote." The funny papers publish squibs on Edison. The daily papers write up his life...Why don't the [newspapers] fill up exclusively with Edison and be...done with?"

Meanwhile, the power with which Edison was most closely associated—electricity—took on a life of its own. A mysterious, quasi-magical force running through all of natural existence, simply waiting to be harnessed by a person of sufficient mental and moral power (or so the nineteenth-century press would have it), electricity became both a national obsession and a national metaphor: "Comply with electricity's conditions," one of Edison's contemporaries breathlessly wrote, "then but turn a key and the servant of all life will be present in light and power." Another wrote of responding to the electric dynamo "much as the early Christians felt the Cross," marveling at its "Mysterious Power!" "Gentle Friend! Despot Master! Tireless Force!"

This late nineteenth-century craze for electricity absorbed

THE MAKING OF THE "SELF-MADE MAN"

a variety of more dubious phenomena. Alongside electricity proper, self-help books and tabloids promoted the pseudo-science of mesmerism (hypnotism), also known as “animal electricity.” Other would-be gurus sold the secrets of “electro-physiology”—harnessing the universe’s less visible energies in search of personal prosperity. Edison’s electricity was, in other words, both a technological force and a distinctly nineteenth-century cultural mythos, bolstered by the celebrity culture of the burgeoning newspaper industry, a mythos that reflected both the anxieties and the ambitions of the gilded age.

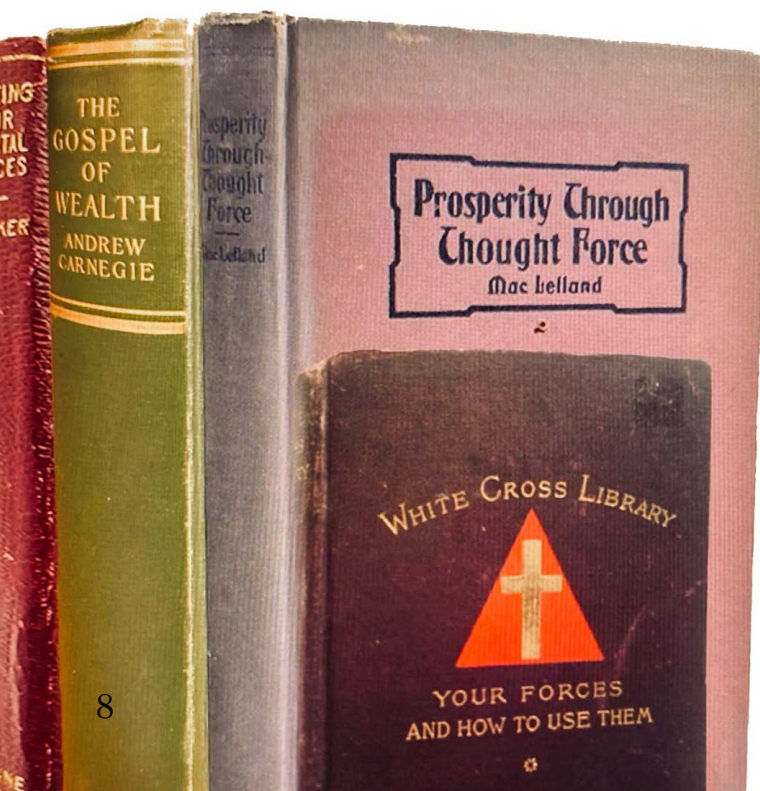
CENTRAL TO THE POP NARRATIVE OF Edison, and of electricity more broadly, were a series of new and distinct assumptions about the self, the world, and the relationship of one to the other. Edison represented the paradigm of a new kind of self-made man: self-made both in the colloquial capitalistic sense, and in a more explicitly philosophical one. A modern magus (or so the popular narrative would have it) Edison understood how to harness and awaken the implicit energies of the universe. By cultivating his will, his personality, and his particular genius, Edison could achieve the bounty promised, in theory if not in practice, to any would-be bootstrapper. The pursuit of material success took

on a newly mystical cast: to become a *self-made man*, in the Gilded Age, was not merely to become wealthy, nor famous, but to develop one’s own personality in harmony with the mysterious will of the universe.

Self-cultivation was hardly new to the American moral tradition. From Frederick Douglass’s lectures on “Self-Made Men” to the “Self-Culture” championed by liberal Protestant minister William Ellery Channing, the idea that the self could and should adopt certain industrious attitudes was an integral part of the American liberal ideas. But these earlier iterations of self-making, by and large, treated self-cultivation as primarily a question of virtue ethics and political citizenship: only though proper individual self-governance could the project of American democracy be legitimized. The genre of hagiographic short biographies of self-made men popular in the early and mid-nineteenth-century, such as Charles Seymour’s 1858 *Self-Made Men*, and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1872 *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-Made Men*, tended to focus on national civic heroes—including Abraham Lincoln and Douglass himself—rather than wealthy entrepreneurs.

But as the nineteenth century wore on, and the inequalities of the Gilded Age propelled titans of industry like Andrew Carnegie (steel), John D. Rockefeller (oil) and J. Pierpont Morgan (electricity), to positions of political and economic prominence, self-making took on a new, and often mystical, meaning. The new self-made magus did not simply cultivate simple civic virtues like thrift and piety. He used his distinct genius to tap into the world’s latent, undiscovered energies, harnessing them for his own ends. His financial prosperity was not merely a personal boon, but a spiritual achievement: the self-made man reflected the final purpose of a vitalist universe, a universe which *wanted* the most powerful human beings to transform themselves into gods.

Some literature from the New Thought / self-making genre: FREEING OUR MENTAL FORCES, THE GOSPEL OF WEALTH, PROSPERITY THROUGH THOUGHT FORCE, and YOUR FORCES AND HOW TO USE THEM



ELECTRICITY WAS NOT THE ONLY SCIENTIFIC or technological development to be subsumed into this new narrative. Central to the development of this new cult of the magus was the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, and the subsequent popularization of the school of thought known as “social Darwinism”: a reductionist view of human life as “the survival of the fittest” (a term first used by influential social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, and only later adopted by Darwin himself). For Spencer, technological progress and human development went hand-in-hand; the moral arc of the universe bent toward the abolition of those undesirables incapable of harnessing Nature’s brutal powers. “The whole effort of nature is to get rid of [the poor],” Spen-

cer wrote, “to clear the world of them and make room for better.” For Spencer, human technological progress meant tapping into Nature’s existing telos; it was “not an accident but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower.” Another Spencerian, the Yale social psychologist William Graham Sumner, likewise argued: “Nature is entirely neutral. She submits to him who most energetically and resolutely assails her. She grants her rewards to the fittest, therefore, without regard to other considerations of any kind.” Elsewhere, Sumner would insist that “millionaires are a product of natural selection.”

THIS SOCIAL DARWINISM, TO ITS adherents, likewise took on the fantastical qualities of a new religion. Describing his first reading of Spencer, the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie—another of the Gilded Age’s self-made industry captains—recounted how:

“Light came in as in a flood and all was clear. Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I have found the truth of evolution....Man was not created with an instinct for his own degradation, but for the lower he had risen to the higher forms. Nor is there any conceivable end to his march to perfection. His face is turned to the light.”

(Meanwhile Darwin himself remained dubious of such interpretations of his work, remarking “I have received in Manchester newspaper...[a write-up] showing that I have proved ‘might is right’ and therefore that Napoleon is right and every cheating tradesman is also right.”)

Here, too, human avarice and the human will to power were linked and sacralized: understood not as selfish desires, competing with the order of a harmonious world, but as the very energy underpinning the world itself, the ghost in the historical machine. This sacralization was only intensified with the nineteenth-century development of New Thought, a hybrid of pseudoscience, self-help and pop religion, that dominated American culture (particularly in the Northeast) from the 1860’s onwards. First popularized by faith healer Phineas Quimby, New Thought (also known as the “mind cure” and “animal magnetism”) held that our circumstances in this life were affected by our mentality: the power of positive thinking rendered literal. “A person is limited only by the thoughts that he chooses,” James Allen insisted in one New Thought text, *As a Man Thinketh*, promising that “The outer conditions of a person’s life will always be found to be harmoniously related to his inner state.”

*“Achieving
success and
achieving
enlightenment
were now one
and the same.”*

While New Thought began as a primarily medical phenomenon—patients were encouraged to think positive in order to get well—it soon achieved wider popularity as a money-making technique. The man who learned to transform his internal landscape, cultivating a positive personality and harnessing the mysterious energy of the universe, was guaranteed financial success. By the turn of the twentieth century, a whole cottage industry had sprung up, promising to teach readers the secrets of “personal magnetism” and “thought force.” Allen himself published dozens of such works, including *As A Man Thinketh* (1903), *Through the Gates of Good* (1903), *All These Things Added* (1903), *From Poverty to Power* (1906), *Eight Pillars of Prosperity* (1911), *Foundation Stones to Happiness and Success* (1913), and *The Divine Companion* (1919)—all dedicated to the veneration of inward thought as a means of achieving personal success.

Achieving success and achieving enlightenment were now one and the same. As Henry Harrison Brown, publisher of New Thought magazine *NOW*, put it: “Man as thinker shapes the universal energy into forms of use and beauty,

through his thought in mechanics and art...Man is thus the absolute, becoming cognizant of himself. Man is God thinking...The conscious man controls the God in man." The divinization of success, furthermore, doubled as a theodicy of inequality: a means of explaining a world in which the mean hourly wage of an average male factory worker was 16 cents an hour. Certain human beings could make themselves—in so doing participating fully in what it meant to be human. As for those that did or could not—well, their failures made them a little less human.

THE LINK BETWEEN THE SELF-MADE MAN and the magus wasn't limited to American capitalistic discourse. Across the Atlantic, a different kind of self-made phenomenon gained traction throughout the nineteenth century: the consciously artificial figure of the dandy. In England, the type was perhaps best represented by Oscar Wilde in England. In France, it was embodied by novelist Barbey D'Aureville and the subsequent generation of "literary decadents." Worshiping artifice, art for art's sake, and the triumph of will over nature, these dandies might at first glance seem to be the exact opposite of the American self-made men: writers and painters rather than entrepreneurs, aristocratic (or at least pseudo-aristocratic) reactionaries rather than bourgeois titans of industry. But, no less than their capitalistic counterparts, the European dandies reacted to the anxieties of the modern industrial age—wealth inequality, urban crowding, the rise of machinery and the obsolescence of certain kinds of human labor—by adopting a mystical approach to the question of self-fashioning. The dandy, after all, was the first modern celebrity—*famous for being famous*, as we would say today—someone who learned how to court and craft public opinion in order to create (and, given that most of these writers were hoping to sell their own books, profit from) their own alluring identities.

The dandy that learned to create himself, according to such dandy-manifestos as Honoré de Balzac's 1830 "Treatise on Elegant Living," Barbey D'Aureville's 1843 "On Dandyism and George Brummell" (a combination biography and manifesto of dandyism), Charles Baudelaire's 1863 "The Painter of Modern Life," and Joséphin Péladan's 1894 "On the Beautiful Personality," became—in D'Aureville's words—a "miniature god." The dandy, like the entrepreneurs, was set apart from the common man, possessing an inchoate power of personality that legitimized his superiority over them. Baudelaire himself referred to dandyism as a "type of new aristocracy...based upon heavenly gifts conferred by neither work nor money," one that

risked being "drowned" by the "rising tide of democracy."

Self-making here, too, was understood explicitly as an act of magic—it's little coincidence that dandyism proliferated alongside a resurgence of interest in the occult—a harnessing of *personality* as a kind of latent force. The occultist and magician Joséphin Péladan, for example, published a number of books that straddled the line between self-help guide and magical manifesto: among his most famous was *How to Become a Magus* (women had its companion volume: *How to Become a Fairy*). For Péladan, aesthetic self-creation was—no less than the economic self-creation promised by New Thought—fundamentally an inward exercise of will: Péladan exhorted readers to "create your own magic, not because your efforts are motivated by vanity, but because you are seeking in yourself the originality of a work of art."

In the case of the entrepreneur and of the dandy alike, we can see how the process of self-cultivation—whether in service of financial success, celebrity status, or some amalgamation of the two—took on a decidedly mystical cast. To turn inward, to focus on the self and its desires, to demand prosperity from the universe, to *think positive*—all these represented the creation of a new cult of selfhood, one that saw the pursuit of worldly esteem not only as allowable but necessary: the moral culmination of a Darwinist world that adopted as demigods its favored few.

This new cult of selfhood flowered everywhere. We can see it in the genealogy of twentieth-century fascism: the line of influence from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (a major influence on dandy-decadent culture) to the authoritarian poet-politician Gabriele D'Annunzio to Mussolini and Hitler. All were in thrall to the ideal of the *übermensch*: the ultimate self-maker in whom worldly power and aesthetic perfection combine. We can see it in the development of the twentieth-century American star system, and the concordant rise of advertising, proffering to the proletariat the promise of Clara Bow's "it": that blend of charisma, sex appeal, and, yes, *personal magnetism* that came to define the celluloid celebrity. And we see it, too, in our contemporary cultural-economic landscape: the ubiquity of the *personal brand* as an economic necessity in the gig economy, where *influence* is a currency, inseparable from the New Thought-infused worship of wellness: only by living our best life, channeling our *positive energy*, *manifesting* our dreams of personal self-betterment, we are constantly told, can we unlock the universe's plans for us. Ideals of self-care, of *toxic energy*, of *you make your own purpose*, are so ingrained as norms within our contemporary discourse that it is easy to forget their relatively recent provenance. It is easy to forget, too, their metaphysical and moral underpinnings: the promise that the strong will inherit the earth; that the wealthy will be blessed. It was a religion to the self-made men of the nineteenth century. It is our religion now. ✦

WELCOME TO A STRANGE THING CALLED

LIFE

A Script for Introducing Newborn Humans to The Universe

Good morning, baby. My name is [insert name] and I am your [insert role: mother/father/other]. This is [insert partner's name, if applicable] and they are your [insert role]. Welcome to the thing! I think the first thing to do is apologize to you somewhat, because I realize you did not have much of a say in coming here and it's probably all terribly bewildering and in a way that's sort of our fault because we sort of... made you. The process was complicated and I think we had better leave the full explanation until later, but I do want you to know that we are ultimately the ones at fault if you don't end up liking this expe-

rience and rather wish it hadn't happened.

We [use I and the singular if appropriate] will be serving as your sort of *tour guides*, or chaperones—you can call us “parents”—for the next few hundred thousand hours or so, or at least until you get tired of us and decide to go your own way, which you can do anytime, but just be warned that if you do it too soon there might be questions and we'll probably get the blame should anything unfortunate happen. Oh, yes, an “hour,” an *hour* is a unit of time, time is a flow of events, or something, I think. (One thing I'm afraid you're going to discover quickly is that [Other Partner, hereinafter OP] and I are imperfect guides to this

place and a lot of your most basic and reasonable questions might not be given satisfactory answers.) Anyway, an hour is divided into sixty minutes, a minute into sixty seconds. Just to give you a sense, you've had about three minutes here so far, and you will likely spend about 36,792,000 of them here in total. It may seem like a lot now but they get used up rapidly so do be conscientious. Minutes cannot be replenished and are not very equally distributed, and can be instantly taken from you should something horrible happen, which we [gesture to OP] will be doing our best to ensure it does not.

There is a lot that we should tell you, and we





won't have time for all of it just now. First, the thing that is happening to you is called "life," and it is either the greatest blessing imaginable or the cruelest curse to inflict on someone, depending on who you ask. We consider ourselves to be in the "for" rather than "against" category, hence you, and this. Now, we realize that your first questions will be of the "Why?" and "What?" variety, but we're going to have to disappoint you there so please just put it aside and don't bother. Life takes place here [point to Universe] in a place called the Universe. You will grow accustomed to it with time. It is very big and spooky and most people try not to think about it very much because it can make you feel tiny and pointless, the former of which I regret to say you truly are, but the latter of which you are most certainly not (at least not to us).

Now, you are probably wondering what you are, and we actually have a reasonably clear answer to that: you are a creature. The world is di-

vided into stuff, plants, and creatures, and you are in Group Number Three. The creatures are all very different—although, in a way, the same—and the type of creature you are is called a "human." It's a kind of... elaborate monkey, and I realize you don't know what a *monkey* is yet but just bear it in mind for context. Whenever you are confused, think to yourself: "I am but an elaborate monkey," and it may prove reassuring somehow. In a way, you are fortunate to have been born a human since humans tend to eat all of the other creatures and if there is one thing I can assure you that you don't want to be, it is *eaten*. (Do your best to avoid it.) But being a human also has its disadvantages, such as the inevitability of *dread* and *despair*. If you had been a snail, there is a good chance you would have just gotten to sort of wander around mindlessly, troubled by nothing, at least until being *eaten*. But here we are and what's done is done and you are what you are, and as they say, "you ain't what you ain't."

Try to be nice to the other creatures, although some of them will yap at you. They are wiser than they first appear. Do not comment on how strange they look, because they are self-conscious. Watch out for snakes. They are not... bad, exactly, but sometimes they bite and have a history of treachery. Best just to stay away.

A QUICK BIT OF INFORMATION you will need: we have given you a label, [child's name]. This is called your "name." Try to remember it, as you may need to use it. I realize you may find it rather presumptuous of us to have decided upon this before you got here, considering that we are only supposed to be your tour guides and not your "owners" or anything like that, but the government wanted something for record-keeping purposes and we were forced to improvise. (More on governments later.) We do think it's a lovely name and it means [if name has a meaning, insert it, if not, make something up]. It will cease to seem strange after a few thousand repetitions, as will all words. As you become *accustomed* to things, though, try to avoid concluding that they are thereby somehow *normal*.

Now, on the subject of you being a creature: if you would care to look down, you will see a

soft, oddly shaped entity called a "body." You will be living in the body. As far as we know, it is not possible to leave or exchange it, and we wouldn't recommend trying. We apologize if it makes you feel trapped. Unfortunately, it's not the most dependable device in the world and it does have a tendency to go wrong and malfunction. Do watch out and tell us if bits start falling off it or anything of that nature. (There will be some rather unpleasant stuff that starts flowing out of it. Do not worry about that, it is expected. We will come and clear it up for you until you've sorted out how to do it yourself, which is really not difficult.)

I realize that what I've said so far might make you somewhat apprehensive about living in the body, so let me tell you some good news: it also has magic powers. If you would please note the two forklike things coming out of the two sticklike things in the upper midsection: these are your hands. You will likely be using them regularly. They move around at your command and can even take things from one place to another. They will, like the rest of this, take some getting used to, but in the long run I think you'll find they come in... handy. (This is called a "dad joke." I will be telling lots of them. Get used to it.)

O THER NOTABLE PARTS OF YOU include the tummy, the feet, the kneecaps, and the privates... you'll find everything sooner or later. If you look in this mirror [hold up mirror], you'll find you have another thing called a "face." Now be careful, just to warn you, this part may be alarming. [bring mirror closer so that child stares into own face] That's you, that is. At least for now. The face will not actually stay this way forever, thank God, and you will be somebody else before you know it.

The face contains some useful accessories you should know about, such as the mouth, which is a hole for getting things from outside the body to within it, as well as for making noise. It also features the eyes, which are balls for looking, and a nose, which produces a rather weird sensation that to be honest will probably be the least useful of your five senses, but you've got it, and if you take off the nose people will think you are odd though it is technically possible to modify it if truly you find yourself unsatisfied with it. You will smell



a great many things, many unpleasant, including yourself. The quest to smell nice may consume a substantial part of your life.

Enough about the body. I realize it is ridiculous, but you are stuck with it as are we all. In fact, in a sense, you are it. The hands don't just *belong* to you, you ARE THE HANDS. Creepy, right? Please don't cry. There is more to come. We have much to cover and some of it will be worse. You will need to start just sucking it up and accepting a lot of it. If hands upset you, wait until we get to *factory farming*.

Actually, before we move on from the body, I suppose I should mention that the face has a "brain" under it. The brain is a lumpy grey gob of something that does the thinking. You will need to think from time to time so it's best you know it's there. Elsewhere under the body's surface you will find organs and bones—in fact you have this rather unsettling-looking contraption called a *skeleton* rattling around under there, but again, there will come time to contemplate it later.

NOW, LET US GO BACK TO THE question "Where are we?" I have already mentioned the Universe, but the space you are in now is just one room of the Universe. It is not all of it. In fact, once we take you out that door, you should prepare yourself, for there is a lot on the other side and some of it is nice and some of it is nasty but you will need to take in many sights and sensations and very quickly. First, the room is located in a *building*, which is a bunch of rooms stuck together. That, I think, should be easy enough to grasp. But once we leave the building we will be "outdoors" on a thing called a *planet*, and to be honest I don't even know what to start with there because gosh there really is a lot of stuff to show you.

The *planet* is a tiny ball, moving through a giant dark nothing. It is lit up by a somewhat bigger ball which I advise you not to stare at for too long. The particular planet on which you happen to have come into being is locally known as *Earth*, admittedly not the most inspiring name we might have come up with for it but sound and workable. Earth is mostly *oceans*, which are gigantic collections of *water*, which is an innocuous liquid you'll end up getting to know quite well. Liquids are, uh, things that are runny instead of hard. There is also another kind of thing called gas, which is floaty and which you happen to be in the middle of a big invisible cloud of at all times. (Coincidentally the same word is used for the noise you just made.)

Let's not get too much further into chemistry for now and it's probably too early for quantum physics, but for now just note that everything you see is made of much smaller things that you can't see and those are in turn made of even smaller things and it just keeps going though we do believe it eventually stops. Oh, and the Universe

is governed by strange and mysterious forces that do astonishing things like pull objects together without touching them. Oh, and time is relative, but the implications of that for you at present are minimal.

Now, [OP] and I are not the only other copies of the you-creature. Heavens no. There are billions, and it's actually very easy to get lost and I don't think you should try to remember all of them by name because it would prove challenging. To save mental effort we tend to lump them into groups called things like "The French" based on geographic locations and some crude generalizations. You yourself are [insert nationality], for what it's worth. There's a bit of an incoherent

from the explosion that began the Universe to the forming of the planet to the growth of life to the evolution of us as creatures to all the wars and innovations and surprises that fill the pages of history. Just keep it in mind and look into some of this stuff eventually because there's quite a lot that happened and you can learn from dipping into it.

Speaking of humans and their progress or lack thereof, I don't know if you'd like me to get into politics right now, but as you can imagine the billions of your colleagues around here do tend to need processes for sorting things out together and we have these sort of imaginary institutions called *governments* where theoretically this is supposed to happen, but to be honest with you



category called "gender" that is often used to try to divide humanity into two separate groups but to be honest it's pretty fluid and we'll just let you decide which of those groups, if any, you'd like to be in whenever you feel like exploring it.

You may be wondering how well all the different types of people get along and have managed to live together and the answer is—well, it's a bit of a mixed record, honestly. Lots of them just peaceably go about their business but sometimes for complicated reasons the whole thing just devolves into unpleasantness and this thing called *mass murder* that I would prefer we not discuss for a few years to give you a chance to have some fun around here before plunging you into that thing I mentioned called *despair*.

I should mention that while each one of the humans began by popping into life like you, the kinds of lives we've all had have varied a fair amount over the years, and it's worth looking into all the stuff that happened before you got here,

most of the time it doesn't and you really may find that a lot around here turns out to be horribly mismanaged. I cannot truly say that we have done the best job we could have of giving you stable and effective institutions for facilitating civic life but there are people trying to fix it, so hang tight, baby. If you remember one thing about politics, make sure it's this: *democracy good, fascism bad*. Don't mix that up.

I almost forgot to mention: the thing I'm speaking, it's called *language*, and it's a kind of telepathic communication device where I can take an idea from my head, put it into a code, and then give it to you. If you can decipher the code, you will receive my thought. It's a very special and useful tool and I do recommend that you try to pick at least some of it up. It shouldn't be too hard, actually, since even though there are an awful lot of words you sort of come wired for this, as was pointed out in the '50s by linguist Noam Chomsky, about whom much more later. Anyway you do

it by moving your tongue around in your mouth (the entrance-hole, remember?) and also you can do it on bits of paper by arranging little symbols. You will soon be forced to learn the symbols.

You have another valuable capacity that you might want to give a try. We call it "imagination." It means that you don't have to just think about the things in front of you. You can also think of things that don't even exist. If you don't like this world, you can build whole new ones in your head. The magical things we know how to do today were totally undiscovered for a very long time and it took imaginative and curious types to figure it out. So you can try to *invent* things that haven't been invented, dream up ideas that have never been tried.

OP: [interjecting] And if you dream up new kinds of useless financial products, they may even make you a billionaire... sorry, I'm being cynical.

First Partner: Yes, let's try not to be too cynical on baby's first day. You will only use your imagination for good things, won't you baby? **[in baby-tickling voice]** Yes you will, yes you will!

The world is full of all kinds of wonders and possibilities, and if you ever get bored, remember that you can't possibly have discovered even 1% of its secrets. Now, a few bits of advice. Yes, we're going to be giving you advice periodically. As your appointed guides it is our obligation. We may even tell you what to do sometimes, but only because we've been around here a bit longer and there are certain things we really do understand better. Please do listen to us, though at some point you will probably be right and we will probably be wrong. Anyway, advice: First, do be kind and try to get along with the others. They're not bad, most of them. Try not to get caught up in some of the silly games that are being played, like the one where you exhaust yourself trying to get as much "money" as possible. (Money is bits of paper, sometimes not even that, and people give you things if you hand it to them... look, it's not easy to explain but people here seem to think it makes sense so you're going to have to humor them until we think of a better way of setting things up.) Try to exercise your own judgment.



Just because people do something in this place does not mean they are doing it correctly. You have a contribution to make. Listen and learn, but don't doubt yourself too much. Question all you hear. It may well be that it's everyone else, not you, who makes no sense—on the flip side, it may be that you're being a terrible person and everyone notices it except you, so do try to be introspective and empathetic. Be ambitious in your goals: we are biased, but we believe there is nothing you cannot do here. You are a special little creature and we know you are going to use this life well.

A LOT IS GOING TO BE HARD. We are sorry about that, and we're going to try to make it easier for you when we can. Some people think it was unfair of us to inflict the world on you, or you on the world. We disagree and we hope that by the end of all this, you'll think we made the right call. Everything is big and weird now, but it will soon become much smaller, and even mundane. The bad news is that this world of ours has a fair amount of *struggle* and *strife* in it, and your life will not always be a garden of roses. (Roses are a *flower*. Flowers, as you will discover, are wonderful.) It is in part your job to help others navigate the difficulties, and work together to repair the mess you are about to inherit. But do take care of yourself first.

Oh, there is so much out there for you! Where

to even start? There are octopi, accordions, succulents, mountaintops, candy bars, gemstones, racing cars, sequoias, cartoons, flamenco dancers, giant cathedrals, honeybees, discotheques, egg rolls, computer games, moose, and so, so much more. If you can't find what you're looking for in the Universe, it probably doesn't exist. Get ready, because this is going to be interesting.

I realize this is a lot to take in all at once. Please relax, if you can. Have a bit of milk and a look around. You may not understand everything we've said just yet, but it will be repeated for you numerous times. You will even go to a *school* where they tell you all kinds of extra facts, though some of it will be propaganda so do be careful.

Is there anything else to cover? Oh, of course. One more thing, the most important of all: We *love* you. You are here because we brought you here, and we care about you so, so much and want this peculiar experience to go as well as possible for you. You may not always be pleased we are here, you may even despise us sometimes, but know that we're looking out for you. When this whole baffling what-have-you leaves you alone and confused, we will be there watching over you, even if some day you can't see us anymore. It is the greatest privilege of our lives to be able to bring you to the world. *Welcome, baby, to the Universe!* Let's go and have a look at it, shall we? ✨

For Charlie "CJ" Abraham, age 1. Inspired by Kurt Vonnegut's "Babies, Welcome to Earth" speech.

what do women really deserve?

the rhetoric of rising, femvertising, & the democratization of luxury fashion

BY EILEEN G'SELL

"The dream I've always believed in is, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, if you work hard, pull yourself up and succeed, then, by golly, you deserve life's prize."

— Ronald Reagan, 1983

"Make your hair beautiful—with Preference by L'Oréal. Shining color and nothing conditions better. So buck up. Develop an attitude. I sure did. Just say, *I'm worth it.*"

— Cybill Shepherd, 1993

IN THE 1980s, A NEW ARCHETYPE STRUTTED across the screen: the fictional female executive—plucky, scrappy, and with a certain entitlement. She was often blonde, almost always white. She could be seen in films like *Working Girl* and *Baby Boom*, or television series like *Murphy Brown* and *Moonlighting*, the dramedy which revived Cybill Shepherd's waning career in 1986. Here was a woman whose workplace was a veritable catwalk, whose Fendi briefcase swung with the bounce in her step. Here was a woman who, while no doubt paid less than her male equivalent, boasted a closet of designer pantsuits inspiring wide-eyed legions to chase the trail she blazed. Here was a woman vying to have it all—because she *deserved* it all. Here was a woman who knew her "worth."

But how is "worth" measured, other than by the metric of financial compensation—or the lack thereof? Often, it's measured through consumer signifiers of female success. For many women, conspicuous swag—from handbags to lip gloss to Lululemon mats—may itself be imagined as material substitution for financial solvency. With such snazzy accoutrements, upwardly mobile women may ask themselves, what can it matter that we have saved only a third of that of men for retirement, make up nearly two thirds of those with college debt, and will have lost \$600,000 apiece in predicted lifetime income during the pandemic? Isn't dressing

the part key to ascending the shaky economic ladder—even more so if so few women are there to hold it steady?

Critics of “girl boss” metrics for female success are, thankfully, not in short supply: leftists like Yasmin Nair, Jessa Crispin, and Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor have cogently exposed the fallacies within glass-ceiling and representational approaches to gender (and racial) equality. Being a female Fortune 500 executive doesn’t make one a feminist any more than bleaching one’s bob constitutes a brazen expression of womanly worth. Mistaking one’s individual achievements (or vanity!) as boosting all of womankind is incredibly tempting—who doesn’t want to think rather loftily that her gains are not just *hers*? But this kind of thinking distracts from a necessary consciousness that might lead to fundamental change—change that is based on building a more just society for all, not just those economically and racially similar to ourselves, change that prioritizes women’s contributions to a more just society over their acts of consumption.

Certainly, it’s seductive to think that making enough money to buy nice things imparts value to us as women. To this end, marketers of consumer goods have shamelessly deployed the rhetoric of *worth* and *deservingness* to appeal at once to our desire to reward the individual self (a self uniquely special) and to the idea that we can lift up other women with our purchase. A conceptual slippage occurs: the idea of “worth” traditionally applied to the product (is it *worth* buying, as in “Does it give value for money?”) is instead applied to the consumer (you are valuable enough to deserve the product). Women are conditioned not to evaluate the value of the item but the value of *themselves*—and are reassured by the advertisement that they are indeed meritorious enough to justify the purchase. Similar slogans such as “you deserve it” become “*you* deserve it,” as in, “*you in particular* deserve it, and others do not, and that makes you special.” Comparisons of personal merit are encouraged. Was Cybill Shepherd “worth it” because *all* women are worth it? Or because she was rich, white, and exceptionally beautiful, patently *unlike* most of her audience? What marketers hope comes off as feminist mantra mutates into self-congratulation and the implicit denigration of others.

IT TURNS OUT, PERHAPS SURPRISINGLY, THAT THE PERNICIOUS notion of *worth* in American advertising directed toward women has connections to what political philosopher Michael J. Sandel has called “the tyranny of merit.” In his latest book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, Sandel traces the inherent connection between the ideology of “meritocracy” and rising inequality by focusing primarily on economic disparities exacerbated by the ever-increasing demand for a four-year college degree. As a professor acclaimed for his Harvard “Justice” course, Sandel is possibly the very last person anyone would associate with glamour, fashion, or blown-out girl bosses. But *The Tyranny of Merit* shows how meritocratic thinking and policy-making have fostered a culture in the United States that privileges individual talent and accomplishment above the betterment of society, leading to self-righteous hubris:

The heart of the meritocratic work ethic ... celebrates freedom—the abil-

ity to control my destiny by dint of hard work—and deservingness. If I am responsible for having accrued a handsome share of worldly goods—income and wealth, power and prestige—I must deserve them. Success is a sign of virtue. My affluence is my due.

Feel familiar? Until relatively recently, my own attitude toward upward mobility aligned with this mindset, and I didn’t realize that, historically speaking, this thinking is fairly *new*. Born in 1979 to lower middle-class parents (at the time, my father was a letter carrier and my mother a college student), I’d assumed that what Sandel calls the “rhetoric of rising” was a crucial part of the American ethos long before I existed. But, as Sandel takes pains to emphasize, “the language of merit and deservingness” has only dominated political discourse since the 1980s, grounding my childhood sense that hard work and intelligence could help me go “as far as my talents would take me.” As a young girl with a penchant for *Star Search* and a chemistry set in the basement, I believed that going “far” meant going places that girls like me were not usually permitted—but that I *would* go if I proved my merit. I would outpace my Midwestern classmates and catapult to greatness. I would win the national spelling bee, master college math in middle school, and become a neonatologist with a National Book Award for poetry.

THAT I DID NOT ACCOMPLISH ALL (ANY?) OF these things did not damper my faith in meritocracy as an inherently feminist route to success. Nor was I discouraged from judging other women who did not seem to work quite as hard to be good at everything, all of the time, and look good doing it (fun fact: my senior creative writing thesis was titled “Learning to Run in Heels”). This undeniably smug attitude—which surely I have not been alone in holding—betrays the problem Sande describes within a so-called feminist framework. Credentialism, he writes, is the “last acceptable prejudice,” and as such has eroded the liberal elite’s connection with the less formally educated, leading to greater political polarization, of which Trumpism is but one symptom. Throughout my own lower middle-class coming-of-age, and arguably that of an entire generation in the ‘80s and ‘90s, “you deserve” became doctrine and slogan for both countless politicians and popular advertisements—from Reagan to McDonald’s, from Clinton to De Beers. “As language of deservingness infused popular culture,” writes Sandel, “it became a soothing, all-purpose promise of success.”

How might this promise specifically appeal to a female demographic? Young women like me did not only deserve to consume nice things because we were hard-working and “talented,” but because we were *female*, and as such belonged to a group long deprived of our due. In this light, Sandel’s *Tyranny of Merit* can be placed in dialogue with an array of thinkers who have analyzed female consumption, like *Bitch* magazine cofounder Andi Zeisler, whose 2016 *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl*, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* tackles the displacement of feminist activism by commercial interests; fashion journalist Dana Thomas, whose 2007 book *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster* explores the democratization of luxury

CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF THE NFT?

then you'll really love the... **NON-EXISTENT
PARAMETER**



You've bought **tungsten cubes**. You've bought **million dollar JPEGs** of badly-drawn apes. You just don't know what to spend your crypto on. But for only .000000001 Bitcoin (\$4 billion), you can get the **Non-Existent Parameter**, a delineated set of coordinate points in spacetime that will be officially declared yours in a ledger. You'll know that these coordinate points are **yours and only yours!**

MAKE THE NEIGHBORS JEALOUS

WHAT DO WOMEN REALLY DESERVE?

fashion; and author and activist Yasmin Nair, whose 2017 “Bourgeois Feminist Bullshit” exposes the emptiness of “choice feminism.”

In *We Were Feminists Once*, Zeisler chronicles the rise of “marketplace feminism,” rampant in the “femvertising” for which I and millions of other women so often fall. “It’s decontextualized. It’s depoliticized,” she asserts. “And it’s probably feminism’s most popular iteration ever.” As Zeisler makes clear, from the “new woman of the late nineteenth and twentieth century” who were peddled Shredded Wheat (“Her Declaration of Independence!”) to the Lucky Strike and Virginia Slim smokers of yore, marketing notions of feminist progress long predate the “rhetoric of rising” that, as Sandel argues, swept the nation over the past forty years (and can hardly be pinned just on the right wing). “[Bill] Clinton and Obama employed rhetoric of rising more than twice as often as Reagan,” he points out. No wonder so many were so receptive to Obama’s lure, embracing his faith in meritocracy as a social justice cause—which for so many wide-eyed women canvassers (like me), was also an implicitly feminist one.

Sandel gets the “rhetoric of rising” right in terms of its national impact, but argues, a bit puzzlingly, that Reagan and other politicians of the ‘80s and ‘90s led the way. “As the rhetoric of rising became prominent [in politics], the language of merit and deservingness found growing expression throughout the public culture,” he claims, citing McDonald’s “You deserve a break today” campaign as one salient example. But in light of the long history of femvertising (not to mention the fact that this McDonald’s campaign launched in the ‘70s), it seems just as conceivable that the political rhetoric of “deserving” was being shaped by marketing tactics that had *already* proven effective; what can sell a product, in other words, can also sell a politician or governmental policy. If one deserves a burger break, why not a tax break? And with that extra tax money, why not splurge on a hot stone massage (an indulgence that, of course, you also “deserve”)?

Focusing on “the common good,” Sandel is not specifically concerned with the gendered implications of the tyranny of merit. But the “you deserve” catchphrase has, in the last twenty years, become the lingua franca of women’s marketing and self-help sisterhood. Suze Orman’s 2012 bestseller *The Money Class: How to Stand in Your Truth*

and *Create the Future You Deserve* conflates personal wealth accumulation with feminist liberation. Motivational speaker and spiritual psychologist Dr. Grace Cornish’s 2003 volume *You Deserve Healthy Love, Sis!: The Seven Steps to Getting the Relationship You Want* promises to help Black women find romantic (heterosexual) fulfillment. In terms of advertising, a Google search for “you deserve” offers a range of examples from across the globe. A 2018 billboard for a Sri Lankan fitness club displays a rusty oil barrel and comments: “THIS IS NO SHAPE FOR A WOMAN ... JOIN SRI LANKA’S HOTTEST GYM AND GET INTO THE SHAPE YOU DESERVE.” Meanwhile an ad for (since extinguished) Fire brand condoms wishes a “Happy International Women’s Day” with the tagline “You deserve pleasure and protection.” Another recent ad for ABM Medical Clinic and Cosmetic Laser Services declares “YOU DESERVE THIS” with reference to a deal for six hair-removal sessions (ruefully, only of a small area, and for \$600).

THE RHETORIC OF “YOU DESERVE” HAS PROVEN exquisitely suited to selling products and services to women—not least because, over the ‘80s and ‘90s, women started rising in the ranks of the professional sphere, making enough money to affirm their worth through their *own* purchases rather than relying on the munificence of men (historically called husbands). What Sandel describes as the two-score ascent of the “rhetoric of rising” in the 21st century is connected to how the fashion and beauty industry has, across the same span of time, marketed itself as accessible—and indeed “feminist”—to the upwardly mobile employed woman. Consumption is the righteous reward for a woman’s talent, nerve, and long hours in the office (or, in today’s gig economy, an overpriced corner of a coworking space like WeWork). The Botoxed business babe and the hairless lady professional are as much the result of the “rhetoric of rising” and marketplace feminism as they are of simple vanity.

In *Deluxe*, Dana Thomas reveals how consumption of luxury goods, especially by women, became its own form of meritocratic lure in the final decades of the 20th century. On the rise of luxury retail, she writes, “More than anything else today, the handbag tells a story of a woman: her reality, her dreams.” But of course it was not always this way (and is not this way now for millions of women). “[U]ntil the Youthquake of the 1960s,” Thomas explains, consumption of luxury products was limited to only the aristocratic and leisure class, and during the revolutionary 1970s, social barriers that separated “the rich from the rest” fell out of favor. “Luxury went out of fashion,” she writes, “and it stayed out of fashion until a new financially powerful demographic—the unmarried female executive—emerged in the 1980s.” Thomas rhapsodizes about who then gained access to fancy duds: supposedly “[a]nyone and everyone could move up the economic and social ladder and indulge in the trappings of luxury that came with this newfound success.” While clearly this was not true—the vast majority of women were excluded from this “financially powerful demographic”—Thomas makes a valid point: rising disposable income for women over this period was but one factor contributing to luxury’s “democratization.” Postponing



Cybill Shepherd in
Moonlighting and
Candice Bergen in
Murphy Brown

marriage freed both sexes to spend more money on themselves. “The average consumer,” Thomas continues, “is also far more educated and well-traveled than a generation ago and has developed a taste for the finer things in life.”

But might this “taste for the finer things” simply be an expression of newfound entitlement for what seems, in Sandelian terms, one’s “just desert” as a citizen? For women over the past four decades, the ability to earn—and spend—as a sign of agency has exploded alongside the “rhetoric of rising” sweeping public discourse. If any given individual deserves certain things, things which were only a few years earlier considered a luxury, would not an individual woman feel it is even more so her reward for hard work, talent, and centuries of oppression? When Karl Lagerfeld redesigned the iconic 2.55 Chanel bag in 1984—specifically appealing to women rising in the executive ranks—would it not be tempting to mistake this chain-strapped, quilted leather treasure for some feminist talisman?

Not unlike how L’Oréal hair dye was once touted as a luxury—“the most expensive hair color in America”—the designer handbag went from distant status symbol to aspirational object. “The It Bag phenomenon is young,” Thomas pointed out fifteen years ago, “and has been wholly created by the marketing wizards at luxury brand companies,” wizards who realized that women could be made to perceive such an accessory as a totem not only of style, but professional status and worth. After all, handbags are decidedly *not* the domain of traditional romantic gift-giving; rather, like hair dye, they are items that women typically purchase for themselves—and the market has only continued to grow. In 2004, 11.7 billion in luxury handbags were sold; by 2019, they would reach nearly fifty. In the post-pandemic luxury rush, sales have gone up again by 10%. By 2028, the global luxury handbag market is expected to reach \$94 billion, and it’s hard to imagine these dollars will reflect the unique “stories or dreams” of the consumers. “[T]o democratize luxury, to make luxury ‘accessible,’” writes Thomas, “sounded so noble ... almost communist,” but “it was as capitalist as it could be: the goal, plain and simple, was to make as much money as heavenly possible.” Conflating access to luxury goods with actual communism is, of course, absurd. But the idea that anyone can earn her way to a handbag has held remarkable sway over women. What one carries in her Burberry, in other words, is less important than how it communicates hard work and merit.

In “Bourgeois Feminist Bullshit,” Yasmin Nair counters this specious logic, questioning the value—to women and men—of promoting meritocracy as opposed to actual change in society’s underlying economic conditions. According to liberal feminism, she writes:

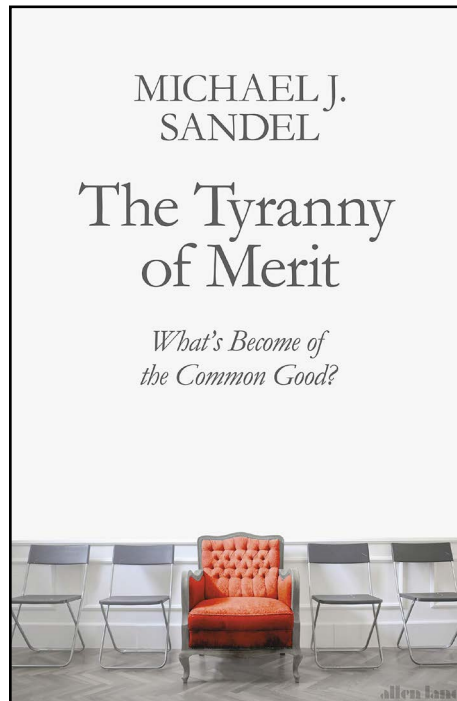
[T]here should be a meritocracy in which anyone can rise from their lowly, pitiful, underpaid position to become the boss. For someone committed to actual material equality, there shouldn’t be bosses, or lowly, underpaid positions, to begin with. It’s not that everyone should be able to get to the top of the hierarchy of female success, it’s that the hierarchy must be destroyed, so that people can do what they want with their lives without having to worry about whether they will be able to feed themselves or their children.

Does that mean we cannot enjoy a sequined clutch to celebrate a promotion—or simply because we like sequins? Of course not. But to rise in the professional ranks, and make purchases accordingly, does not mean that, as women, we have proven our “worth” to ourselves or others. Nor are these acts liberatory for women as a whole or any person who faces gender-based oppression in an unequal and “meritocratic” economy.

The wellness industry is arguably but the latest iteration of “democratized” luxury—the idea of “deserving” a monthly massage or mani-pedi as a form of “self-care” granted the righteous air of feminist empowerment. What could, after all, be more feminist than a woman choosing to care for her own body and mind—or, even better, “mind-body experience?” But these days, what constitutes self-care is up for debate, from injecting filler into nasolabial folds to consuming smoothies that could grout kitchen tile. When, in the mid-’80s, Audre Lorde, the renowned Black feminist, poet, and civil rights activist, wrote,

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare,” she was battling two forms of cancer. She was literally speaking of her “physical” and “psychical” survival. These days, self-care is hardly the kind of radical affirmation Lorde wrote about, and can refer to almost anything that feels or makes you look good. Any purchase can pass for self-care in the name of self-improvement, especially if it takes a lot of money and time.

Of course, women *should* have more leisure time, more time *not working*, and more time to reflect and create. What’s politically fraught is how immediately leisure is conflated with luxurious consumption, and self-care becomes a trip to the spa. It’s as though some women can’t be sure they are genuinely relaxing unless someone else is serving them. Further troubling the (lavender-infused) waters is that those serving tend to be working-class women of color, women who have not managed to climb up the meritocratic ladder to “bigger and better” lives and face challenges such as systemic racism, lack of opportunities due to immigration status, or language barriers. In fields such as skin care specialists and personal appearance workers, women of color occupy over 50% of workers. In the field of manicurists and pedicurists, wom-




en of color comprise 61% of workers, the highest percentage among occupations with large shares of women of color. A 2018 UCLA study of the nail salon industry in the U.S. describes the industry as predominantly female and foreign-born (mostly Vietnamese); many of these women are self-employed and lack job security, and over two thirds support children on wages significantly below the national average. We need to be concerned about how *all* women are able to care for themselves when we purchase self-care.

None of this is to say that women should never get their nails done. Or to say that we shouldn't feel, on some level, as though these small (or large) luxuries are our "just desert" (tempting to add a second "s" here, as Dove chocolate bars and pricey cupcakes are so often promoted as just that). But to define consumption itself as a feminist act—or one that does anything to challenge sexism or classism within society—and to conflate vanity with virtue, is to paint the "rhetoric of rising" in so many shades of Millennial Pink (Millennials did not create these meritocratic ideals, but have accumulated unprecedented levels of debt to pursue them). In other words, buy that pair of sandals—but resist the idea that you are contributing to the feminist cause because the boutique is owned by a woman, or because *you* are a woman and it's tempting to think that anything done on your own behalf contributes to a greater cause. As Nair astutely puts it, "feminism is not something that comes about simply because of the presence of women; it is fundamentally about changing the world so that everyone, *regardless of gender*, has the same access to material benefits."

Rather than focus inordinately on what we buy or do not buy, what if we focused on what we *contribute* to the common good instead—through our professional and family lives along with daily acts of compassion? If the average American woman diverted more of her self-care time to the care of others unlike herself—the poor, the incarcerated, the undocumented (people of any gender)—would that not arguably be more just? And if we devoted more of our "me time" to researching—and voting for—policies that aimed to reduce gross wealth inequity (that almost always inordinately punish women, especially women of color), wouldn't that be at least a teeny bit more empowering than buying a second pair of sandals?

If I sound snarky, it is not exclusively—or even primarily—toward the consumer practices of other women. I personally enjoy a full-on head rush from a good shopping trip, and devote no small amount of my disposable income to maintaining what appears to be a whimsical, low-maintenance hairstyle (it is not). I believe that pleasure is a precious part of being alive, and that purchasing things and experiences can be part of that pleasure. I believe that women deserve pleasure—all of us do. And it *did* feel feminist when I bought a house on my own as an unmarried woman, with savings I had scraped together waiting tables, editing museum publications, and teaching writing and film as an adjunct lecturer. Only five years before I was born, I would not have been permitted to purchase a house without a man's name on its title! At the time I bought my house, I felt that I had a place in women's long struggles for equality, but I now believe this is true only to a point. I wasn't carrying out feminism when I bought my house any more than

I am carrying out feminism by buying a lipstick with my own credit card. I was simply benefiting from the struggles of prior feminists to ensure that gender did not preclude the legal acquisition of property. The temporary boost of self-worth from this acquisition, moreover, pales in comparison to the sense of purpose I have gained as a writer and teacher over the past decade—whether promoting the work of a female filmmaker, instructing undergraduates at a state correctional center, or nudging my more privileged students to question the hyper-competitive, meritocratic rat race they have inherited. To be sure, I am not radically challenging systemic inequality through any of these activities, but it is a first step toward contributing, in my own small but distinct way, to what Sandel calls "the common good."

 WE ARE LIVING IN A TIME WHEN, AS individual women, we have become algorithmically targeted by marketers in ever savvier ways. As women, we have been tyrannized by meritocratic thinking—meritocratic thinking that has informed, and been informed by, the forces of consumer culture and marketplace feminism. "This way of thinking is empowering," Sandel argues. "It encourages people to think of themselves as responsible for their fate, not as victims of forces beyond their control." Feeling like one is in control of one's destiny is better than feeling like the product of fate's cruel vicissitudes. But, as Sandel notes, the flip side of this is that "the more we view ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the less likely we are to care for the fate of those less fortunate than ourselves." We made it out of our own girl-power grit and gumption, so why can't others do the same?

Over fifty years ago, a 23-year-old copywriter named Ilon Specht devised the tagline "Because you're worth it" for L'Oréal. No small amount of think pieces since have commemorated its "poignant" and "empowering" message. Global Brand President Delphine Viguiet-Hovasse declared that she is not "just managing a beauty brand, [but] managing a brand that supports women to be confident in their self-worth." Over a hundred years since its founding, the company wants "women to have a seat at the negotiating table in every field: economic, artistic, educational, scientific, political." Surely this is admirable. But a beauty brand that packages merit in mascara cannot confer worth to women. And representation—a seat at the table—is not the same as fundamental change.

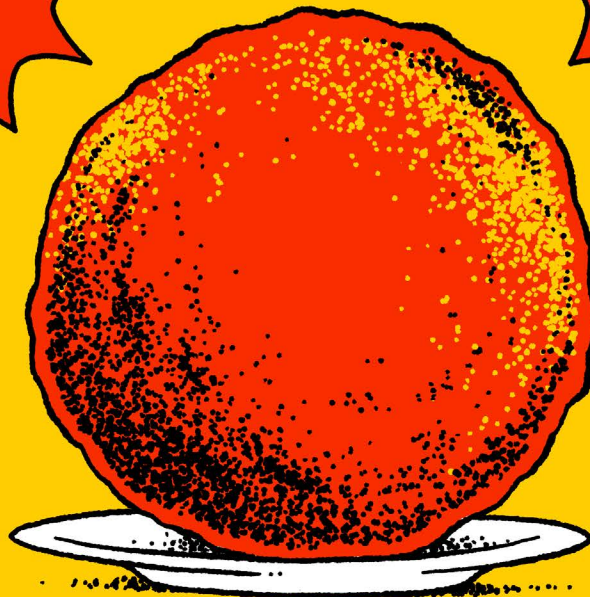
The rhetoric of worth and deservingness, whether in advertising or political punditry, falsely claims to affirm our value while actually suggesting that a minority of us (among whom happen to be "you") are in the moral elect, the group who has earned status and luxury through hard work and merit. When this rhetoric disguises itself as feminism, it is even more insidious, wrapping self-interested pursuits in the illusion of solidarity. But there is no such thing as a woman who is worth it versus a woman who is not; no human being uniquely deserves "life's prize," as Reagan put it, more than anybody else. When we veer toward this thinking, however beautifully virtuous it might make us feel, we fall prey to a host of assumptions that lead us to accept an unjust status quo. ✦

TOO MANY MEATBALLS?



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ОТДЕЛЕНИЕ



МАТЕМАТИКИ



THE QUEST FOR RED PLENTY BY BEN BURGIS

A rising star in the Party bureaucracy visits his fiancée on a collective farm.

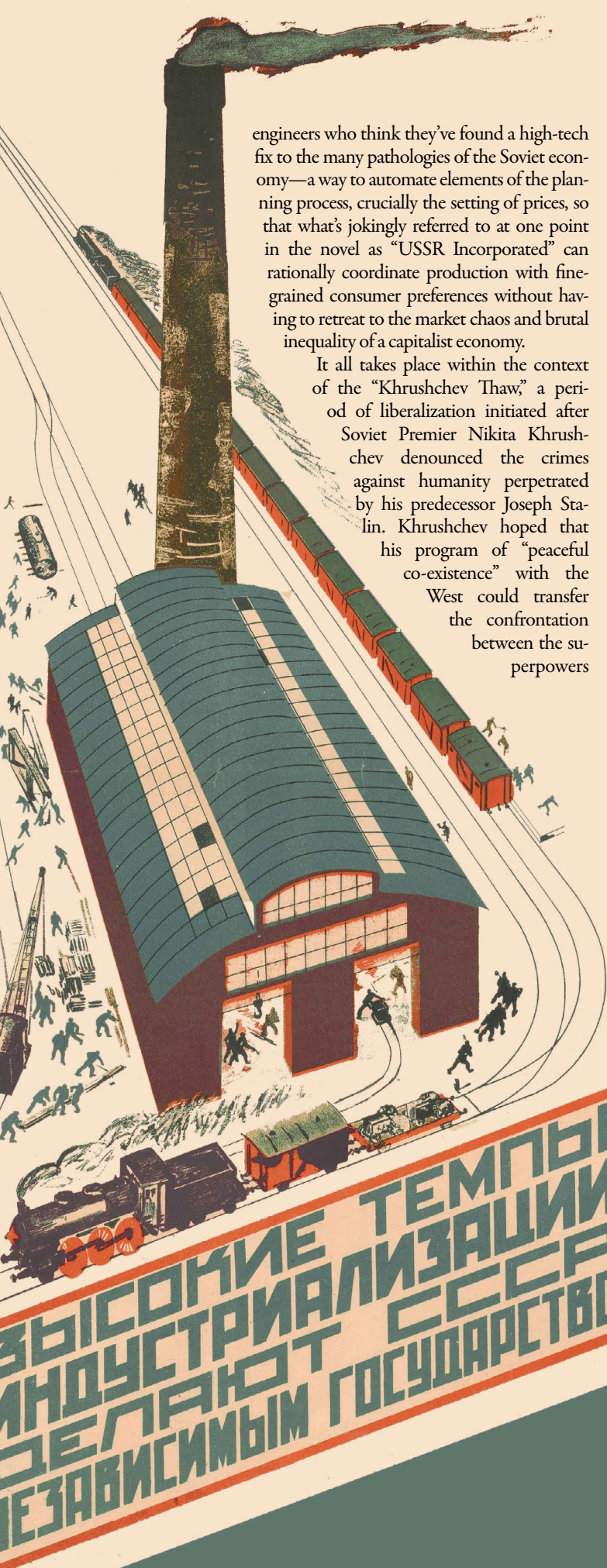
Everyone sits around toasting the bride and groom with glasses of grain alcohol. The bride's grandfather raises his glass to "Christ and his saints"—he is either too senile to realize that this kind of ideological deviation could create trouble or too cantankerous to care. The young bureaucrat reassures everyone that he doesn't mind drinking to that. "It's what my grandfather would say." He's lying. His grandfather was a Muslim. But it puts everyone at ease. The more they talk, the more the young man realizes that the farmers' wages are a joke and the empty shelves at the village shop are the punchline.

Another couple, an ambitious young woman and her boyfriend, are tasked in their role as Party youth activists with visiting an exhibition of American products in Moscow and arguing with the guides about capitalism and racial injustice in the South. The woman gets genuinely angry and takes things too far in arguing with the American host. She ends up ruining her career in the Party.

A fixer who makes his living arranging transfers of goods between state enterprises so that everyone can fulfill their quotas playfully calls himself a "servant of the Plan." He moves around the edges of the official economy, trading favors and being paid off by all sides. A policeman who knows the fixer is too well-connected to be arrested—but too despised for anyone to care much about what happens to him—beats him and leaves him in the snow.

THE MAIN character in Francis Spufford's novel *Red Plenty* isn't a person. It's the centrally planned economy of the Soviet Union. You may be skeptical if I tell you that a 450-page book about economic planning is a good read *as a novel*—but it is. Sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, Spufford is very good at what he does, and the story of this central character emerges from a patchwork of stories about human beings. All of these episodes feel like lovingly crafted literary short stories. What are essentially historical essays read like dreamy Russian fairy tales.

The most important part of the character arc of the planned economy is the story of a group of mathematicians, economists, and computer



engineers who think they've found a high-tech fix to the many pathologies of the Soviet economy—a way to automate elements of the planning process, crucially the setting of prices, so that what's jokingly referred to at one point in the novel as “USSR Incorporated” can rationally coordinate production with fine-grained consumer preferences without having to retreat to the market chaos and brutal inequality of a capitalist economy.

It all takes place within the context of the “Khrushchev Thaw,” a period of liberalization initiated after Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev denounced the crimes against humanity perpetrated by his predecessor Joseph Stalin. Khrushchev hoped that his program of “peaceful co-existence” with the West could transfer the confrontation between the superpowers

from the realm of costly military brinksmanship to that of economic competition to see whose system could deliver a future that nations around the world would want to join. As Khrushchev told then Vice President Richard Nixon in the famous “kitchen debate” at the American National Exhibition in 1959: “Let’s compete! Who can produce the most goods for the people, that system is better and it will win.”

The technocrats’ quest to achieve “red plenty” through more rational economic planning could only take place against the background of that thaw—both because of state officials’ relative openness to new ideas in the period and because the regime needed to find a way to fulfill Khrushchev’s constant promises that the Soviet Union would not only catch up to but “overtake” the prosperity of the West. (“We will bury you!”) Khrushchev had told Nixon that the Soviets would wave at America as they passed it.

But the story is a tragedy. The thaw was temporary, and the next decades would see the total collapse of the brief Soviet dream of a bountiful luxury communism that would deliver a superior standard of living.

In *Red Plenty*, Spufford pulls no punches in his portrayal of the disturbingly authoritarian features of even Khrushchev’s USSR—and he repeatedly calls the reader’s attention to the genuine horrors of the Stalin era. Nor is the 1950s Soviet economy portrayed flatteringly; the economic dysfunction of “USSR Incorporated” is the central problem that all the book’s small human stories swirl around. Considering all this, the most surprising thing about the novel is that it never feels *anti-communist*. When the “red plenty” dreamers envision something better, Spufford wants you to dream with them.

MARXIST CRITICISM OF SOVIET REPRESSION—what would later be called “anti-Stalinist” Marxism—is a tradition that goes back much further than Joseph Stalin’s ascendance to the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Within months of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd in 1917, Rosa Luxemburg wrote a pamphlet criticizing their authoritarian tendencies.

“[S]ocialist democracy,” Luxemburg wrote, “is not something that begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist economy are created.” It is not “a Christmas present for the worthy people who have, in the interim, loyally supported a handful of dictators.” Democracy, she explained in her polemic against Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky, is *the whole point*.

ВЫСОКИЕ ТЕМПЫ
ИНДУСТРИАЛИЗАЦИИ
ДЕЛАЮТ СССР
НЕЗАВИСИМЫМ ГОСУДАРСТВОМ

THE QUEST FOR RED PLENTY

Trotsky had written that “As Marxists we have never been idol worshippers of formal democracy.” But Luxemburg replied: “Surely, we have never been idol worshippers of socialism or Marxism either.” Agreeing that socialists have never been “idol worshippers” of “formal democracy,” she explained that this does *not* mean socialists see democracy itself as unnecessary or a mere formality:

All that that really means is: We have always distinguished the social kernel from the political form of bourgeois democracy; we have always revealed the hard kernel of social inequality and lack of freedom hidden under the sweet shell of formal equality and freedom—not in order to reject the latter but to spur the working class into not being satisfied with the shell, but rather, by conquering political power, to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy—not to eliminate democracy altogether.

Several years later, when he started to see how bad the state he’d helped to create was becoming, Trotsky himself became an oppositionist.

My own great-grandfather, Morris Field, was part of the long tradition of socialist dissent against Stalinism. An early leader of the United Auto Workers, Morris was what was then called a “Lovestonite”—one of the American adherents of Nikolai Bukharin’s opposition faction within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. (The name came from Jay Lovestone, General Secretary of the Communist Party USA before he was expelled—for siding with Bukharin and for holding the heretical view that

America’s political conditions were sufficiently different from the ones that had prevailed in Tsarist Russia to necessitate a very different socialist strategy.) My memories of Morris are vague—I mostly remember him telling me and my older sister Ukrainian fairy tales while the rest of the adults talked about politics in the other room. From what I can now tell about the Lovestonites’ politics, though, they agreed with Luxemburg about socialist democracy. So do I.

But what is the relationship between the lack of *democracy* and the economic dysfunction portrayed in *Red Plenty*? The Soviet working class’s lack of democratic



control over the machinery of the state was objectionable in and of itself, but does it explain the poor economic results?

Luxemburg predicted that the problems that would confront the Bolsheviks as they attempted to construct a socialist economy couldn’t be solved if socialism was “decreed from behind a few official desks” instead of arising from what was learned through the “experiences” of the masses. But it’s far from clear what the road-not-taken would have looked like in practice. To see the problem, imagine an alternate history of the Soviet Union where the USSR’s basic economic model was grafted onto a democratic political system, complete with a robustly independent civil society, a free press regularly airing a wide range of opinions, and real multi-party elections. Whichever party won a majority in that year’s elections to the Supreme Soviet would form a government and appoint the head of the state planning office known as the Gosplan.

I don’t doubt that the most horrifying decisions made by the planners would have been avoided in this version of Soviet history. In the 1930s, if Stalin had had to worry about whether he’d win the next election, and couldn’t liquidate his critics before they convinced anyone, the USSR probably wouldn’t have been selling Ukrainian wheat on the foreign market to buy heavy industrial machinery while Ukrainians starved.

But in this timeline, would the day-to-day frustrations of citizens trying to spend their paychecks at grocery stores in the 1980s have been much different?

I have my doubts.

As Leonid Kantorovich and

the other “red plenty” visionaries realized, the problem was technical and not just political. Before 1917, the few Marxists, anarcho-syndicalists, or other socialists who bothered to spell out the details of a future socialist society tended to focus on how factories and farms would be *managed* by committees elected by the workers, or how the committees would coordinate with each other. All too often they neglected the question of how the coordinating committee that made high-level economic decisions would know *what* to produce, and how those products would then find their way into people’s homes. A major problem with the Soviet economy, where prices were set by administrative fiat, is that workers were disenfranchised not just as workers and citizens but as *consumers*. As *Jacobin* editor Seth Ackerman put it, the citizens of Soviet-bloc nations “experienced the paucity, shoddiness and uniformity of their goods not merely as inconveniences; they experienced them as violations of their basic rights.”

To some socialists, even the word “consumer” might smell like capitalist propaganda. But it’s a bad mistake to underestimate the importance of delivering people the goods and services they want to consume.

Socialists spend a lot of time critiquing the *workplace* and thinking about how it can be restructured. Workplaces under capitalism are petty tyrannies. That can and should change in a better system. But

even jobs done under the fairest conditions—working at a collectively-owned and democratically self-managed farm or factory or office or grocery store—involve time spent doing tasks one wouldn’t necessarily *choose* were it not for the need to make a living. Some people love their jobs so much that they hate days off. But most people put the highest value on the time they spend off the clock. That time is spent doing things like going out to the bar with friends, playing a board game, privately browsing the shelves at a bookstore, looking for the next fat novel to immerse oneself in or just sitting on the couch watching *Netflix* with loved ones.

Like it or not, outside of work people spend their lives, to a great extent, as consumers. If that sounds shallow, so be it, but all the aforementioned leisure activities are also examples of *consumption*—of beverages, of board games, of books, of movies and TV shows. To paint an appealing picture of a global socialist economy, it matters not just that there is collective ownership and democratic worker self-management at the bars and the board game manufacturers and the bookstores and the publishing houses and the studios and the streaming services. It’s also important that there be a reasonable system for coordinating what they produce to fit extremely specific preferences of all the billions of consumers.

This question might sound trivial to socialists who live in societies suffering more from massive economic inequality and workplace authoritarianism than from a dearth of consumer products. But the history of the twentieth century shows us that we’d *better* care about delivering the goods if we want to build a durable alternative to capitalism. The lack of attention to the problems of satisfying consumers’ demands is a major reason why, even after the Soviet political system had become far more liberal, Soviet workers showed little inclination to resist the restoration of capitalism in their “workers’ state.”

IN THE ’50S AND ’60S, SOME IN THE SOVIET UNION believed that cybernetics—roughly, the study of automatic control systems—offered a way to solve the problem of efficiently coordinating production with consumer preferences. Given a sufficient amount of data about both ends of that equation, Soviet computers could spit out rational prices that could play a structurally similar role to the one played by prices in capitalist economies. No more empty shelves at the grocery store. No more reliance on the black market. And all without losing the upsides of economic planning.

So: Would the cybernetic solution have worked? A key scene in *Red Plenty* points to a reason for skepticism.

Emil Shaidullin, an economist pushing that solution, is smoking a cigarette outside of a committee meeting with Maksim Mokhov. An open-minded but deeply realistic bureaucrat, Mokhov is skeptical about Emil’s argument that automating the price system would generate the desired “optimal prices.”

“You want to take our discretion away,” Mokhov complains. “You want the plan targets for ten thousand enterprises to come straight out of the computer. And then there’d be no way of correcting errors.”

Shaidullin claims that these errors wouldn’t arise in the first place given optimal prices. Mokhov doesn’t buy it.

“They’re only as good as the data they’re based on. If I understand correctly, they’re based on the efficiency of an enterprise’s equipment. In other words, they depend on managers submitting completely truthful information about what their enterprises are capable of. Speaking as somebody





who has been trying to get them to do just that for nearly thirty years, I have to say it strikes me as a trifle unlikely that they'll change their ways just because you've sent them a new form to fill in."

That scene is set in 1965. Since then, capitalist corporations around the world have vastly increased their profits partly through use of mathematical tools pioneered by real Soviet technocrats who are characters in *Red Plenty*. The algorithms have gotten unfathomably more advanced in the last 57 years. It's less clear, though, that anyone has devised a convincing solution to the problem Mokhov points out about enterprise managers' incentives—and it's far from obvious that those incentives would go away if the managers were either answerable to elected workers' committees or directly elected.

Since the Soviet Union's founding, the problem of how a government could effectively plan the economy had vexed Soviet technocrats and invited serious critique from bourgeois economists. Some free market critics argued, starting in the 1920s, that it was simply impossible for the state to decide what to produce. Ludwig von Mises declared that a centrally planned socialist economy was literally 'impossible' because no one institution could do the necessary calculations to sort it all out.

It's easy to see why von Mises's ideological successors believe that the economic experience of the Soviet Union and similar nations vindicated their side of this "socialist calculation debate." And the painful truth is that, at least to some extent, it does.

The good news is that the experience of the last several decades of social democracy shows us beyond any shadow of a doubt that some sectors of the economy deliver *better* results when they're planned outside of the market. State-planned healthcare sectors in culturally and

economically similar Anglophone countries, for example, outperform their marketized American equivalent. Brits and Canadians live longer. Fewer of their children die as infants. Their rate of "mortality amenable to health care" is lower. (That one is stats-speak for the rate at which people die when they would have lived if they'd gotten the health care they needed, or if they'd gotten it sooner.)

SVEN IF THE CONSUMER GOODS SECTOR is different, quite a bit of the economy—healthcare, education, energy, telecommunications infrastructure, and banking are a good starting list—can and should be subject to economic planning outside of the chaos of the market. But is that where it ends? Is our ability to reshape the world economy in accordance with socialist values limited to the kind of maximalist socialist democracy that Robert Heilbroner called "slightly imaginary Sweden?"

I don't think so, for two reasons. First, we should separate out the question of markets from the question of capitalist ownership structures, especially when we think about the kind of socialism that we'd be able to achieve "five minutes after the revolution" without waiting for either a further moral revolution to create more honest factory managers or a technological revolution so some God-like Artificial Intelligence system could figure it all out without any human managers with bad incentives having to correctly fill out forms. If we need price signals and firm failure to avoid replicating the problems that afflicted the consumer goods sec-

THE QUEST FOR RED PLENTY

tor of the Soviet economy, the firms can at least be worker-owned, and the financing can come from grants from nationalized banks, with the funding provided by progressive taxation to cut down on economic inequality between the worker-owners of more and less capital-intensive industries. A model like this can be found in mathematician David Schweickart's book *After Capitalism*, and another with many similar features appears in economist Yanis Varoufakis's speculative novel *Another Now*. (One like it is also the basis of a book called *The Blueprint*, which I am writing for Verso with Bhaskar Sunkara and Mike Beggs.)


SHOULD THIS KIND OF SOCIALISM, THOUGH, represent the outer limits of our imaginations? Maybe not. At least some of the problems with capitalism would continue to exist in a form of socialism that still included a substantial role for market mechanisms. Worker cooperatives, for example, would continue to have bad environmental incentives, even if we hope that at least some of those incentives could be counteracted by interests of worker-owners in not seeing the communities they live in polluted. And it would certainly be reasonable to hold out hope that better regulations would emerge from a political process that didn't include the outsized political influence of a wealthy elite.

This brings us to the second point, which is that progress won't and shouldn't stop with the end of capitalism. As Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski argue at the end of their book *People's Republic of Walmart*, we can think of market socialism and socialist planning not as discrete and incompatible alternatives but as a spectrum. How far we can travel along that spectrum toward a completely planned economy without replicating the problems of the Soviet economy is for now an open empirical question. It's entirely possible that new technological developments will open up new ways to take more chunks of the economy outside of the market without unacceptable reductions in dynamism and efficiency.

I expect that there would be intense political debates in any future socialist democracy about how far along the markets-versus-planning spectrum it would even be desirable to go. Different and competing values would have to be balanced. It's not *just* that many people would be wary of the prospect of either being disempowered as consumers like their Soviet forebears or forced to spend their lives in endless meetings if they wanted to have any input on exactly which cuisines should be served by a new restaurant

under construction or whether the whiskey produced in the nationalized distilleries should be smoky or smooth or whether the nationalized publishing houses should be putting out more romances or more techno-thrillers. Any factions of future socialist citizens wary about turning more private worker cooperatives into parts of a coordinated economic plan might be motivated by entirely different concerns, ranging from the question of how to safeguard political diversity and the independence of civil society if the media were entirely nationalized to the issue of resources that might be wasted if inefficient enterprises couldn't be weeded out by market competition. (Interestingly enough, Yanis Varoufakis suggests that firm failure within competitive markets could be replaced with randomly selected juries empowered to shut down poorly performing enterprises.)

To the extent that all of these concerns could be persuasively addressed, though, there may be good reasons that a great many people in a socialist society would argue for moving as far as possible in the direction of greater economic planning. An important part of why socialists have always wanted "social" control of the economy is that under capitalism there's a sense in which even capitalists don't really rule—they're pushed around by the sort of market pressures that Karl Marx called a "blind power" governing our lives. And if the citizens of this socialist future, unlike their Soviet predecessors, democratically control the state, the extension of state economic planning is the extension of *democracy*. Even a worker cooperative disenfranchises all the people in the broader community who don't work there—but who may nevertheless be impacted by the cooperative's decisions.

I don't know how relevant the technical problems that consume the characters in *Red Plenty* would be in such a society. The "information" problems that were supposed to doom socialist planning may have looked intractable in the 1960s—but we just can't know how they'll look by, say, the beginning of the twenty-second century. I don't know how far along the planning spectrum the people of the future would choose to go. But I would dearly love to find out. The planners of *Red Plenty* struggled with the problem of how to provide abundance for all without taking on the considerable disadvantages that come with market economies. They might not have found the answer. But we shouldn't abandon the quest. 



Politics & the

MFA

IF I WERE TO DEVISE A SCENE THAT SHOWED THE starting point for modern American literature, I would begin in a creative writing classroom in the 1950s. A group of young people has been corralled into a seminar room where an instructor, in horn rim glasses and herringbone blazer, is torturing the adverbs out of first drafts. The writing program has been created in the hope that under no circumstances should these students engage in ideology or broad societal critique in their work. Instead, the individual was to be the ceiling and the floor of literature.

Eric Bennett, an English professor and graduate of the MFA program at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, in 2015 published *Workshops of Empire*, a book about how creative writing emerged as a discipline used to promote capitalist values during the Cold War. In America's creative writing programs, Bennett writes, "the artistic mind found protection from the dangerous influence of Communism." Through university programs, "the aspiring writer embraced the dream of a nuclear family and a steady job at the same time he was learning the techniques of the modernist form." Writers, like everyone else, had to get dressed in the morning and head to the office. It was the Cold War. Political quietism and introspection were in. Communism and broad societal critique were out. Literary fashion followed the conservative Flannery O'Connor, a writer who, however brilliant, dealt exclusively in the scouring of atomized souls. Left-leaning authors who wrote with a wide scope about communities and politics—writers like John Dos Passos, Langston Hughes, and John Steinbeck—were passé.

Following the passage of the GI Bill of 1944, which funded high-

er education for armed service members, creative writing programs began popping up across the nation after the war. They were mainly modeled on the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, established in 1936. Many were founded by graduates of that program. The design of these programs has essentially remained the same to this day. Up-and-coming writers are placed in micro-communities of competitive peers in isolated academic environments. They attend workshops, led by professional writers, in which new pieces of student writing are critiqued each week. Following these workshops, students are supposed to return to their work with a broadened perspective, enlightened by the opinions of their peers and professor.

Sandra Cisneros, author of the novel *The House on Mango Street*, earned an MFA at Iowa in 1978. Writing about the

program in her 2015 memoir *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life*, she wrote, "How can art make a difference in the world? This was never asked at Iowa." "In grad school, I'd never been trained to think of poems or stories as something that could change anyone's life but the writer's. I'd been trained to think about where a line ended or how best to work a metaphor. It was always the 'how' and not the 'what' we talked about in class."

This emphasis on form over content was still common when I became a creative writing student thirty years later. As a student in the late aughts, I wrote an (overambitious) story in which a male sex worker, a drag queen, and a club bouncer discuss theology with a Catholic monk in a gay bar in Manhattan. When the story was workshoped, the professor went around the seminar table and asked everyone to draw a diagram of the bar. My classmates spent an hour analyzing this space: where the tables, dance floor, and

BY ANNIE LEVIN

exit were located in my fictional bar. Not one comment did I receive about the actual content of the story. It was all “how” and not “what.” The subject matter, the “what,” was treated as ornamental and didn’t enter into the analysis. Approaching the form of writing in this way can be useful: you clear away the facade and work on the foundation. Here, however, the foundation of my story was treated as if it was devoid of content. What mattered to my teacher was where the tables and chairs were. The moral dimensions of my story and its topic of sex work were pushed completely aside.

WHILE DIVORCING THE CRAFT OF writing from the content of writing is not explicitly anticommunist or pro-capitalist, it is notable that teaching writing in this way grew to popularity during the Cold War and was popularized by vocal anticommunists. Paul Engle, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop director from 1941 to 1964, fundraised for the program using explicitly anticommunist rhetoric: he communicated with private and public donors that Iowa was in the business of bringing writers together in one place to train them to compete against their ideologically-driven counterparts in the Soviet Union. In his essay “How Iowa Flattened Literature,” Eric Bennett writes that Engle was explicit in his political motivations in his fundraising for the program. “Iowa prospered on donations from conservative businessmen persuaded by Engle that the program fortified democratic values at home and abroad: It fought Communism,” Bennett writes. Through these efforts, Engle brought in money from the Rockefeller Foundation, The State Department, and CIA front groups the Farfield Foundation and the Asia Foundation.

These organizations were giving money to Iowa at the same time that the CIA was funding literary magazines worldwide through the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In the U.S., they supported the *Kenyon Review*, to this day one of the most prestigious literary reviews in the nation. The review was a proponent of The New Criticism, a form of literary criticism in which the critic avoids making reference to the historical, political, or personal context in which a work of literature was written. In *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, Frances Stonor Saunders describes how the review’s founder, John Crowe Ransom, had ties to the CIA. He received funding from the CIA through the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and had some of his students recruited to the CIA. The *Paris Review*, another mainstream literary light influenced by the apolitical New Critics, began as a front group for the CIA. Its founder, Peter Matthiessen, was himself a CIA agent.

We know that the CIA was interested in art and literature during the Cold War. Exactly what impact this interest had on literature itself is hard to quantify. However, looking at the literature of the period through a wide angle lens, you can see a shift away from political literature or literature of broad cultural scope. When I was first studying literature in college, I started putting a dividing line between literary novels written before and after

World War II. It seemed like the books from the before times were good at doing lots of things. They could world build and philosophize. They could be love story, adventure novel, and satire all in one. Books written after the war, however, could only do one thing at a time. Mostly that one thing was soul-searching or introspection. Serious post-war fiction, whether it was what I was being fed in school or read in the pages of *The New Yorker*, was about sad white people with relationship problems.

Cold War writers like John Updike, J.D. Salinger, Flannery O’Connor, and John Cheever—soul-scouring chroniclers of the small—were beloved by my baby boomer teachers in high school and college. When I was being educated, I was assigned John Updike’s often anthologized “A&P,” first published in 1961, in four separate academic classes. This is a story about a supermarket cashier who gets turned on by a teenage girl in a bathing suit. The narrator watches the girl and her friends wander through an A&P in bathing suits. The writing is gorgeous, and very much of its time: the girl’s bare chest in a strapless bathing suit is “like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light.” At the end of the story, the store manager tells the girls to put some clothes on. The cashier responds by quitting his job. His dramatic gesture isn’t perceived by the girls, and the cashier wanders away, sad and jobless. It ends, “My stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.” That’s the entire story.

The writing is well crafted. It’s not a bad story. But not only does it foreground the male gaze and very little else, it also reads as though cut off from time and space and other people. The narrator’s coworker is “married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage already.” His coworker cannot do anything so effeminate as to father babies, so he instead guns them down over Normandy. Slave to his hormones, the narrator doesn’t make choices. He reacts. One minute he is watching the girl blush, and the next he is throwing in his bowtie and walking out the door. The store, the character, the scenario, are all vehicles for describing a girl with “a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit.” Lean, sculpted sentences all. But in service of what, exactly?

I don’t believe that fiction *must* have deep societal meaning. Of course, stories can exist for themselves. Writing about his literary vocation towards the end of his life, Updike wrote, “my only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me—to give the mundane its beautiful due.” I find Updike’s vision very noble. What is unique in Updike’s writing, however, and in much writing from the post-war period, is how little it does beyond this beautification of the mundane. Whereas a more politically-oriented writer might take the scenario in “A&P” and use it as a vehicle for the class inequalities on display—the poor cashier, his overbearing boss, the privileged teen girl who doesn’t know he exists—and ask questions of the reader or draw moral assessments, Updike’s story stands for itself. The story is experienced almost in real time, like a film. Updike keeps our attention on the object of consumption: the bare shoulders of the teenage girl. Given a different ending, I can imagine the story as a beer commercial (toss the bowtie, kiss the girl, drink Miller High Life). There are moral or spiritual or societal dimensions



THE REWARDS OF APOLITICAL WRITING: John Updike being awarded the 1989 Medal of Arts by President George H.W. Bush and the 2003 National Humanities Medal by President George W. Bush



that could be dealt with in “A&P,” but the text is stripped clean of much beyond the beautifully rendered surface.

Mid-century writing like Updike’s would be a historical footnote had its tenets not been ingrained in writing programs nationwide. Bennett, in *Workshops of Empire*, describes the teaching philosophy of creative writing programs at mid-century as supporting “sensations, not doctrines; experiences, not dogmas; memories, not philosophies.” The primacy of this type of writing, buoyed up by MFA programs, publishing houses, and (sometimes CIA-funded) magazines, was long lasting. If you have taken a writing class in the United States in the last seventy years, you have probably received lessons that have been handed down from this period: from the New Critics and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. You may, for instance, have been told that writing should “show and not tell.” In some ways, this advice is sound. To show (sensations, experiences, and memories) and not tell (doctrines, dogmas, and philosophies) in narrative fiction is a good idea. While people love to enthuse over what interests them, what readers need to know to understand what is happening usually needs to take precedence over a writer’s passions. In the decade in which I taught writing I had to steer plenty of students away from “info-dumping,” from giving a lecture about family genealogies, magical powers, or how physics works in a fantasy universe—and to structure stories around action. It’s a way to get a student to stop thinking of themselves and to start thinking about their reader.

THE PROBLEM WITH “SHOW DON’T TELL” is that applied to actual literature it becomes over-simplistic. Literature historically is full of dogmas, doctrines, and philosophies. It’s full of writers telling you things. Thomas Mann philosophizes at great length; Leo Tolstoy fills chapter after chapter with moralizing dogma; and certainly no one ever applied to Herman Melville the rule about showing and not telling regarding his whale taxonomy lists in *Moby Dick*.

Even on the most practical level of information delivery, showing

and not telling isn’t always the best option. Consider the following passage from *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, in which Jane Austen introduces the novel’s famous love interest.

Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.

Here telling instead of showing—giving the action in exposition, as background information—allows for a multivalenced perspective: we see how everyone at the party came to perceive Mr. Darcy. He is handsome, rich, and kind of an asshole. Darcy is filleted by the protagonist’s community before the characters meet. He doesn’t arise out of nowhere, a singular highlight upon which her imagination can run wild with metaphors. Instead of showing him walking into a room, Austen tells us what everyone in the room thinks of him after an evening of conversation. Just as we view people in real life, his character is a composite of many perceptions at the same time.

Shown detail, which can be affecting and beautiful, has an entirely different impact and narrative purpose. In Updike’s “A&P,” the “shown” object of affection is introduced as follows:

She didn’t look around, not this queen, she just walked straight on slowly, on these long white primadonna legs. She came down a little hard on her heels, as if she didn’t walk in bare feet that much, putting down her heels and then letting the weight move along to her toes as if she was testing the floor with every step, putting a little extra action into it. You never know for sure how girls’ minds work (do you really think it’s a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?) but you got the idea she had talked the other two into

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coming here with her, and now she was showing them how to do it, walk slow and hold yourself straight.

Written in first person, from the point of view of Updike's horny teen protagonist, we linger for sentences on the girl's footsteps. In Austen, through the *told* description, we become a part of the hive digestion of Darcy. In Updike, outside perspectives are dismissed (A&P shoppers are "houseslaves in pin curlers") and the narrator, the independent soul reveling in the girl's freedom and beauty, is—like you, the reader at home—different and special. Only he is consuming her in the right way, even if it gets him into trouble. On the level of language economy, Updike spends several sentences of a very short story writing about a girl's footsteps. In Austen's novel, in exactly the same number of words, a major character is introduced and physically and morally dissected by an entire community.

Austen is telling. Updike is showing. The deft handling of these tools, knowing when to use one and when the other, is the art of fiction writing. Updike also does his share of "telling" in "A&P," although the writing is stream-of-consciousness and the reading experience is more like showing than telling. Yet, how to "tell," how to give concise and witty information in exposition (à la Austen), is rarely taught in a classroom. How to "show," meanwhile, how to describe a girl walking barefoot across a supermarket, is the bread and butter of every fiction workshop in the land.

Writing teachers like to say that great writers can break the rules because they know the rules to begin with. But this idea implies that the rules have always been the same and the needs of readers have always been static. The notion that "giving the mundane its beautiful due," describing a barefoot girl walking across supermarket tile, is the purpose of fiction, may have come as news to a writer like Jane Austen. She was as much moral philosopher and social satirist as she was crafter of fine sentences about the mundane. These static midcentury rules imply a stultifying sameness throughout the whole of world literature. Their continued adherence in academia implies that we are stuck. Just as it is hard to imagine a world after capitalism, it is hard for American fiction writers to imagine a literature after Updike and Salinger. The midcentury poetics that were institutionalized during the Cold War, at least partially for political reasons, have, I believe, brought literary fiction to a dead end.

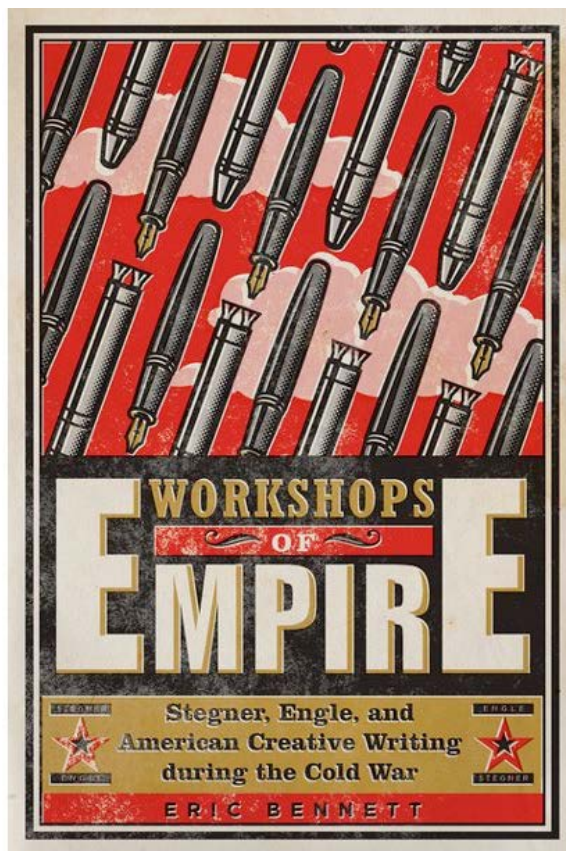
Here in the third decade of the 21st century, according to NEA statistics, readers of literature have become steadily fewer and few-

er in the last forty years. Writers' incomes have also decreased. The transforming market, new technology, and shorter attention spans are all being blamed for the shrinking of fiction's readership. I would further add that trends in fiction writing itself, in which stories are built upon narrower and narrower subjectivities until the only readership left is that of the writer alone, is also to blame for this exodus. These combined factors have driven literature towards contemporary obsolescence.

In the last forty years, in the same time that readership has declined, creative writing programs have blossomed. There were 52 MFA programs in 1975, whereas as of 2016 there were 350. The creative writing business makes over \$200 million a year in revenue. There are more MFAs and other businesses that grew out of the Iowa workshop model, and more people willing to spend real money to go to MFA programs and attend conferences and workshops where authors, agents, and editors dole out advice on how to get that book deal. The literary world once looked to readers of (relatively inexpensive) books for its sustenance. Now, it relies upon costly creative writing education products, and hopeful writer-consumers willing to buy them.

Literature, part of our human birthright, has, like our food and water supply, our systems of care and education, and so many other things, been ransacked and misused by capitalism. Retaking that birthright, I believe, is a small part of the struggle to build a better world.

I believe that writers have a duty to use their talents, their ability to show *and* tell—"to give the mundane its beautiful due" and to channel broad and diverse perspectives in narrative form—to help build that better world. Not only can writers envision new worlds, they can also build schools, publishing houses, and publications that work against the capitalist ethics enthroned in the American literary establishment. They can widely broadcast stories about mass climate action, the labor movement, and left-wing solidarity. Where literary institutions during the Cold War popularized a fiction of atomized soul-scouring—a flattened formalism that is still being taught in academia—new institutions can help conceptualize a post-capitalist world. Writers and artists, taking their cues from creative writing programs themselves, can build institutions. After all, institutions have created the stranglehold of liberal capitalism on the arts. Perhaps institutions, built and sustained by the left, have the chance to break that stranglehold. ♣



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THE PLANET EARTH,
CAPITAL OF THE PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC OF EARTH (PRE), IS BESET BY
CRIME AS IT RECOVERS FROM A RECENT ORBITAL
BOMBARDMENT FROM THE MURDEROUS MECHANICAL HIVE-
MIND KNOWN AS THE MECHAZUR NEXUS. ALMOST A THIRD OF
THE PLANET'S SURFACE IS RUBBLE AND FUSED GLASS. THE SLIDOR
SYNDICATE—A RUTHLESS CRIMINAL CORPORATION—HAS EXPANDED,
SMUGGLING ILLICIT GOODS AND USING EARTH'S POPULATION FOR DANGEROUS
SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENTS (RUMOR HAS IT THAT HUMANS ARE WELL SUITED
FOR TESTING ALL SORTS OF COSMETIC AND MEDICAL PRODUCTS). A MYSTERI-
OUS ALIEN-BIRD EMPIRE HAS JUST INVADDED THE PLANET AS WELL. THE PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC OF EARTH IS NOW AT WAR ON THREE
FRONTS IN AN UNFORGIVING GALAXY...

WE ON THE LEFT PRIDE OURSELVES ON OUR political imagination. As a leftist, I'm in the business of imagining a different, better world, and I often use games to explore these ideas. In two decades of gaming, I've noticed that the creators of games—who tend to be overwhelmingly white and male—often have limited political imaginations when compared to their inventiveness in other realms. Game developers, like all artists, are deeply influenced by the norms of the society they grew up in. Virtual worlds (don't make me say *metaverse*) often share features of our own world, whether those features are intended as satirical commentary or are simply unconscious reflections of the particular perspectives of their creators. Modern games often feature explorations of imperialism, militaristic aggression, "law and order," and racism. At best, these depictions can help us better understand our own social context in a new way. At worst, these games promote the many injustices that exist in society (even if their creators didn't consciously intend to make political statements through their games).

Stellaris is a grand strategy space exploration game in which you start on a home planet (Earth in this case) in the year 2200. At the start of the game, humanity has already made two major advances. First, the many nations of Earth have come together to form one world government, the characteristics of which are up to the player. Second, humanity has developed faster-than-light travel, enabling us to travel outside our solar system, visit neighboring systems like Alpha Centauri, and spread our species (and our way of life) across the galaxy as we interact with various other inhabitants of the Milky Way. You play as an ageless central planner guiding your home civilization through the future centuries in times of peace, war, economic development, and diplomacy. You must avoid total annihilation at the hands of empires led by war-prone aliens, artificial intelligence gone rogue, creatures called "assimilator species" that can absorb and incorporate the DNA of their victims, massive swarms of microscopic space robots, and even space whales—mostly placid interstellar life-forms that have evolved to thrive in the vacuum of space. You choose your nation's policies and starting government structure, deal with internal factions and elections, then select how your people will interact with space and its inhabitants.

Stellaris stands out from its peers in the genre, as it allows a communist or social democratic form of government—a rare thing in modern science fiction or gaming, in which it's much more common to find hyper capitalist hellscape like *Blade Runner*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, or *The Expanse* than any kind of true social democracy. Even *Star Trek*, the original space uto-

I TRIED TO LEAD AN ETHICAL STAR NATION

by MICHAEL THOMAS CARTER

pia, has been partially transformed into gritty dystopia in its recent incarnations as *Discovery* and *Picard*. Such stories would seem consistent with reality, with billionaire oligarchs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos hungrily eying our solar system and our government practically begging them to start the process of capitalist exploitation of space. Even now, Bezos hopes to eventually outsource heavy industry to the moon and Musk has his heart set on a Mars colony (I wonder what labor standards would be like with kilometers of vacuum between these operations and any Earth government).

It's very tempting (and easy) to play *Stellaris* with an expansionist and militarist mindset—this also happens to be the default mode for most grand strategy games, from the board game *Risk* on down to its many imitators. But when I set out to play *Stellaris*, I decided to see what would happen if I cre-

ated a socialist society based on internationalist principles. If the humans of Earth could transcend our differences and unite together in a socialist society, how would our principles be challenged as we attempted to explore space? Could space communism persist—even thrive—under pressure? I created a custom civilization called “The People’s Republic of Earth,” an egalitarian society in which all people’s needs were met and the focus was on peace and justice, not war and aggression. From the beginning, I decided I would compromise as little as possible. For the first few decades of the game, I built nothing but Science Ships, which are strictly for exploration and research, outfitted to boldly go where no person had gone before. Even after meeting my interstellar neighbors, I was able to focus almost exclusively on building research facilities to uncover the secrets of the universe, and sending envoys to make new friends with various alien civilizations. As other interstellar governments waged war on each other, PRE territory was a safe haven for refugees of all species, including androids (synthetic life-forms like Data from *Star Trek*). I made sure that all my people had access to housing, food, and the most technologically advanced healthcare available.

The honeymoon ended when the Mechazur Nexus entered the scene. The Nexus was intent on eliminating all organic life and populating the galaxy with drones—in a manner similar to but legally distinct from the Star Trek Borg®. Their war fleets vastly outnumbered those of the PRE. While teaming up with a network of alliances was enough to prevent immediate destruction at the hands of the Mechazur, a century-long Cold War ensued. PRE’s economy was forced to reorient to a permanent war footing, which entailed building massive star fortresses and retooling space stations to produce warships quickly and continuously. PRE workers built alloy foundries and scaled up planetside mining to fuel the forges. They built housing for the constant stream of survivors who sought asylum from the Mechazur advance. Next came the sales agents of the Slidor Corporation, sleazy flimflammers who used bribery, extortion, and theft to expand their massive crime syndicate into PRE space. The corruption they caused led to massive production delays as the people of our many worlds and space stations were seduced by promises of quick profits and the personal accumulation of wealth over the collective collaboration at the heart of the People’s Republic of Earth.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE GAME’S BUILT-IN trade-offs model the political choices inherent in creating any kind of polity. My decision to avoid offensive wars and prioritize economic development and diplomacy (the ultimate fantasy for a 21st century American) benefited the well-being of the planet’s people, but I had no power to prevent the rest of the galaxy from falling into superstition and authoritarianism. I often found myself grappling with the unspoken goal of the strategy genre: to build an empire. While I felt justified in conquering systems held by rogue AI or aggressive criminal syndicates like the Slidor, I still found myself tempted to wage the kind of misguided ideological wars characteristic of U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century (couldn’t I *do* something about that superstition and authoritarianism and perhaps get some valuable natural resources in the process?) Moreover, the game falls short in accurately modeling the kind of long-running insurgencies such invasions usually provoke. My star society managed to stay true to anti-imperialist values (prioritizing diplomacy, valuing self-determination, and attempting to spread democracy through setting a good example, not at the point of a spear). However, I still felt that the game was not designed to model the staggering (and tragic) costs of endless wars of conquest.

In fact, *Stellaris* (and gaming in general) was not designed to simulate other societal complexities such as popular uprisings or the diversity of society as a whole. While the internal dynamics of societies include factions which have certain policy preferences (a xenophobic faction will prefer that you don’t welcome any refugees, for instance), these factions are undifferentiated in terms of class composition or racial composition; nor are there factions that are made up of social groups like the military, clergy, or other professionals which occupy strategic sites of power. One of the important insights of the socialist tradition is our understanding that social and economic classes (and the conflict between them) are major drivers of historical change.

This concept of class conflict is usually not represented in mainstream modern American conceptions of politics. Instead, Americans of all classes are encouraged to identify with one of our two major political parties based upon social and cultural values, with class conflict largely taking place outside the official spaces of electoral politics (Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are rare examples of national politicians who speak in terms of class conflict: the exceptions prove the rule). The game’s designers buy into the classic American concept that politics are practiced within a “marketplace of ideas” on a level playing field, instead of my own more depressing contention that politics can be better modeled as an “arena



of constituencies,” complete with blood, gore, and corporate sponsorships. The recent bitter conflict over the Build Back Better Act in Washington showcases this reality, as a multimillionaire coal baron (Joe Manchin) obstructed legislation that would make life a little easier for millions of middle-income and poor Americans and would also start making bare-minimum investments in fighting climate change. Both Manchin’s general interest as a card-carrying member of the 1% and his particular interest as someone with investments in the coal industry are directly opposed to his political party’s signature domestic policy agenda. High-minded discussion of the issues on the merits has little to nothing to do with the ultimate fate of the legislation (not to mention the country).

As of 2400 C.E., halfway through the game, space communism survives (even on the highest difficulty setting) but is far from thriving. The PRE has been forced by necessity to ally itself with a megacorporation run by rock people and a theocratic state of floating brains. The galaxy is divided roughly into thirds, with one third held by a pair of murderous mechanical hive minds, one third held by various kinds of interstellar corporations, and one third held by religious zealots. The star systems of the People’s Republic of Earth stand apart as beacons of liberty and democratic governance, but survival is far from guaranteed.

The inherently liberal capitalist frame that undergirds the game’s systems can be seen in all sorts of small and large ways, some of which have implications that are truly heartbreaking. One inherent assumption baked into the game is that more police leads to a reduction in crime, an assumption that is endemic to our society but increasingly challenged by data as the discourse surrounding policing changes. The very concept of “crime” in the game is curious, as the myriad policy options available to you do not include options related to drug prohibition, sex work prohibition, or gun control. While you can outlaw robot workers, institute slavery, or criminalize political dissent, you cannot legalize or prohibit drugs, sex work, or guns. It isn’t that the developers assume all these things will be legal in the far future, because one of the negative events you can get if your planet has a high crime value is that it becomes a hub of the interstellar drug trade. Perhaps the idea is that the drugs of the 23rd century are so potent and dangerous that no government, no matter how libertarian, permissive, or even sinister, could contemplate allowing them. Regardless, the collapse of sex work, drugs, crime, and guns into game features that have a narrow range of possibilities clearly shows that the baseline American prohibitionist mindset is the only game in town for the developers of *Stellaris*. You can make fungus people who worship space dragons, but they aren’t allowed to get high while doing it. (Perhaps research into the treatment potential of psychedelics was suppressed in the 22nd

century just as in our 20th.) You can build police stations, but abolition is largely off the table. (As in real life, police and military budgets can only go up.)

In another example, the “sprawling slums” that you start with on your founding planet act as a blocker that prevents you from improving them or building on the land they occupy. Regardless of your chosen political outlook, the only interaction available is old-fashioned Robert Moses-style slum clearance. The idea that the residents of these “sprawling slums” might actually make up part of the governing constituency in a socialist or communist society is not considered. Even more grotesque, the reward for clearing these “slums” is the creation of a new citizen for your world, apparently from nothing (the game denotes population by giving planets a number of citizens, with each individual representing a much larger group of people). This new citizen has the ability to occupy jobs and produce goods and services for your space society—creating alloys to build ships and space stations, science points to further research, or harvesting food, minerals, or energy from their planet’s natural resources.

This isn’t just an annoying quirk of the programming: it’s pure unfiltered capitalist ideology. Under this framework, the inhabitants of low-income “slums” are inhuman, savage to the extent that they cannot participate in society except as parasites, and the only way to make them “productive citizens” is to bulldoze their already substandard housing to make way for further development. While I would expect such a choice if I had chosen to play as a fascist dictatorship or a liberal capitalist regime, it seemed deeply unfair that, even when I had opted for space communism, the only way I could interact with this game feature was to enact the racist assumptions of 20th century urban planning and just demolish the homes of large numbers of urban poor people. Another telling detail is that these slums are called “The Delhi Sprawl.” (To their credit, the developers edited out the specific reference to Delhi in their latest patch.) The developers of *Stellaris*, it seems, cannot help but recycle half-remembered capitalist ideas about slum clearance and imperialist condescension toward the nation of India because their assumptions and mindsets, like those of the average person, were formed through the education and socialization of an imperialist and capitalist society. Even when all the world joins together as one nation (already a fairly utopian prospect), the player is still encouraged to think of a major part of the Global South as just one big slum that needs clearing out to be considered productive or even truly human. Personally, I would appreciate the chance to build real, high-quality public housing to house the galaxy’s huddled masses.

I cannot entirely blame the developers for their inability to accurately and sympathetically model space communism. Indeed, the shortcomings of the game’s systems point mostly, for me, toward the limitations of our own society’s political discourse

and culture. While some of us may be encouraged to “make our voices heard” by voting for one of two options every few years, (many, of course, are implicitly and explicitly discouraged or prevented from doing this), in practice this results in, for the most part, continuation of the status quo. In addition to living under a narrow definition of electoral democracy, Americans are often told that it is rude or distasteful to bring our political selves into, for example, our workplaces, our streets, or our schools. When social movements do start to shake our governing institutions, such as the abolitionist unrest of 2020 surrounding the murder of George Floyd or the 2018-19 teacher strike wave that rocked the South in response to education cuts, they are often viciously attacked by the corporate media and by the elite practitioners of politics who insist that the only “legitimate” arena of politics is the one they happen to dominate. These politicians likely struggle to imagine popular social movements playing a role in government because they, like us, have grown up in a world where social movements are often crushed by the forces of reaction and at best palliated and co-opted into the ruling status quo. This, of course, does not mean that we should just give up, but it’s important that we all understand what we are up against.

MY EXPERIENCE LEADING A COMMUNIST Earth into the 23rd century is therefore fairly realistic. The game reminded me of the principles of internationalism. Internationalism refers to the idea that the truly revolutionary positive change in the organization of society, such as the creation of socialism, cannot be accomplished if it is permanently confined to one country (or one part of the galaxy). Capitalism—which is the organization of society around profit at the cost of the well-being of people, nature, and the planet—is a global force. Any attempt to break its stranglehold will face intense opposition, producing a siege mentality that tends to lead to stagnation and intolerance of dissent. Just as nations on Earth that have socialist tendencies, such as Cuba or China, are beset by international sanctions, the primary experience of attempting to live one’s values on a large scale is an experience of constant, unceasing struggle. In *Stellaris*, while I managed to avoid emulating the authoritarianism and murderousness of Stalinism, I paid the price in blood and treasure, as the only alternative to repression was full-scale war against my enemies. Perhaps Trotsky’s idea of “permanent revolution” had something to it after all (please don’t cancel me for revisionism). “Socialism in one country,” like most of Stalin’s ideas and initiatives, seems self-defeating and strangely naïve in a world where capital freely moves across borders and the few extant socialist states and local formations are forced into a permanent defensive posture against the international capitalist world order. It seems self-evident to me that the various cells of

the growing international socialist movement should attempt to coordinate and collaborate as we build the future together across borders. My strategy to stave off conquerors with a network of alliances in *Stellaris* had interesting results. Through prolonged contact with the culture of the People's Republic of Earth, my allies began to converge and change to be more like their idealistic ally on Earth. The theocratic societies became more secular, the authoritarian societies became more open to immigration, and even some of the less hostile megacorporations became (a little) more egalitarian.

In these times, pessimism is unhelpful. What we need is imagination. Instead of seeing only the current impediments in the struggle for justice worldwide, why not practice a radical optimism and imagine the future we want for ourselves? The People's Republic of Earth faced challenges but made a positive impact on the in-game galaxy, welcoming refugees, defending organic life from annihilation, and spreading democracy through peaceful coexistence. If *homo sapiens* ever does reach other star systems, how will we appear to the inhabitants? It seems to me that it's up to us to make sure we make a good first impression. As leftists, we need to be both able to capitalize (wink) on the existing meager power we command and also expand that power to other places and other sites of struggle. We need to contest every area of society, fighting to win elections from the school board to the presidency. We need to be present everywhere, from large cities to rural communities. We need to represent our values wherever we can, in our workplaces, our schools, our unions, and our families. This struggle is difficult, but nobody ever said it would be easy.

The year is 2443. Our border with the Mechazur Nexus has stabilized and we are at peace with them, as well as most of the galaxy (our star fortresses have proved the adage that high fences make good neighbors). The Slidor Syndicate has been dismantled and absorbed by the People's Republic of Earth, with the corrupt gang bosses disempowered and ordinary Slidor given a voice in interplanetary democratic government. Most of our past adversaries have moderated, becoming less aggressive and engaging in peaceful interstellar trade. Many states that were once theocracies have become more open to other belief systems or instituted limited democratic systems. A transmission comes in from a spider-like species with psychic abilities and an ancient history, but who mostly stay within their heavily fortified system. Emperor Grodsuun of the Vat'na Kaa Zealots has a message for the galaxy. He has watched from his stronghold as the galaxy has fallen from purity and faith into blasphemy, heresy, and sin. His war fleets and forges are active once again, and they will

carve a swathe of fire through the decadent unbelievers of this galaxy. He will start, of course, with the most decadent, the so-called People's Republic of Earth, whose insistence on rationality and questioning everything personally offends him. However, this time, the PRE is ready. People of every species spring into action, ready to defend their way of life once again against an existential threat. This time, they do not fight alone.

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A Brief History of the Bourgeois SAFARI

BY LILY SÁNCHEZ

IN APRIL 1991, A FEW YEARS BEFORE HE WOULD BE elected President of South Africa in the country's first election based on universal suffrage, Nelson Mandela appeared on the cover of the newspaper *Weekly Mail*, kneeling in grass at the Mthethomusha Game Reserve. In one hand, he held a hunting rifle; in the other, the horn of a blesbok, a species of antelope that he had killed moments before while on safari. The headline declared, "Mandela goes Green. A hunting trip converts ANC [African National Congress] leader to conservation." Mandela had gone on a two-week safari to hunt and learn about ecology—"at a time when most blacks could still not hunt legally, let alone own guns" and when "conservation [had been] long identified with the marginalization of blacks in South Africa," writes Jacob S.T. Dlamini, author of *Safari Nation: A Social History of the Kruger National Park*. Mandela also went to visit Kruger National Park, one of the most popular national parks in the world. His trip would mark the beginning of the ANC's commitment to conservation in postapartheid South Africa, as well as to reforming the national parks system into one accessible for all people and one which considered the needs of locals. Kruger in particular had represented, from colonial times, the government's efforts to "promote a 'national feeling' among whites" and to "promote a sense of nationhood built on the exclusion of indigenous peoples," writes Dlamini.

In fact, modern conservation (often seen as commonsense in the West), when applied to African wildlife and landscape, has been rooted in colonial attitudes and practices, including hunting. Big game hunting in Africa was a favorite sport of gentlemanly European elites. In British East Africa (which approximates modern-day Kenya), the practice peaked in the early 20th century prior to the outbreak of World War I. The Europeans were so fond of hunt-

ing that they "shot out" the big game and had to impose regulations. The Germans gained control of Tanganyika (which, along with Zanzibar, became modern-day Tanzania) in 1885, and they had a preference for ivory. In *Selling the Serengeti: The Cultural Politics of Safari Tourism*, Benjamin Gardner writes, "Soon after colonizing the country the Germans created regulations to protect the remaining wildlife and regulate its use for hunting. Colonial laws effectively banned customary hunting," although locals could "apply for a license to hunt" or else had "severely limited" access to what eventually became formal game reserves. Thus, wildlife went from being a communal natural resource (on the eve of colonialism, land was held communally, under customary land rights) to being mostly for European use and profit. The British would gain control of Tanganyika after World War I, at which point they enacted game ordinances which kept locals out. Gardner writes that in Tanzania, whether under colonial or postcolonial governments, "controlling wildlife" would remain "central to accumulating state wealth and maintaining authority." In neighboring East Africa (Kenya), by the 1930s, the British realized they would need to conserve wildlife if hunting were to remain a viable industry; hence one impetus for the creation of national parks around that time.

In *Selling the Serengeti*, Gardner gets to know Maasai activist and former Tanzanian MP (member of parliament) Lazaro Parkipuny, who had this to say about the settlers' appetite for the hunt:

Indeed the excitement of the whites, colonial civil servants, missionaries and settlers alike was not climaxed in watching, photographing and describing the scenery and wealth of wildlife they found here. Their pleasure was only recorded and hearts fulfilled at sights such as the heaviest ivory from the biggest horn of a ferocious rhino that took a bullet in his brain, the display of the biggest horns of a sable antelope shot, the distance at which an eland was killed with a small caliber rifle, etc. ... The



main attraction of the Serengeti to Europeans at the time, up until the 1930s, was shooting lions [that were] helpless in the extended [plains].

Safaris purchased today—whether for trophy hunting or sight-seeing—descend from safaris that originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as European powers were “carving up” Africa into various regions under their rule and bringing in white settlers. “Safari emerged as a form of tourism at the precise moment that imperial expansion in Africa was reaching its peak,” writes Trevor Mark Simmons in *Selling the African Wilds: A History of the Safari Tourism Industry in East Africa, 1900-1939* (from which most of the details in this sketch of the colonial origins of safari have been drawn). Simmons notes that Sir Charles Eliot, the Governor of the British East Africa Protectorate, said in 1903 that “the main object of our policy and legislation must be to found a white colony.” Indeed, these former “white colonies” are now some of the top tourist destinations for safari: Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa.

Simmons explains that the safari is a “transcultural innovation that combined African and Arab travel methods with European notions of the hunt.” The word “safari” originated from Swahili and Arabic; both languages had words connoting voyage or discovery. Technological advances in transportation, including steamships and the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, enabled Europeans to travel from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, ending up in Mombasa, Kenya, where “clubs, a gymkhana (sports club), a well-appointed race course, luxury hotels, cricket and polo fields, and golf courses, all beautifully kept and frequented by white settlers” awaited them. From there they would embark on the next

phase of their journey into the interior of the continent via the Uganda Railway, a controversial and expensive project that one critic called the “lunatic line.” From the train cars travelers saw a landscape “teeming” with wildlife. Simmons quotes Winston Churchill as having described the railway as “a slender thread of scientific civilization, of order, authority, and arrangement, drawn from across the primeval chaos of the world.” The whole affair appealed to those who “were attracted by colonial fantasies, ideas about exotic Africa, nostalgia for the great past age of exploration and adventure, and admiration for what they regarded as the beneficent effects of the British colonial project in Africa.” Safari satisfied their desire for a “natural environment increasingly ... seen as healthful, beautiful, and reinvigorating, a reprieve from the trauma of rapid industrialization and urbanization in the West.”

SAFARI TOURISM CREATED AN ENTIRE INDUSTRY in service of Europeans, including stores for supplies and clothing, taxidermists to stuff their game, travel agencies, and so forth. The foundation of the industry was the labor of Africans and Asians. Laborers from India were brought in to build the Uganda Railway. Africans were “guides, trackers, skimmers, porters, cooks, guards, drivers, servants, camp attendants, and general assistants” and “professionals in the full sense of the word, working in the industry their entire lives” even as their people were “forcibly relocated” to create tourist areas. Their labor produced wealth that allowed the industry to become

“a leading sector of the East African colonial economy.”

In the 1920s and '30s, the years corresponding to the Great Depression and the time between the two World Wars, technological developments helped the safari industry stay afloat: advances in optics (cameras and binoculars) and improvements in wildlife photography; filmmaking, which saw the rise of wildlife documentaries; and air travel. During this time, “royalty, celebrities, plutocrats, and big-spending filmmaking productions ... provided invaluable publicity and shored up the profits of the safari industry.” American filmmakers Martin and Osa Johnson, whose films achieved critical success, embarked on an “immense” undertaking in 1924, utilizing “six Willys-Knight cars with customized safari bodies, four lorries, five muledrawn wagons, four ox-carts, and some 230 porters” to transport, over 500 miles, “255 crates of supplies, including eighteen guns, twenty-one cameras, and large quantities of supplies, photographic equipment, camp furniture, tents, and food.” Just a decade prior, in 1909-10, Theodore Roosevelt had made his famed Smithsonian-Roosevelt African expedition, during which he and his son killed 512 animals (some brought back to American museums) at an estimated cost of the equivalent of \$1.5-2 million in today’s dollars. Roosevelt’s crew also included professional photographers eager to demonstrate the advances of wildlife photography and filming. In 1926, George Eastman, of Eastman-Kodak, went on a four-month safari. Ernest Hemingway wrote *Green Hills of Africa* based on his safari in 1933-4 in Tanganyika. “Hemingway relished the hunt. He killed three lions, a buffalo, a rhino, a kudu, and twenty-five other animals during seventy two days in Africa,” Simmons writes.

In *Green Hills*, Hemingway portrays himself in ways reminiscent of the “gentleman hunter” of the “leisure class.” On the noble ethics of the kill, he notes: there was to be “no killing on the side, no ornamental killing, no killing to kill, only when you wanted it more than you wanted not to kill it.” He seems to have a romantic idea about hunting, observing that it was like writing or painting, an essential thing you had to do as long as there was available game, the way one wrote or painted as long as one had pencil and paper or paint and canvas. He characterizes the African landscape as “like an abandoned New England orchard to walk through.” Of course, the area was probably not “abandoned” as he imagines, and he notes seeing natives walking away from famined areas (famines happened regularly under colonialism). Hemingway clearly got enjoyment out of the horns of animals he’d killed, even though his jealousy comes through when describing the horns on a fellow hunter’s kill. The horns were “the biggest, widest, darkest, longest-curling, heaviest, most unbelievable pair of kudu horns in the world. Suddenly, poisoned with envy, I did not want to see mine again; never, never.” He also describes killing the creatures: “This new country was a gift. Kudu came out into the open and you sat and waited for the more enormous ones and selecting a suitable head, blasted him over.” He describes the dead kudu bull: “He smelled sweet and lovely like the breath of cattle and the odor of thyme after rain.” Hemingway wrote that he was taking back horns for his “wealthiest friends.”

From Hemingway’s account, one understands that this kind of hunting was dangerous (an animal could charge the hunting party) and time consuming. Hemingway and his native guides

needed tips and information from other native people in the area to know where to pursue the game. The party had to note which direction the wind was blowing to avoid being smelled by the animals. They used a “blood spoor,” or bloodstain, to determine the animal’s whereabouts. The color, the wetness, and the quantity of blood all gave clues as to how briskly the animal was losing blood and in which direction it might have headed, and after how much time. After the hunt, which often left the party dehydrated and exhausted, the whites would sit around with food (canned fruits, meat from their kills), beer, and books—all transported by human porters—and eventually doze off under the shade of a tree.¹

THE 1920S AND '30S SAW THE RISE OF national park formation on the continent. The oldest colonial national park in Africa, Virunga National Park, in present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, was created by the Belgians in 1925. Kruger National Park was formed at the turn of the century as the Sabi Game reserve and formally named Kruger in 1926, and is one of the continent’s largest national parks. Dlamini notes that in 2009, half of Kruger National Park was under a “land claim,” which means a dispute over the land by locals which has been verified by the government, a process legally created in 1994 at the end of apartheid (the Restitution of Land Rights Act 22). Then South African President Jacob Zuma issued in 2009 an injunction that all land claims were to be compensated financially, since Kruger was considered a “national icon” that had to be preserved. There are still Kruger land claims under review, although a number of them were settled financially in 2016. It turns out that Manyeleti, the game reserve that my partner and I visited while on safari in 2019 and which is just outside Kruger National Park, is claimed by the Mnisi community, which settled there in 1922 for “grazing and subsistence farming” but were removed in 1964 “without their consent or compensation.” One academic report from the Netherlands notes the complexity of the claim on Manyeleti, specifically around who gets to be a claimant. It appears the claim is not fully resolved, at least as of 2019, although the reserve’s web site notes that it is “owned and managed by the local Mnisi tribe. They successfully claimed the land as they have been living in the area for many generations.”

In 1933, the British passed the “Convention for the Protection of the Flora and Fauna of Africa, which called for the creation of national parks in Africa,” writes Gardner. A string of national parks followed in Kenya in the 1940s. In Tanganyika (Tanzania), Serengeti National Park and the nearby Ngorongoro Conservation Area were created in 1959. Gardner’s *Selling the Serengeti* tells the story of Tanzania’s Maasai people, who are semi-nomadic pastoralists (a way of life that relies on livestock that must be moved around periodically to

1. Hemingway’s treatment of Africans swung wildly from friendly to mocking to homicidal. One “savage” he made fun of by calling the man “Garrick,” alluding to British actor and playwright David Garrick because the man pantomimed to communicate. Frustrated during a difficult hunt, Hemingway writes, “If there had been no law I would have shot Garrick.” This is not even getting into the soft sexism toward his wife, or his offhand remarks about Muslim people.

graze). The Maasai have essentially faced the threat of a “global land grab” from colonial times onward. Over the years, the government has enclosed their land and even evicted them, tried multiple times to convert their land to other uses in a series of failed agricultural projects (sometimes aided by the U.S.), and allowed neoliberal notions of private property and market value to be placed onto traditionally communally held land. The rise of modern conservation and neoliberal market policies and structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the ‘80s led to increased foreign investment in the region, ultimately commodifying the wildlife and landscape. Throughout this time, the Maasai have organized and demonstrated against initiatives that would hurt their access to land.

Researchers from the Oakland Institute, a think tank that published a report about the Maasai’s plight in the region in 2018, interviewed villagers in the Ngorongoro district. One anonymous villager had this to say:

“We are Tanzanians but the laws that govern the others do not apply to us. Instead, we are still governed by the colonial laws of the past. The Maasai, chased from the Serengeti, were tricked into believing that we will have Ngorongoro as compensation and that we will never be evacuated from here. We were even promised priority in a case of conflict. But today we cannot use the land for grazing or for cultivation—the end result is starvation of our families. The only use left for this land is to be our burial ground. ... We were then promised food aid. But little assistance came and when it did, leaders sold it at exorbitant prices. So we live in dire poverty and face malnutrition. Families have sold cows to buy food. With cattle gone, nothing more is left. Men have been forced to look for jobs in urban areas. They work as night guards in South Sudan where several have been killed. Poverty, hunger, and illiteracy have increased. There is no money for education and those who go to school are still starving. In 2012-2013, close to 500 children from 30 villages, faced with malnutrition, were taken to the hospitals. ... Hunger is a sensitive political matter in the village and we are not allowed to speak of it.”

Gardner concludes that SAPs and the ecotourism policies they put into place have failed to raise most people’s material conditions in Tanzania. Tanzania’s Maasai are in the news again as of February 2022, as thousands are said to be protesting “renewed” government efforts to expand conservation areas.

SAFARIS THAT DON’T INVOLVE KILLING THINGS

Safaris for non-hunter tourists often appear on travel bucket lists and are expensive. One tour operator lists price ranges for the safari itself and they start at around \$400 per person per night. A look at one award-winning “super-high-end tour operator” (price listed as “from \$7,500 per person for a ten-day trip”) is instructive. They show you how you can follow in the footsteps of safari-going former presidents and Hollywood celebrities. What’s more, “your safari will change a life” via the company’s nonprofit that helps African school children’s education. This messaging sounds fairly standard for modern times, when, increasingly, consumption of products and

experiences is transformed into social uplift or social justice. (For example, RED, which was co-founded by Bono in 2006, boasts a collection of products and experiences the proceeds from which go toward The Global Fund, a private financing group founded by Bill Gates and others that aims to “defeat” HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria. You can purchase products like “earth rated” bags for doggie poop or a \$3,250 gita robot that doubles as a walking buddy and a cargo carrier.) What Gardner writes to describe tourism in the Serengeti, we could apply to African safari generally: “It is a particular form of consumption in which the landscape is the commodity itself.”

From the iconic Hemingway-style tents to the practice of having “sundowners,” also referred to as “happy hour in the bush,” to the focus on the “Big 5” animals (a term referring to big game species that were considered the most difficult to hunt by foot: the African buffalo, African bush elephant, leopard, black rhinoceros, and lion) to, in the case of trophy hunting, posing with one’s kill—modern safaris glorify the European colonialism from which they originated.

Safaris are a form of ecotourism, which includes activities like visiting national parks, cultural heritage sites or monuments, or other natural areas of interest. One 1991 *New York Times* article noted that ecotourism was “born out of the environmental movement.” According to the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.” Gardner writes that “high-end safari companies attract tourists who are willing to pay extra for an exclusive experience that they believe has a positive impact on the environment and the local communities.”

Generally speaking, a safari’s main feature is the game drive. Two guides—a driver and an animal tracker—take a group of tourists out in a 4x4 for a few hours to see large game. The vehicles can get fairly close to the animals—within a few feet—which the guides say is safe because the animals have been desensitized to people (we got close to lions more than once, which becomes unnerving when you stop photographing the animal and actually think about the situation you’re in). The drivers are in communication by walkie-talkie, so they can alert each other to salient findings in the bush. In my personal experience, the safari focused on Big 5 and other big game to the exclusion of much other wildlife. To say this is not a slight on safari tour guides, who are certainly catering to tourist demand as defined by private tour operators. But the experience does limit a tourist’s experience to a narrow set of observations that obscures the underlying biodiversity of the country. One checklist from the South African parks department, for example, lists 296 species, a fascinating list that includes bats, mice, shrews, and bush babies; a list of several notable tree species, and over 500 species of birds. To focus mostly on large game, for which popularity grew under colonialism, is to get a stunted view of African wildlife and landscape.

If safari ecotourism—and, by extension, the conservation it claims to promote—focuses on a few species of African wildlife, the focus is even less on individual animals. As Abraham Rowe wrote for this publication last year, “Conservation as it exists today pays little attention to the actual interests or wellbeing of wild animals, like an individual

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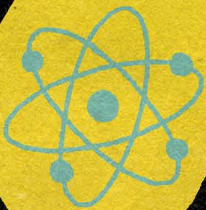
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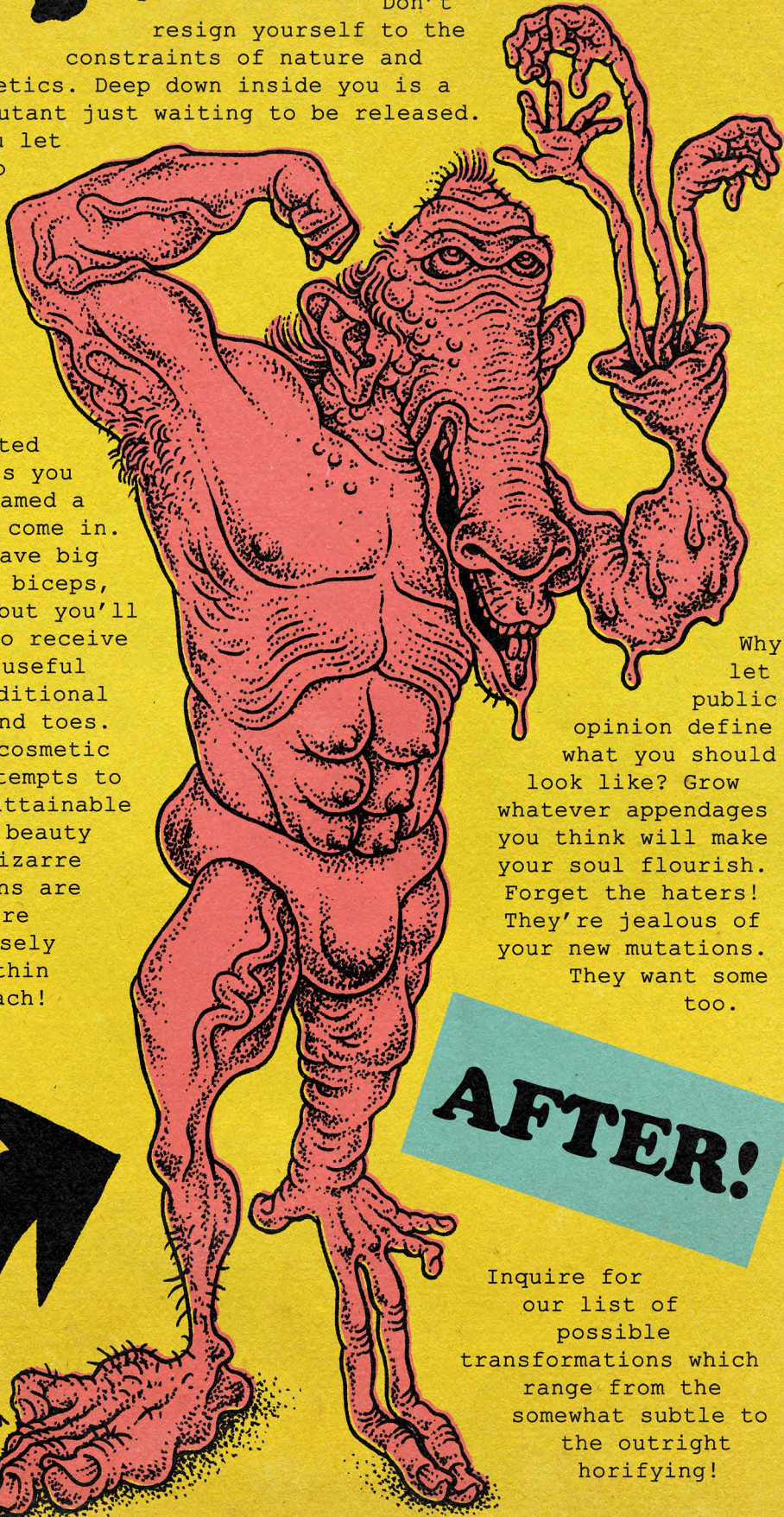
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toad, cricket, or giraffe, and instead places value in species. But species do not experience harms—individuals do.” Perhaps there is no better way to think about the lived experience—and suffering—of animals, as caused by humans, than by taking a look at trophy hunting.

TROPHY HUNTING SAFARIS

Just as the colonialists “shot out” their game, so do modern safari operators who cater to Big 5 hunters. You need to buy “new blood,” as one operator explains in the 2017 documentary *Trophy*. Replenishing the stock, especially for “canned” hunting—the practice of raising animals in captivity for the purpose of hunting in a controlled environment—is key, because eager trophy hunters await the opportunity for another kill. The film gives a glimpse into the trophy hunting industry, showing the Safari Club International (headquartered in the U.S.) hunting convention, “the largest hunting convention on the planet.” According to the SCI web site, their mission is to “protect the freedom to hunt and to promote wildlife conservation worldwide.” In the film, an SCI leader explains that auctioned hunts raise funds that “go back into conservation.” The film then cuts to a woman at the convention. “Crocodiles are really mean. So I don’t feel bad about killing one of those,” she says. Besides, she confesses, she wants a purse, boots, wallet, and belt made out of crocodile skins.

The prized goal for some hunters is the Big 5 Grand Slam. The film shows hunt prices ranging from \$50,000 (lion) to \$350,000 (rhino). As one *Times* writer put it: “Big-game hunters operate in a separate world from weekend deer hunters in the United States.” It’s an “elite person” who can afford to purchase “plane tickets, specialized gear and weapons, safari guides and astronomical hunting fees determined by what kind of animal you want to kill.” “These are salt-of-the-earth people,” one tour operator says in the article. “They may be wealthy, but people who hunt consider themselves conservationists.” As the saying goes, “If it pays it stays.”

Trophy hunting is legal in over a dozen African countries, with the most popular destinations being South Africa, Tanzania, Botswana and Zimbabwe. (Trophy hunting was banned in Kenya in 1977.) According to Gardner, a typical 21-day hunting safari in Tanzania, which offers seventy species to hunt, cost \$50-150,000 in 2010. Once you take into account the various fees, “estimates suggest that a single visiting hunter brings in anywhere from fifty to one hundred times more revenue than a non hunting tourist.”

Notorious American Big 5 hunters include the Trump sons Don Jr. and Eric as well as Walter Palmer, a Minnesota dentist who paid around \$50,000 to kill a “celebrity lion” named Cecil in 2015 in Zimbabwe. The U.S. plays an outsized role in trophy hunting, as we “import more animal trophies than any other country in the world,” estimated at “over 650,000 trophies in 2017 alone.” Furthermore, according to *Trophy*, 70% of hunters in the South African market, one of the largest, come from the U.S. and Canada. These statistics belie another reality: that fewer than a third of Americans surveyed in 2019 said they approved of trophy hunting (a much lower number than the approval ratings for hunting for other reasons).

One idea explored in *Trophy* is that what used to be a “sport” is now “just killing,” as pointed out by ecologist Craig Packer, who has studied lions in the Serengeti. The idea is that if the hunt is too easy—there’s no “fair chase”—then it could be objectionable. But the distinction between sport and just killing is meaningful only for the human involved. Ultimately, doesn’t the creature suffer whether it’s killed for sport or just killing? In another scene in the film, a hunter from Texas has made his way to a reserve to hunt. He and the guide have identified an elephant that is too small to be a trophy. It will be killed and given to the local community as part of a “quota” arrangement with the safari company. After the initial shot, the elephant falls onto its side. The poor creature lies groaning, breathing heavily, eyes blinking. The men hover around it. The guide tells the hunter where to shoot. He shoots. Another groan, along with deep breaths, and then eventually the elephant goes still.

Hunting enthusiasts argue that hunting is critical for conservation. “Hunting is the most successful tool for maintaining incentives to conserve lions,” wrote two SCI leaders in a 2011 op-ed. They argue that hunting in Africa brings in \$200 million annually and that this “gives wildlife value,” as if wildlife have no intrinsic value or other right to exist. If lions cannot be hunted, they argue, lions will not have value, and then people cannot pay to protect them, and so inevitable human-wildlife conflict will cause people to kill all the lions. Thus, hunters are “truly the greatest stewards of our wildlife.”

Packer counters this assertion in *Trophy*. About hunting in Africa, he says, “in many places, the economics don’t add up.” He also authored a 2011 paper which found that trophy hunting led to declines in lion populations in Tanzania due to “poor” management. The paper recommended a numerical limit on lions hunted. Even this kind of argument, though, reduces the issue to a calculation, similar to the SCI authors’ assumption that only a market price can impart value onto something or ought to guide our actions. This resembles “economistic logic,” which, as Nathan J. Robinson has written, “in the absence of a clear moral understanding of what creatures deserve, can lead you to justify the most horrifying things imaginable.” (For the creatures being hunted, such experience could very well be the animal equivalent of horrifying.)

To return to Rowe:

“It is a spectacular moral failure that we do not act to address the vast animal suffering occurring in the natural world, human-caused and otherwise, and instead focus only on increasing biodiversity and protecting wild spaces. While the current goals of conservation are important, they miss something fundamental: that wild animals are individuals with their own needs and concerns.”

Where proponents would consider the harm to the animals, it’s in comparison to poaching. *Trophy* observes that the yearly animal deaths by trophy hunters (1,100) constitute but a tiny fraction of the animal deaths caused by poachers (30,000). This is a form of lesser-evilism at work. But whenever we’re dealing with harmful behavior like poaching, which is presented as criminal, we need to ask: whose harmful behaviors are legal and whose are illegal? If killing an animal that we don’t have to kill causes it to suffer, and if suffering that can be avoided is therefore harmful and even undesir-



able, then why is it legal for a wealthy white man to do it on a hunting safari but illegal for, say, an African poacher to do it, whether that person is part of a larger criminal network or just an individual looking for a way to make money? It's hard to see trophy hunting as noble and poaching as depraved.

MOVING PAST BOURGEOIS TOURISM

According to Gardner, in 1970, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, a socialist, convened a student inquiry at the University of Dar es Salaam into “the merits and limits of pursuing tourism as a strategy for socialist economic development.” The students criticized what was seen as an effort “geared towards producing tourist goods” such as “tapestry for the hotel room, a fan, water-heater, or a whisky.” They predicted tourism would “reinforce colonial relationships” and would “mainly benefit the elites or the ‘international bourgeoisie.’”

I have deeply ambivalent feelings about having been on a safari. I'd bought into something that was billed as a bucket experience to help save Africa for humanity but was the West's idea of a commodified Africa. Safari ecotourism and trophy hunting, we're told, will fund conservation for humanity and development for people in Africa in general. Did humanity vote on Western conservation? And what are Africans telling us in the West to conserve for humanity? All we do in the U.S. is develop and destroy.

African nations generally suffer disproportionately from global wealth inequality and tax avoidance. Despite decades of interna-

tional development goals, including the UN Sustainable Development goals, the #1 of which is to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” with a 2030 timeline, poverty remains at persistently high levels, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, and these levels are expected to worsen throughout the course of the pandemic (WHO reports that a mere 9% of all Africans have been fully vaccinated against COVID, in no small part due to wealthy countries hoarding vaccines). There's also the “bottomless bottom-line cruelty” of the IMF and the World Bank, which keeps poor countries poor and in a state of debt servitude. Almost all of the world's poorest countries are African.

Beyond returning stolen art and artifacts to former colonies, the West owes Africa for what it took from the continent and continues to extract today. This cannot be made up by bourgeois tourism. If moving past a colonial and capitalist past and present requires learning different ways of relating to each other and to the natural world, we need to shed old practices, and that includes safari-going. We have to counter the colonial and imperialist tendencies alive in the world with a robust anticapitalist internationalism. We need a different form of conservation. As Rowe wrote: “Conservation could take a more transformative approach, and consider not only human interests, but the lives of all beings impacted by nature.” To do this, we need to go back to Indigenous knowledge and try to figure out a way forward if we want to coexist with megafauna as well as keep our planet habitable.

The problem is not, as the neoliberal enthusiasts tell us, that nature or people have no value other than what the market will assign to us. The problem is the notion that the market should assign value to any critical aspect of our existence or to the natural world—or what remains left of it. ✚

UTOPIA OF THE MONTH

This month: the Handmade Utopia. Everything in the Handmade Utopia has been lovingly crafted through the work of the human hand. In the Handmade Utopia, there is no mass production—every single object is completely unique and bears the imperfections and quirks that distinguish objects made by artisans who care about every detail, every stitch and stroke, of the objects they make. This means that every inch of the Handmade Utopia has been thought about and carefully created.







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MANAGEMENT

WARNING: THIS ESSAY CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF VIOLENCE AND QUOTES RACIAL SLURS.

"For about twenty years after the war, I couldn't look at any film on World War Two. It brought back memories that I didn't want to keep around. I hated to see how they glorified war. In all those films, people get blown up with their clothes and fall gracefully to the ground. You don't see anybody being blown apart. You don't see arms and legs and mutilated bodies. You see only an antiseptic, clean, neat way to die gloriously. I hate it when they say 'He gave his life for his country.' Nobody gives their lives for anything. We steal the lives of these kids. We take it away from them. They don't die for the honor and glory of their country. We kill them."

—Admiral Gene Larocque, U.S. Navy WWII Veteran, in Studs Terkel, *"THE GOOD WAR": AN ORAL HISTORY OF WORLD WAR II*

"Optimistic publicity and euphemism had rendered their experience so falsely that it would never be readily communicable. They knew that in its representation to the laity what was happening to them was systematically sanitized and Norman Rockwellized, not to mention Disneyfied. ... The real war was tragic and ironic. ... America has not yet understood what the Second World War was like and thus has been unable to use such understanding to reinterpret and re-define the national reality and to arrive at something like public maturity."

—*"The Real War Will Never Get In The Books,"* in Paul Fussell, *WARTIME: UNDERSTANDING AND BEHAVIOR IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR*

I was in the wrong gift shop. This one specialized in 1940s-era clothes—dresses, gloves, scarves, fedoras, trench coats, and military surplus bags. The cashier informed me that if I wanted to look at books, I would need the gift shop across the street:

"We have four gift shops now. We're expanding all the time."

Indeed, the National World War II Museum in New Orleans is in the middle of a \$400 million expansion. It has just erected the Canopy of Peace, a 120-foot abstract "architectural piece"

THE GREAT AMERICAN WAR STORY

The disturbing nostalgia for our Good War...

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

that soars over the complex, which the official website says will "establish the Museum as a fixture on the New Orleans skyline." The full museum now occupies a sprawling campus across multiple city blocks. Its irregularly shaped warehouse-like buildings are sheathed in corrugated steel, like a Frank Gehry remix of a wartime munitions factory. Each building is called a "pavilion," with exhibits covering a different facet of the war. The Louisiana Memorial Pavilion contains the museum's flagship D-Day exhibit and "Arsenal of Democracy," a tribute to workers on the home front, from the women who took factory jobs and grew victory gardens to the pioneering scientists of the Manhattan Project, who innovated a historic new method of efficiently incinerating civilians. The "Campaigns of Courage" pavilion takes visitors on tours through the European

Theater and the Pacific Theater in its immersive "Road to Berlin" and "Road to Tokyo" exhibitions, each a "richly layered, multimedia experience that invites exploration and connection." The Freedom Pavilion (sponsored by Boeing, the world's third-largest defense contractor¹) is a spacious hangar displaying U.S.-made WWII aircraft ("warbirds") including the B-25 bomber, the Douglas SBD Dauntless, the P-51 Mustang, and Boeing's own B-17 Flying Fortress. It also features *Final Mission: The USS Tang Submarine Experience*, an interactive experience in which museum visitors board a replica of the control room of a submarine for a simulated battle with the Imperial Japanese Navy.² In the neighboring

1. Other donors to the museum include Walmart, Northrop Grumman, Shell Oil, AT&T, and the Jelly Belly Candy Company. Individual donors include Steven Spielberg, Donald Rumsfeld, Meg Whitman, and Home Depot billionaire—and author of *I Love Capitalism!*—Ken Langone.

pavilion, the museum's Solomon Victory Theater plays a 45-minute "4D cinematic experience" called *Beyond All Boundaries*, narrated by Tom Hanks. It is "4-D" because things pop out at you during the show—like a replica of an Auschwitz guard tower that rises from the floor—and the seats shake and such. (The theater is also available for rental, and "offers a state-of-the-art, digitally enabled, multimedia experience ideal for corporate presentations, award ceremonies, and film premieres.")

Next to the Victory Theater, the Hall of Democracy pavilion is flexible in its function, serving as a space for "new programming, scholarly research, special exhibits, distance learning, digital initiatives, and preservation efforts." The Hall of Democracy also contains the largest of the museum's four gift shops. Across the street, the John E. Kushner Restoration Pavilion houses a "STEM Innovation Gallery," which showcases technological breakthroughs from the war years made possible through American know-how. (Its STEM Innovation Summer Camp for kids lets them "learn about the ingenuity and innovation behind the American victory in World War II."³)

There are two eating establishments, the Soda Shop (a replica of a 1940s-era diner, complete with a jukebox playing "In The Mood," "Chattanooga Choo Choo," "Moonlight Serenade," and other Glenn Miller classics) and the American Sector Bar & Restaurant ("Freedom Tastes Better Here"). There is also an entertainment venue, the Stage Door Canteen, a recreation of a period USO club with performances "showcasing the songs, style, stars, and spirit of this incomparable era" where patrons "enjoy evening and matinee performances by headliner acts, signature musical productions, big bands, dancing, the Victory Belles vocal trio, and more!" (The Victory Belles, an Andrews Sisters tribute group in military garb, do "a musical salute to each branch of the US armed forces.") During my own visit, the Stage Door Canteen's featured act was the "World's Greatest Johnny Cash Experience" starring noted Cash impersonator Terry Lee Goffe.

The museum calendar is packed with events. ("Jan. 27: International Holocaust Remembrance Commemoration Ceremony / Jan. 28: Wartime Piano Happy Hour") A "Family Block Party" promises "An unforgettable evening of family fun at The National WWII Museum!" There are lectures by historians and special conferences, such as the upcoming symposium to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. When I visited, it was Scout Week, and the whole place was teeming with Scouts and Troop Leaders, who would be participating in special workshops (e.g., Cooking on Rations) to earn new badges.

The four gift shops offer a simply astonishing range of WWII-themed consumer goods: notepads, lapel pins, patches, aprons, jewelry, tote bags, desk toys, tea cozies, shot glasses, stationery sets, plus the obligatory selection of pens, mugs, sweatshirts, etc., albeit in unexpectedly numerous permutations. (I counted at least 50 dif-

ferent kinds of baseball cap.) They've got you covered if you have ever wanted any of the following: an Eleanor Roosevelt devotional candle, a notepad that says "To Hell With Hitler!" on it, a set of four gold drink stirrers shaped like shotguns, a thermos shaped like a shell casing, a T-shirt that just says "PEARL HARBOR" on it, a bottle opener shaped like a soldier crawling on his belly, a pair of whiskey glasses with grenades on them, a chess set in which the two kings are FDR and Hitler, a Christmas ornament depicting the famous image of a sailor sexually assaulting a dental assistant to celebrate the conquest of Japan, or a rubber duck stylized to look like Winston Churchill, a Tuskegee airman, or Rosie the Riveter. Rosie merchandise is ubiquitous; she is on everything from socks to mousepads to bibs.

For those seeking something somber, a set of Holocaust Memorial Cufflinks informs purchasers that:

"Wearing the Holocaust Remembrance Cufflinks shows a commitment to remember the innocent victims of the persecution and the horrors of the Nazi extermination camps. By relaying the survivors' message you will help prevent such a tragedy from happening again."

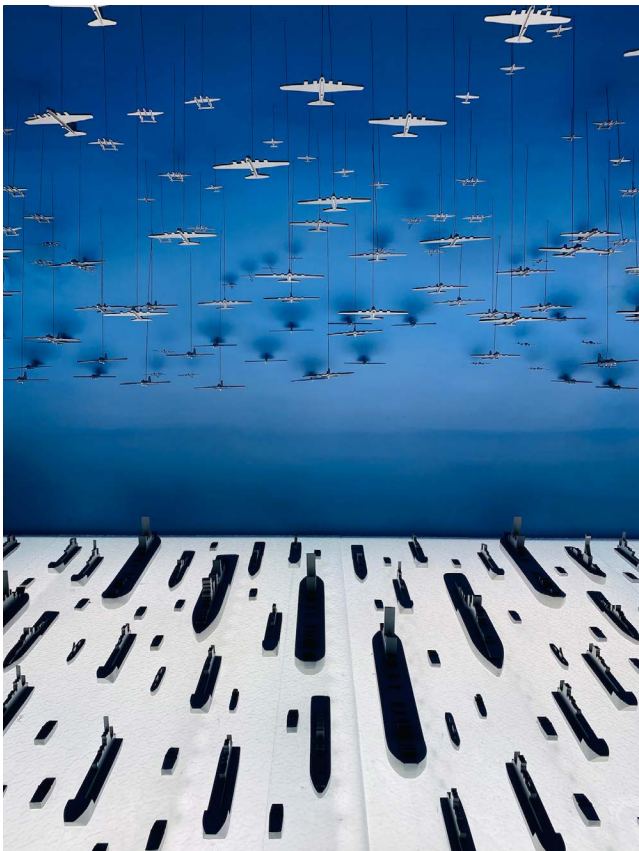
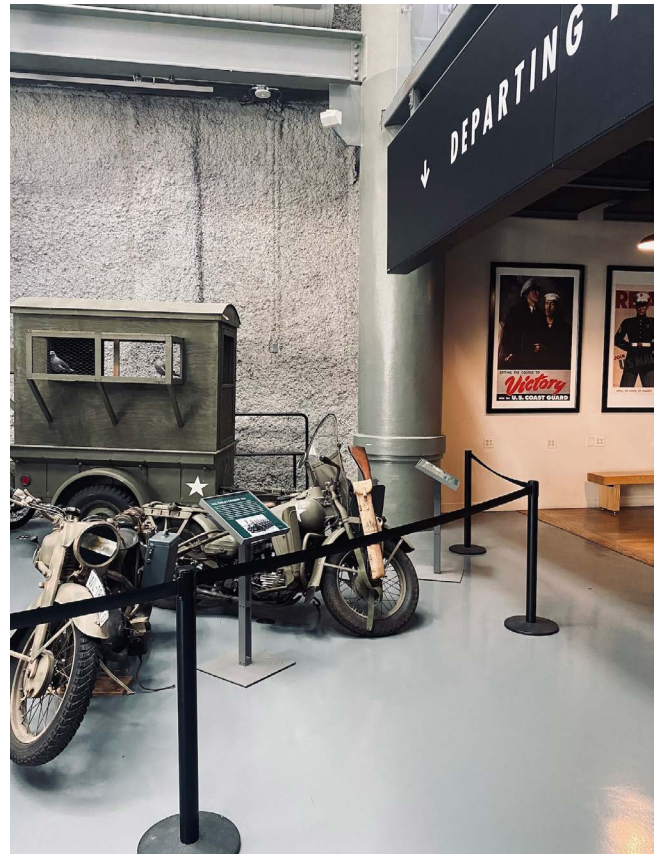
The bookstore specializes in the kind of war books that dads like: accounts of battles, biographies of generals, stories of Nazi spies and covert ops, plus separate books devoted to every imaginable kind of ship, plane, weapon, and piece of military apparatus (there's even a book about the M-1 helmet). A book called *Atomic Salvation: How The A-Bomb Saved The Lives of 32 Million People* promises to explain how "the Truman administration had little choice but to use the new weapon" when it dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The children's books are more lighthearted and typically feature animals of one kind or another, and include *Calliope: The Tale of a Police Horse During The Blitz*, *Spooky: The Adventures of a Ship's Cat During WWII*, *Zip: The Story of a Carrier Pigeon During World War II*, and *Smoky: No Ordinary War Dog*.

There's plenty more to buy for kids, like buckets of green Army men, a build-your-own-periscope kit, fighter pilot uniform baby clothes, and lots of toy planes and jeeps. A full Iwo Jima playset comes with dozens of plastic Marines and Japanese troops, plus tanks, sandbags, barbed wire, etc., everything a child needs to playfully replicate one of the war's bloodiest battles, in which over 6,000 Marines and 18,000 Japanese soldiers were killed with bullets, mines, grenades, shells, and flamethrowers.

IT HAS TO BE SAID THAT THE NATIONAL WORLD WAR II Museum is one of the most elaborate and impressive museums in the world. You can see where the \$400 million went. At the start, attendees board a replica of a Pullman train car to watch a video about soldiers leaving home. Each visitor is assigned a unique historical individual whose "journey" through the war you follow at computer stations throughout the museum. (Usually this is a soldier, but my person was Bob Hope, who sang, danced, and wisecracked his way through the war.) The museum has something like a quarter of a million artifacts, and they seem to have most of them on display. There are planes, jeeps, tanks, and landing craft, plus every weapon imaginable, but also

2. Each visitor is assigned a real historic crewmember from the USS Tang "and many will be 'enlisted' to perform specific tasks to navigate through the battle. At the end of the experience, they will discover if they were among those lost or one of the few who, after a harrowing ordeal at sea, suffered on in Japanese captivity."

3. Most of the time the museum says "Allied" victory but sometimes they slip.





"We will not capitulate
destroyed, but if we are
with us - a world in flames"

the little everyday artifacts that get us close to the human beings who fought the war: letters home, wallets, combs, watches, candy wrappers, canteens, binoculars, dog tags, soap, K-rations, D-rations, razor blades, and a bottle of Dr. Lyon's Tooth Powder.

The museum's promotional material is accurate in promising "a richly layered, multimedia experience that invites exploration and connection." In the Pacific Theater exhibit, you walk through an entire artificial jungle, with noises of combat playing in the background. Giant film screens throughout show archival newsreel footage. In the European Theater you find yourself in the wintry forests of France, complete with simulated snow. The website elaborates:

From faltering first battles in North Africa to the bloody struggle at Germany's doorstep, the immersive galleries in Road to Berlin recreate actual battle settings and villages—with crumbling walls, bomb-torn rooftops, icy pathways, and a chillingly realistic soundscape—as the evocative backdrop for period newsreels, video histories, interactive kiosks, macro-artifacts, and digital displays dive deeper into the story ... Visitors are able to walk in the shadow of Normandy's brutally dense hedgerows and imagine the challenges that followed D-Day; attend a mission briefing with the Bomber Boys and gain perspective inside America's all-important air strategy; and see personal artifacts—cigarette boxes, photographs—scattered over real Normandy sand, providing a touching perspective on the human cost of the war.

There is all this, and much more. It is impossible to fault the National World War II Museum on the grounds of effort or expenditure. It is also commendably progressive in some ways. There is an exhibit on the Japanese American internment, featuring video testimonies from Japanese Americans on life in American concentration camps. Curators have also clearly put some thought into highlighting the stories of Black Americans and women in the war. There is very little that is overtly "problematic"—a display on Japanese anti-American propaganda also shows that American anti-Japanese propaganda could be equally vicious. The team of American historians that has worked with the museum has clearly been conscientious in presenting the war accurately. There is probably not a single technically inaccurate statement across the hundreds of thousands of words of text across all the labels for all the hundreds of thousands of artifacts in all the dozens of rooms.

And yet: I still cannot help but feel that the National World War II Museum is not really about World War II. In fact, for all the aircraft parts, telegrams, machine tools, tattered flags, uniforms, black-and-white photos, and newspaper front pages that visitors look at over the course of their "journey" through the "immersive experience," I don't think the average person comes away with a much better understanding of the war than they went in with. They may even leave the place more ignorant. Preserving the memory of the Second World War is necessary, even urgent. But, despite the \$400 million, the team of historians, and the Smithsonian affiliation, I'm not convinced that having a museum like this is better than having no museum at all. And I think a man named Paul Fussell might have agreed with me.

IN 1939, WHEN HE WAS 16, PAUL FUSSELL joined the ROTC at his junior college in California. He wanted to get out of gym class, where he had been embarrassed by his flabby body and didn't like having to be naked in front of other boys. The ROTC didn't make you strip down completely. Plus "if you worked up to be a cadet officer, you got to wear a Sam Browne belt, from which depended a nifty saber." Within a couple of years, Fussell found himself nudged into the Army itself, and in 1944, at age 20, he was sent off to Europe as a second lieutenant with the 103rd infantry division, a pack of "hillbillies and Okies, dropouts and used-car salesmen and petty criminals" who "wore a colorful green-and-yellow cactus on their left shoulders."

Looking back after the war at his letters home from Fort Benning and then from France, Fussell could not believe what a naïve and earnest little kid he seemed. "I feel very confident and safe," he wrote to his mother. The youthful prewar Paul Fussell was such a stranger to the grown postwar Paul Fussell that as an adult he spoke of his younger self in the third person: "Like a bright schoolboy, he is pleased when grown-ups tell him he's done well," he comments of the letters, cringing at eager-beaver quotes like "I got a compliment on my clean rifle tonight."

The child did not know what war was, but in France he would soon find out. Conveyed to the front lines in Alsace, "after a truck ride up the Rhone valley, still pleasant with girls and flowers and wine," the 103rd division came under German shellfire. There "our civilized period came to an abrupt end." For the awkward boy who had been keen to wear a nifty Sam Browne belt and get an A+, waking up the next morning in the pine forest would show him what war really meant:

[W]hat I saw all around were numerous objects I'd miraculously not tripped over in the dark. These objects were dozens of dead German boys in greenish-gray uniforms, killed a day or two before by the company we were relieving. If darkness had hidden them from us, dawn disclosed them with open eyes and greenish-white faces like marble, still clutching their rifles and machine pistols in their seventeen-year-old hands, fixed where they had fallen.

Nothing in Fussell's wholesome, all-American prior life had prepared him to confront a forest full of the corpses of boys who looked like him. At first glance, he said, they almost seemed beautiful, like something Michelangelo could have painted. But then there was "no feeling but shock and horror ... My adolescent illusions, largely intact to that moment, fell away all at once, and I suddenly knew I was not and never would be in a world that was reasonable or just." There was no meaning in these deaths, and the scene "sorted so ill with modern popular assumptions about the idea of progress and attendant improvements in public health, social welfare, and social justice." What kind of world could transform "guiltless boys into cold marble after passing them through unbearable fear and humiliation and pain and contempt?"

The up-close experience of combat, Fussell says, turned him from earnest and humorless to someone who saw in the world a deep sense of irony, that "great gulf, half-comic, half-tragic, between what one expects and what one finds." One had been told that the



war was a great struggle between freedom and tyranny, in which noble and meaningful sacrifices were made. At the front lines one realized that, to those fighting it, war was little more than a grisly, traumatizing chaos, in which perfectly nice teens from American towns and German villages were blowing each other to pieces by any means available, in the middle of a gorgeous Alsatian forest. It was nothing but killing, terror, and destruction without end, and a person thrown into it found ideas like “democracy” difficult to even conceive of.

Faced with sights he was totally unprepared to process, overcome with fear, and desperate to get out of it all, Fussell became something of a wreck. Yet he pushed forward:

I was psychologically and morally ill prepared to lead my platoon in the great Seventh Army attack of March 15, 1945. But lead it I did, or rather push it, staying as far in the rear as was barely decent. And before the day was over I had been severely rebuked by a sharp-eyed lieutenant-colonel who threatened court martial if I didn't pull myself together. Before that day was over I was sprayed with the contents of a soldier's torso when I was lying behind him and he knelt to fire at a machine gun holding us up: he was struck in the heart, and out of the holes in the back of his field jacket flew little clouds of tissue, blood, and powdered cloth. Near him another man raised himself to fire, but the machine gun caught him in the mouth, and as he fell he looked back at me with surprise, blood and teeth dribbling out onto the leaves. He was one to whom early on I had given the Silver Star for heroism, and he didn't want to let me down. As if in retribution for my cowardice, in the late afternoon, near Ingwiller, Alsace, clearing a woods full of Germans cleverly dug in, my platoon was raked by shells from an .88, and I was hit in the back and leg by shell fragments. They felt like red-hot knives going in, but I was as interested in the few quiet moans, like those of a hurt child drifting off to sleep, of my thirty-seven-year-old platoon sergeant—we'd been together since Camp Howze—killed instantly by the same shell. We were lying together, and his immediate neighbor on the other side, a lieutenant in charge of a section of heavy machine guns, was killed instantly too. My platoon was virtually wiped away. I was in disgrace, I was hurt, I was clearly expendable—while I lay there the supply sergeant removed my issue wristwatch to pass on to my replacement—and I was twenty years old.

A similar story of disillusionment is told by Robert Rasmus, another All-American boy who fought in Europe (an Eagle scout, tuba player, and ham radio enthusiast in high school, who later became the CEO of a wood paneling manufacturer). As his train wound its way through occupied Germany to the front lines, he was overcome with delight at the architecture and the landscapes. He describes a surreal mix of fear and awe:

As we were moving out of this area of sheared-off buildings, there were courtyards with fruit trees in blossom. And there were our heavy mortars blasting away across the river. ... [W]e really hadn't been in it ourselves. It was still fun and dramatics. When the truck took us from Cologne south through Bonn, for me it was, Hey, Beethoven's birthplace! But when we crossed a pontoon bridge and I saw a balloon

of fire, I knew the real combat was going to begin. I had the feeling now that we were gonna be under direct fire, some of us were gonna be killed. But I was also enormously affected by the beauty of the countryside. We were in rolling hills and great forests. It stretched out for mile after mile. I could almost hear this Wagnerian music. I was pulled in two directions: Gee, I don't wanna get killed. And 'Boy, this is gorgeous country.' ... Our uniforms were still clean. We were still young kids who hadn't seen anything. ... I was struck by the sheer beauty of the countryside, the little villages, the churches. This sort of thing the impressionists did. I was sort of schizophrenic all through this period. I was a participant, scared out of my wits. But I was also acutely aware of how really theatrical and surreal it was.”

The time for admiring the cathedrals and smelling the flowers came to an abrupt end, as Rasmus saw the sheep in the meadow exploding, hit with mortar shells. On the first day of fighting, Rasmus' platoon sergeant—hated by the men for his tyranny—was killed, and the teenage Rasmus grew up fast:

We had to improvise stretchers. I took off my field jacket and turned the arms inside out. We poked rifles through the arms and fashioned a stretcher. We got the sergeant on ours and, jeez, half his head was blown off and the brains were coming out on my hands and on my uniform. Here's the mama's boy, Sunday school, and now I'm really in it. I remember lying in that slit trench that night. It was a nightmare. I'd now seen what dead people look like, the color out of their face. I think each person in my squad went through this dream of mine. Daylight came and we moved out into another town. This is twenty-four hours of experience. Those who really went through combat, the Normandy landings, the heavy stuff, might laugh at this little action we'd been in, but for me... We had one day of this. Our uniforms were now dirty and bloody and our faces looked like we'd been in there for weeks.

STORIES LIKE THIS ARE COMMON AMONG THOSE who were plunged into combat. They were essentially children, who knew war was *scary* and *deadly* and *bad*, and knew that they would be “fighting,” but hadn't the faintest idea what the experience would actually be like. (Fussell came away disliking the word “fighting” altogether, since much of the time one is simply trying to avoid being hit by the next shell.) They found out quickly that it meant constant deafening explosions destroying everything nearby, and close-up contact with violently dismembered human bodies. They found out that words and images could not even begin to prepare someone for the kind of sights, sounds, and smells they would confront. They found out that “war is hell” does not just mean *war is extremely unpleasant and you get mud on you*, but rather *war is like seeing the inside of Hell itself, like having the worst imaginable nightmare come to life all around you*.

Fussell wrote a number of books and essays after coming back from Europe, and became known for his strong opposition to the sanitization of war. He was a conservative, not a pacifist. But he thought everyone needed to face up to the reality of what war actually *is*, what it does to people who live through it. Too much discussion of the Second World War, he said, is conducted using

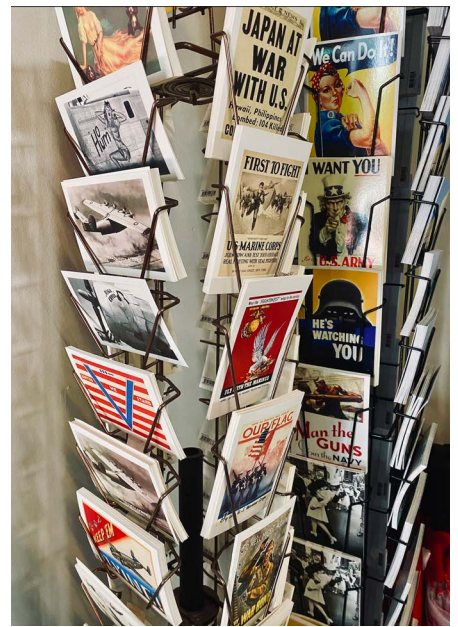
LEFT: A young boy is photographed next to a Waco glider. A nearby sign informs visitors that many of these fragile gliders killed their occupants upon landing, and features a photograph of an unrecognizably mangled soldier in the wreckage of his glider.



pleasant euphemisms or abstractions. If we are to understand what the war *was*, we have to understand its brutality in full, rather than think only about those parts that don't upset us too much. It may be discomforting to hear Fussell speak of being "sprayed with the contents of a torso." But all *we* have to do is read words. Fussell was the one who had to undergo the actual experience.

In real wars, he pointed out, people die in ways you do not ever want to think about. But they also die deaths that are *absurd*, because they are accidental and the result of bureaucratic mix-ups or mistaken identity or opening the wrong door or turning right instead of left. Stories about World War II as a struggle between Democracy and Fascism help to give deaths some meaning, but on the ground deaths are often the result of stupid fuck-ups, and it is much more difficult to come to terms with deaths that are nothing but the result of fuck-ups.

For instance, Fussell points out that the number of friendly-fire incidents in World War II is staggering, though they were usually hushed up by the governments involved. Just a week after the war began, the British submarine HMS Trident sank fellow British submarine HMS Oxley, killing 52 sailors. In Normandy, the U.S. Eighth Air Force bombed the Army, killing a highly-decorated lieutenant general, Lesley J. McNair, along with a hundred soldiers. Pioneering female Royal Air Force pilot Amy Johnson had her plane shot down by fellow Brits when she mistakenly gave the wrong identification code. Naval gunners at Pearl Harbor destroyed several U.S. aircraft while aiming for Japanese attackers. (In Studs Terkel's *The Good War*, a Pearl Harbor shipyard worker recounts finding out that his girlfriend died that day in her home after being killed by a badly-aimed American shell.) In 1942, a squadron of RAF bombers attacked the British Army in Egypt by mistake, killing 359 of them. That same year a German U-boat sank the RMS Laconia transport ship, killing 1,400 Italian prisoners of war. The incident didn't end there: British planes accidentally attacked Germans who were rescuing Allied survivors of the sinking,





and a U.S. B-25 bomber attacked a U-boat carrying survivors. Prisoners of war were often killed by mistake. The 1944 sinking of the Japanese cargo ship Junyō Maru, packed with thousands of slave laborers and POWs, was the worst sea disaster in history until that point. The next year saw an even worse calamity, when the RAF launched synchronized attacks on three German ships in Lübeck Harbor, killing 7,000 Jewish concentration camp survivors and Soviet POWs. Twenty Allied POWs even died in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

There are dozens more such incidents from the period. They should not be surprising. When one thinks about what war involves—deploying heavy killing machinery in close quarters—it's obvious that there will be a lot of imprecision to the murder. But these deaths are particularly tragic and meaningless, the kind the National World War II Museum does not draw attention to.

Americans in particular, Fussell says, do not like to face the unpleasant parts of reality. This was true even as the war was going on, when there was a “public innocence about the bizarre damage suffered by the human body in modern war.” Euphemisms were everywhere, language used to make the horrors seem innocuous. The atom bombs were called “Fat Man” and “Little Boy.” Bomber planes were “she.” A German V-1 bomb was a “doodlebug.” The “Flying Fortress” plane suggested a “vaguely chivalric venue and a purpose largely defensive.” Fussell had particular disdain for the way the war was reported and discussed on the home front. U.S. corporations would run ads boasting of the usefulness of their products in killing Germans and “Japs.” The people who did this, Fussell says, were sadists who had no idea what killing and dying was actually like.

Fussell's book *Wartime*, in chapter “The Real War Will Never Get In The Books,” describes the up-close experience of war in all its gruesome detail. Lost in the numbing statistics about “millions killed” are the facts. Partly this is understandable, since “no one wants to foresee or contemplate the horror, the inevitable ruin of civilized usages, which war will entail.” But it's important to know what we're not seeing. For instance, Fussell notes that in *LIFE* magazine's compilations of war photographs, actual violence is carefully censored out:

“No American dismemberings are registered, even in the photographs of Tarawa and Iwo Jima. American bodies (decently clothed) are occasionally in evidence, but they are notably intact. ... [N]o matter how severely wounded, Allied troops are never shown suffering what was termed, in the Vietnam war, ‘traumatic amputation’: everyone has all his

limbs, his hands and feet and digits, not to mention expressions of courage and cheer.”

Fussell draws our attention to the war reporting of legendary embedded correspondent Ernie Pyle, whose newspaper columns told Americans vividly about life faced by front line troops, and whose work is quoted heavily in the National World War II Museum. Before his death in 1945, Pyle was known for providing a ground-level, soldier’s eye view of the war. But Fussell notes that Pyle was almost certainly telling about “20% of the truth.” He was still describing Hollywood-ized deaths. For instance, in a famous column about the death of a Captain Waskow, beloved by his men, Pyle mentions “the wound.” But he does not say what “the wound” was. “Where was it?” Fussell asks. How much was left of the captain’s body? “Where was his wound? ... Was it a little hole, or a great red missing place? Were his entrails extruded? ... Were the captain’s eyes open?” Pyle delicately ensured that his readers would never need to think about these things.

FOR FUSSELL, THE INSISTENCE ON descriptions of war’s real horrors was not just a request for gratuitous detail. It was a request for the *truth* of war’s unpleasantness. “So unwilling is the imagination to dwell on genuine—as opposed to fictional or theatrical—horrors,” that “we shall never know half of the history of these times.” Because we can talk all we like of what the soldiers “sacrificed,” but you won’t know just how much they sacrificed until you get a better sense of the sort of thing we are actually *talking* about when we talk about being “hit with a shell.” When we talk about the boys going to war, we are talking about “an American high school kid [who sees] his own intestines blown out of his body and spread before him in the dirt while he screams and screams.” “In war,” Fussell notes, “as in air accidents, ‘insides’ are much more visible than it is normally well to imagine. To soldiers they are deplorably familiar.” But the general American public did not, and still does not, accept that war is nothing like it is in films (and now video games), that when a shell hits next to a man it is “as likely to blow his whole face off” as to cause him to simply fall over like a plastic green army man.

After introducing us to some of the actual surreal horrors (e.g., suddenly finding the upstairs neighbor’s severed arm in bed next to you during an air raid, soldiers being hit by flying pieces of their friends’ bodies, or sleeping next to decomposing





former colleagues), he admits: “you can’t take much of that sort of thing without going mad.” But that is the point: World War II was homicidal madness on an unprecedented scale, and we have to *understand* it as homicidal madness, and to know what those words refer to in terms of the first-person realities of the victims. To clean up the war, to make it family-friendly and bearable, is to lie about it.

When Fussell describes what the typical American view of the war leaves out, he identifies precisely what it is that makes the National World War II Museum so strange, and so dishonest. Considering this was a war in which both sides developed technologically sophisticated new ways of quickly dismantling the human body, the display of corpses and blood is kept to a minimum in the museum’s exhibits. A famous *LIFE* magazine photo of several Marines lying dead on a beach is seen, but as Fussell notes in an essay on war photography, their faces aren’t seen, and their bodies are intact. It is the kind of photo we can see without being too disturbed.

In fact, I realized just how deeply wrong the National World War II Museum was when a friend told me he didn’t think he wanted to go, because it would be too depressing. I found myself replying that he needn’t worry, reassuring him that he likely

wouldn’t find the museum depressing at all. I didn’t. Because it wasn’t.

But how can that be? It *should* be depressing, because World War II is the bleakest and most horrible thing that has ever happened. To get anywhere near the truth of it should nearly crush one’s soul. Yet it’s entirely possible to spend a day wandering the museum’s pavilions without shedding a tear. To create a World War II that doesn’t ruin one’s vacation is an astonishing feat of curation.

Weirdly, mentions of the Holocaust are kept to a minimum in the World War II Museum. It comes up here and there, but the theory is evidently that that if people want to think about the Holocaust, they can go to the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. The New Orleans museum is explicitly nationalistic in its focus: it says openly that it is about the “American experience” in World War II.

The museum seems to take for granted that presenting people with the war through American eyes only is legitimate. But visitors will inevitably mistake the *National* World War II Museum for a general World War II museum, without noticing just how much the “national” aspect shapes what they see and don’t see.

The war is almost treated as if it started on December 7th, 1941, with the attack on Pearl Harbor, and as if the main event of the war was the D-Day landing. (Indeed, the museum was originally explicitly called the “D-Day Museum.”) The Soviet experience in the war is virtually undiscussed, despite the country’s colossal number of deaths (over 20,000,000, compared with 300,000 for the U.S.). Likewise the British, French, and Chinese perspectives. Notably, while Japanese *Americans* now have a small exhibit, the Japanese and Germans themselves are still treated as faceless masses of swarming soldiers, even though many of their civilians were just as much victims of the regimes as Allied soldiers were. The lack of international perspectives is a terrible missed opportunity to provide Americans with a better understanding of the lives of people very different from themselves.

PAUL FUSSELL DETESTED PROPAGANDA ABOUT THE war that erased the grisly details, the irony, the absurdity, and the real depth of the misery. He also felt the war was more morally ambiguous than most Americans wanted to admit. There is, he said, a national myth about World War II, namely that “it constituted a notably moral common cause, one moment in our history when the well-known American greed, centrifugalism, and jealous individualism briefly subdued themselves in the interests of virtue.” It is a “parable of good and evil,” in which Americans (freedom-loving, democratic, good) united to defeat fascism (tyrannical, murderous, evil).

The myth has power, Fussell says, in part because it has truth, and the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were extreme and revolting. But it is a mistake to assume that because *they* were far worse, *we* were decent. In fact, World War II should be understood not as a battle of the forces of light against the forces of dark, but as an abyss in which we were dragged into the very depths of moral depravity. It might have been *unavoidable*—Fussell believed the war had to be fought, and even defended the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But it was deeply morally complicated, and any humane person who looked out at a forest full of the pieces of German teenagers would find it hard to think there was a difference between “just” and “unjust” wars. It’s all just a hideous tragedy, full of pointless suffering, in which nobody comes away with anything to be “proud” of. The only way to maintain belief in the national myth about World War II as a fight between Good and Evil is to overlook significant parts of the reality.

For one thing, we have to set aside all of the war crimes committed by the Allies, or to pretend that those crimes were only committed for reasons of narrow strategic necessity. There are, of course, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in which 200,000 Japanese people, mostly civilians, were either incinerated immediately or died agonizing drawn-out deaths. Less discussed is the firebombing of Tokyo, the single most destructive bombing raid in human history, which destroyed 16 square miles of the city, killed 100,000 people, and left a million people homeless. Accounts from the ground of what the fire was like as it

burned children and old people are so graphic and disturbing as to be almost impossible to read. And Tokyo was only the largest of the 64 Japanese cities that were firebombed. Huge swaths were left in ruins, and civilians perished by the thousands. The intelligence officer of the U.S. Fifth Air Force said openly that “the entire population of Japan is a proper military target” and “there are no civilians in Japan.” But Harry Truman must have known that this view was indefensible; when the “Little Boy” was dropped, Truman told the public in a radio address that “the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.” Curtis LeMay, who orchestrated the mass firebombings of Japanese cities, admitted later that “if we’d lost the war, we’d all have been prosecuted as war criminals.”

The usual defense of the bombings is that they prevented the U.S. from having to conduct a land invasion of Japan (“Operation Downfall”), and in doing so saved American lives by forcing the Japanese to surrender. Plenty of high-ranking American officials from the time have disputed this framing. Dwight Eisenhower, no peacenik, claimed that he told the Secretary of State that dropping the bomb was “completely unnecessary,” and “our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives.” He later told *Newsweek* that “the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.” Harry Truman’s Chief of Staff, Admiral William Leahy, said that “the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan.” General MacArthur said he saw “no military justification for the dropping of the bomb. The Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, Chester Nimitz, said in 1945 that “the atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military standpoint, in the defeat of Japan.” Admiral William Halsey, Commander of the Third Fleet, said in 1946 that “The first atomic bomb was an unnecessary experiment ... It was a mistake to ever drop it.” Henry “Hap” Arnold, commanding general of the Air Force, said in 1949 that “it always appeared to us that, atomic bomb or no atomic bomb, the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse.”

There is plenty of evidence in the historical record that an emotional desire for vengeance against the hated Japanese, and a total indifference to their suffering, also factored into the decision to drop the bomb. Getting Japan to surrender was only part of the story. We even kept bombing them after the surrender offer. On August 11th, 1945, two days after the Nagasaki bombing, the *New York Times* front page headline was “JAPAN OFFERS TO SURRENDER.” One would have thought there would be no need to inflict more pain. But political scientist Nina Tannenwald notes that “conventional bombing intensified *after* the nuclear attacks, and the heaviest conventional bombing of the war followed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” On Aug. 14th and 15th, “a 1014 plane mission, the largest of the war, staged a 14-hour bombing attack on six Japanese cities, dropping 6,000 tons of conventional explosives.” According to the official Air Force history of the war, this was because Air Force Chief of Staff Hap Arnold “wanted as big a finale as

possible.” This was not strategy. It was sadism.

Those who portray the bombings as the product of cool strategic reasoning, carefully concerned with the minimization of human suffering, forget the atmosphere of the time, which was suffused with *hatred* of the enemy. After Pearl Harbor, the United States erupted into violent loathing for the Japanese, and thirst for vengeance became feverish. In *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, historian John Dower says the Japanese were seen as “a uniquely contemptible and formidable foe who deserved no mercy and virtually demanded extermination.” Prejudice, he says, “fed atrocities, and atrocities in turn fanned the fires of race hate. The dehumanization of the Other contributed immeasurably to the psychological distancing that facilitates killing, not only on the battlefield but also in the plans adopted by strategists far removed from the actual scene of combat [and] facilitated the decisions to make civilian populations the targets of concentrated attack.” Charles Lindbergh, who flew missions as a civilian consultant in the Pacific theater, wrote in his diary of his disgust at the way the Japanese were treated:

It was freely admitted that some of our soldiers tortured Jap prisoners and were as cruel and barbaric at times as the Japs themselves. Our men think nothing of shooting a Japanese prisoner or a soldier attempting to surrender. They treat the Japs with less respect than they would give to an animal, and these acts are condoned by almost everyone.

E.B. Sledge, author of an acclaimed memoir about his time as a Marine in the Pacific theater, said that the Japanese reluctance to surrender led U.S. soldiers to be unwilling to take prisoners, preferring to kill every last man: “You developed an attitude of no mercy because they had no mercy on us.” In practice, that could mean the mutilation of Japanese corpses or the summary execution of Japanese prisoners. Sledge writes of being horrified as he saw fellow soldiers ripping the gold teeth from the mouths of living wounded Japanese soldiers. For their part, Japanese troops had a record of beheading POWs, working them to death, or even conducting human experiments on them. (Imperial Japan had an appalling record of crimes against civilians, too, including abducting women into sexual slavery.) The war, Sledge says, turned American and Japanese alike into complete “savages,” who, filled with pure animalistic hatred, killed each other through disturbing and grisly methods. Marines would torch the Japanese with flamethrowers, or pour gasoline on them and set it alight. A veteran of the Battle of Peleliu recounts the dying scream of a Japanese soldier when an American tore his eyes out and threw him over a cliff, amidst kill-or-be-killed hand-to-hand combat. Historian Antony Beevor in *The Second World War* comments that “some Marines decapitated Japanese corpses in order to boil the head and sell the skull when they got home.” (Indeed, *LIFE* magazine carried a photograph of a woman next to the Japanese skull her Army sweetheart had sent her as a souvenir.) Sledge says that the attitude toward the Japanese was “different than the one we had toward the Germans.” Germans were seen as recognizably human. Not so the Japanese. Fussell writes of the situation:

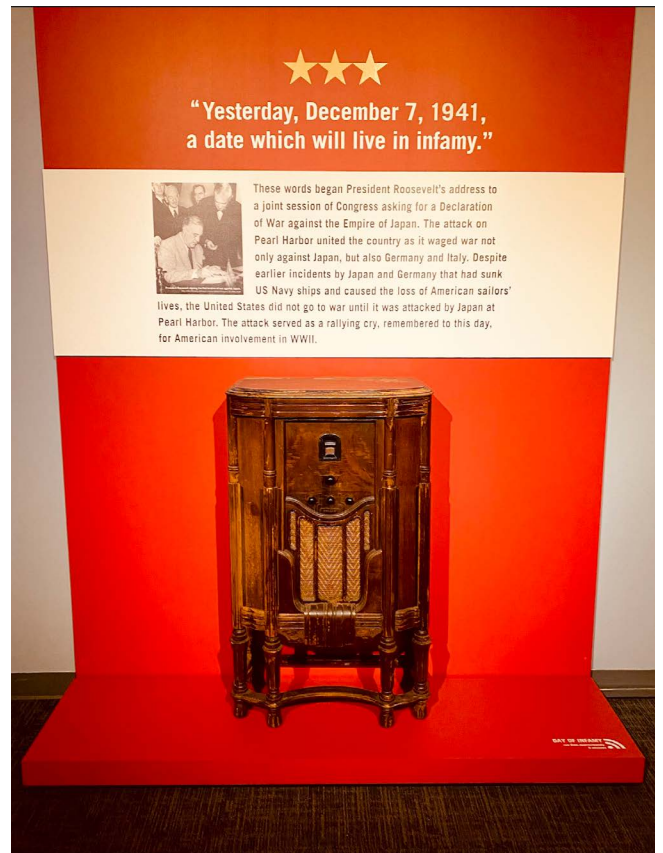
Marines and soldiers could augment their view of their own invincibility by possessing a well-washed Japanese skull, and very soon

*after Guadalcanal it was common to treat surrendering Japanese as handy rifle targets. Plenty of Japanese gold teeth were extracted—some from still living mouths—with Marine Corps Ka-Bar Knives. ... In the Pacific the situation grew so public and scandalous that in September 1942, the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet issued this order: “No part of the enemy’s body may be used as a souvenir. Unit Commanders will take stern disciplinary action . . .” Among Americans it was widely held that the Japanese were really subhuman, little yellow beasts, and popular imagery depicted them as lice, rats, bats, vipers, dogs, and monkeys. What was required, said the Marine Corps journal *The Leatherneck* in May 1945, was “a gigantic task of extermination.” The Japanese constituted a “pestilence,” and the only appropriate treatment was “annihilation.” Some of the marines landing on Iwo Jima had “Rodent Exterminator” written on their helmet covers, and on one American flagship the naval commander had erected a large sign enjoining all to “KILL JAPS! KILL JAPS! KILL MORE JAPS!”*

Dower and Fussell both say that the feeling was mutual, that neither side saw the other as human, and so both felt justified in committing unspeakable atrocities, crimes that escalated and escalated until finally the U.S. finished off 200,000 people with atomic bombs. (Followed by the “big finale” of another giant bombing raid after the Japanese offer of surrender.)

BUT WHILE IT’S TRUE THAT THE DEHUMANIZATION of the Japanese was extreme, and played a part in the casual willingness to nuke them, the Allied bombings of Germany were no more humane. We have long since forgotten about this, even though it was in many ways equally vicious and destructive. The German writer W.G. Sebald, in *On The Natural History of Destruction*, writes that “today it is hard to form an even partly adequate idea of the extent of the devastation suffered by the cities of Germany in the last years of the Second World War, still harder to think about the horrors involved in that devastation,” even though 131 towns and cities were attacked, a million tons of bombs dropped, half a million Germans killed, and 3.5 million homes destroyed. Sebald notes the curious fact that these events have disappeared almost completely from the collective memory of the war, and “we do not grasp what it all meant.” There was a sense that the Germans deserved whatever they got at the end of the war—which is also part of why there was little pity when soldiers from the Soviet Union’s Red Army “raped every German woman from eight to eighty” after “liberating” the country, as one journalist observing the occupation noted. Nobody in the world had time for “Nazi” tears in 1945, any distinction between people and their governments having disappeared.

There has been some debate over the firebombing of Dresden, which was particularly controversial because of the city’s status as a cultural center and architectural jewel. But it’s notable that Dresden was selected as a target by the British, according to Beevor, “simply because it remained one of the few major [German] cities which had not yet been flattened.” For 1943’s Operation Gomorrah (named, of course, after the city God Himself obliterated), the British and Americans did extensive research on how to cause max-





imum damage to an urban center using incendiary bombs. They aimed to produce a conflagration large enough to overwhelm attempts at firefighting and destroy the entire city of Hamburg.

Attitudes toward deliberate attacks on civilians had shifted during the war. The European powers on both sides had originally agreed to limit bombing to strictly military objectives. Hitler immediately violated the agreement, destroying the small Polish city of Frampol as an experiment. After the London Blitz, and Germany's bombing of other European cities like Warsaw and Rotterdam, the Allies too switched from attempting to minimize civilian casualties to attempting to maximize them. The bombing of Hamburg, says *National Geographic*, "marked the beginning of a new phase of World War II, one in which the Allies would begin targeting civilians in a concerted effort to crush German morale and put an end to the war." The goal "was to harness fire's tendency to perpetuate itself, building on dry weather conditions and other factors in the hopes of overwhelming emergency responders and burning as much territory as possible."

Thanks to 9,000 tons of bombs, the plan was successful. "HAMBURG HAS BEEN HAMBURGERED," said one newspaper headline, showing how cheerfully the terror-bombing of civilians was accepted. Approximately 37,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands more were wounded (many suffering horrific burns that would disfigure them for life). The city was virtually destroyed, with most of its residents rendered homeless. As *National Geographic* describes the scene:

Civilians scattered, disoriented and terrified, dodging falling buildings and dead bodies as their own clothing burned into their skin. As Hamburg resident Heinrich Johannsen huddled under a wet blanket with his son in a pile of gravel at a construction site, he "saw many people turn into living torches." In basements and air raid shelters, bodies simply disintegrated into ash. The shrieking storm sent billows of smoke 20,000 feet high; from above, British pilots reported the smell of burning flesh.

This terror was the intended result of the operation, not a byproduct of it. Arthur Harris, the head of RAF Bomber Command, said openly that:

The aim of the Combined Bomber Offensive ... should be unambiguously stated [as] the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers, and the disruption of civilized life throughout Germany. ... the destruction of houses, public utilities, transport and lives, the creation of a refugee problem on an unprecedented scale, and the breakdown of morale both at home and at the battle fronts by fear of extended and intensified bombing, are accepted and intended aims of our bombing policy. They are not by-products of attempts to hit factories.

The idea that by striking civilian populations one could destroy their "morale" may have been a strategic error. In fact, insofar as the goal was to demoralize the population and erode its will to fight, bombings were counterproductive in the same way the Blitz was: nothing does more to foster a sense of unity and determination in a population than to force it to endure a collective tragedy.

But Harris was a madman, with zero regard for civilian lives, convinced he could bomb his way to victory and unconcerned

about the cost. "I do not personally regard the whole of the remaining cities of Germany as worth the bones of one British Grenadier," he said, meaning he simply didn't think a moral question arose when it came to wiping out hundreds of thousands of old people, women, children, and disabled noncombatants. Most officials in the British and American governments evidently agreed. It was only when the charming Baroque city of Dresden was obliterated that the strategy of terror bombing came up for internal debate.

I do not wish here to make the argument that the Allied bombing campaign was unnecessary to destroy the Third Reich. I am not asking the United States and Britain to wallow in guilt over what happened. Nor is it the case that the murders we committed mean there is little moral difference between democracy and fascism. But I do not think we can ever regard what we did as "just" regardless of whether it was "necessary." It was an unspeakable atrocity that no sane person wants to spend a second contemplating. World War II was not "good versus evil." Hitler and Hirohito were evil, yes, but they pulled people (their own, and ours) down into an escalating cycle of mass murder and hatred from which it was almost impossible to escape. We do not come out of something like that as the "good guys" just because we did not start it. If you are viciously attacked on the street by a stranger, and you survive by cutting off the other person's head, and feel it was necessary, you may claim to have acted in justified self-defense. But there is no pride to be taken in what you have done. You would—or should—regard it to the end of your days as the worst thing you have ever done.

I HESITATE TO OFFER A CONTINUING PARADE OF anecdotes of wartime suffering. In researching what isn't in the National World War II Museum, I have encountered enough stomach-churning detail to fuck me up for some considerable time—stories of bodies stacked like cordwood, blast victims wandering the streets carrying their own eyeballs, bombed hospitals full of skeletons in beds, legless teenage girls begging to be put out of their misery, and the air raid warden at a bomb site who thought she saw a mop that turned out to be a severed head. Plus all of the tales from the Nazi extermination camps. Even then, I have only seen, softened through words and black-and-white images, the tiniest sliver of the suffering that took place. But since the National World War II Museum will not tell us the full truth about what a war is, I believe I ought to end with two accounts that remind us of things we might not care to know. Here, then, are two passages about those who found themselves on the other side of our "arsenal of democracy." First is Kurt Vonnegut, who was a prisoner of war in Dresden when it was bombed, and was put to work cleaning out corpses afterward:

Every day we walked into the city and dug into basements and shelters to get the corpses out, as a sanitary measure. When we went into them, a typical shelter, an ordinary basement usually, looked like a streetcar full of people who'd simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead. A fire storm is an amazing thing. It doesn't occur in nature. It's fed by the tornadoes that occur in the midst of it and there isn't a damned thing to breathe. We brought

the dead out. They were loaded on wagons and taken to parks, large open areas in the city which weren't filled with rubble. The Germans got funeral pyres going, burning the bodies to keep them from stinking and from spreading disease. 130,000 corpses were hidden underground.⁴ It was a terribly elaborate Easter egg hunt. We went to work through corridors of German soldiers. Civilians didn't get to see what we were up to. After a few days the city began to smell, and a new technique was invented. Necessity is the mother of invention. We would bust into the shelter, gather up valuables from people's laps without attempting identification, and turn the valuables over to guards. Then soldiers would come with a flame thrower and stand in the door and cremate the people inside. Get the gold and jewelry out and then burn everybody inside.

Then we have William Craig, from his book *The Fall of Japan*, describing the detonation of the bomb over Nagasaki:

The Fat Man was detonated ... just northeast of the stadium in the Urakami Valley. At the moment of ignition, there was an intense bluish-white flash as though a large amount of magnesium had exploded. The entire area grew hazy with smoke. Simultaneously there was a tremendous roar, a crushing blast wave and searing heat.

Twenty-four hundred feet to the northeast, the roof and masonry of the Catholic cathedral fell on the kneeling worshipers. All of them died.

At the Nagasaki Branch Prison, just north of the explosion, 118 guards and convicts saw the brilliant light but nothing more. There were no survivors.

The baggage master at the railroad station never rose to meet the incoming train. The roof of the building dropped onto his head. His assistant, torn by flying glass, ran into the street where people were beginning to jump headlong into the river to find relief from burns.

The approaching train had stopped for a moment to discharge passengers near the entrance to the Urakami Valley. Most of the people never left their seats as the white light flooded over them. The windows blew in and ripped flesh into flayed meat. Severed heads rolled down the aisles as uninjured Japanese stumbled over the dead and ran from the train, too stunned to offer any help to the others.

Out in the harbor, two and a half miles from the center of the blast, a seaman watched the explosion from his boat. As he stood transfixed, a small craft near him burst into flames and burned to the waterline. Beside him on his own deck, crew members screamed from burns on exposed portions of flesh.

Four and a half miles to the south of the blast, a wooden barracks at Kamigo simply fell down.

[...] The fireball of the bomb had broadened in seconds to fill the valley. It lapped at the ridges on either side. The blast wave leaped the crests and raced through the seaport. People by the hundreds lay on the streets, in the fields, in wreckage, and screamed for water. Creatures that barely resembled human beings walked dazedly, skin hanging down in huge flaps, torsos blackened.

Can there be a "just war," one where we can feel pride in what we have done? If there is such a thing, we're told World War II is it. But to believe that wars can be just, you have to spend \$400 million burying the counterevidence. Were there really "good guys" in World War II, when the good guys killed so many kids? Can one really contemplate this destruction without shame?

4. NOTE: the accepted number is now closer to 25,000

"It's too damned serious over here to be talking about hot dogs and baked beans and things we're missing. Tell them there are men getting killed and wounded every minute and they're miserable and they're suffering. Tell them it's a matter more serious than they'll ever be able to understand."

— U.S. soldier to a reporter, France, 1944

THE NATIONAL WORLD WAR II MUSEUM DISTORTS the war in a few core ways, which affect every exhibit. It hides most of the actual violence. It treats Americans as more important than non-Americans. It imbues events of the war with meaning, so that they seem less absurd and tragic. And it treats the war as morally unambiguous, which discourages visitors from grappling with the atrocities committed by the winning side. The end result of this, alarmingly enough, is that the National World War II Museum manages to construct a World War II that doesn't seem nearly as bad as it really was.

The danger of this cannot be overstated: if Americans still do not grasp the reality of war, they will not be sufficiently committed to making sure wars do not happen.

Fussell could be describing the museum when he condemns reporting in which "a large slice of actuality ... was declared off-limits, and the sanitized and euphemized remainder was presented as the whole." If we don't admit that *we* became savage killing machines, that we dehumanized the Japanese just as much as the Germans dehumanized Jews, that our finest young men are capable of unspeakable acts, we will carry a dangerous arrogance. Indeed, in the decades after World War II, in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the United States unleashed the same kinds of indiscriminate terror bombing campaigns that it had in Japan and Germany, yet again massacring civilians without a second thought, yet again treating a population of foreigners as if they were ants rather than human beings. We are a danger to the world so long as we are convinced that our actions always result from motives that are pure and untainted by bigotry or bloodlust.

I enjoyed my day at the World War II Museum, and I wish I hadn't. I had to find out the truth about the war elsewhere, in novels and in the kind of history books they don't sell in the museum store. That's where I learned about soldiers driven insane by their exposure to dead bodies, about the pure terror of being next to a shell when it hits the ground like a freight train. I learned that the most visceral experience of war is not the sights or sounds, but the smells, which the museum makes no attempt to replicate. I learned about the carnage left out of the photo of the Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima, people cut in half or atomized into "tiny red bits," a memory that was still producing PTSD in its witnesses when they were in their 90s.



I still don't have any idea about war, though, because the real war cannot be conveyed in words or pictures. The only people that know about it are those who saw it, and for many of them, it was so disturbing that they never wanted to talk about what they witnessed. My grandfather, Dennis Matthews, who served with the British Army in Burma, never spoke about his war years. When I was a child, I thought his medals were cool, though he kept them put away. My only reference point for the war was the '60s sitcom *Dad's Army*, about the misadventures of a ragtag platoon in the domestic Home Guard. I thought that was pretty much what my granddad's war must have been like.

Now I know better. I know why he didn't talk about it. He didn't talk about it because it wasn't like that at all, and because he almost certainly saw things no human being should ever have to see, and which it takes a lifetime to forget.

I don't think my granddad would have liked the National World War II Museum. For one thing, he always resented Americans—he said they acted as if they'd won the war themselves, an impression the museum would have done little to disabuse him of. But he also wasn't the kind who would have bought a brandy snifter with a grenade on it. He knew what grenades did, and if you've seen what they do, you don't want to be reminded.

I am not saying that the only World War II museum worth building is the one that traumatizes you. But I do think that, especially if children are going to be admitted, it needs to try to convey the fact that war is *the worst thing that can happen*, and that tanks aren't just cool pieces of machinery. They blow up humans, and you don't want to see them do it. World War II was a meat grinder in which the great powers of the world turned their whole economies toward the task of finding new ways to murder and destroy at an industrial scale. We think of the Holocaust as horrifying in part because it involved trying to efficiently maximize murder. But the nuking and firebombing of cities and the development of flamethrowing tanks and Mk2 fragmentation grenades also involved putting maximal scientific and engineering know-how toward the goal of destroying people in horrible ways. The fact that our purposes were nobler does not make the idea of a murder-based economy any less disturbing.

I want World War II to be discussed and presented in ways that help us move toward a world without war. I don't necessarily think my local museum has to be dismantled, but I do want it to depress people, even if that causes it to lose its status as the #1-rated local tourist attraction on TripAdvisor. It needs more on the Holocaust, more on the realities of violence and trauma, and less of the cheerful nostalgia and kitsch. It certainly can't sell war toys to kids. I have nothing against the "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy from Company B," but visitors need to realize that in the real war, the bugle boy ended up cut in two by a land mine, or pulverized under the treads of a Panzer tank. The real war, as Fussell says, was darkly, hideously *ironic*: all those Americans who went off so cheerful and wholesome, fond of candy and comic books, found themselves turned into mass murderers, doing things that would have been the crime of the century if they'd occurred back in Iowa. Then those that survived had to come home and somehow try to live normal lives, to forget that they had been sadistic serial killers for a time, as if it had been something as innocent as a gap year abroad.

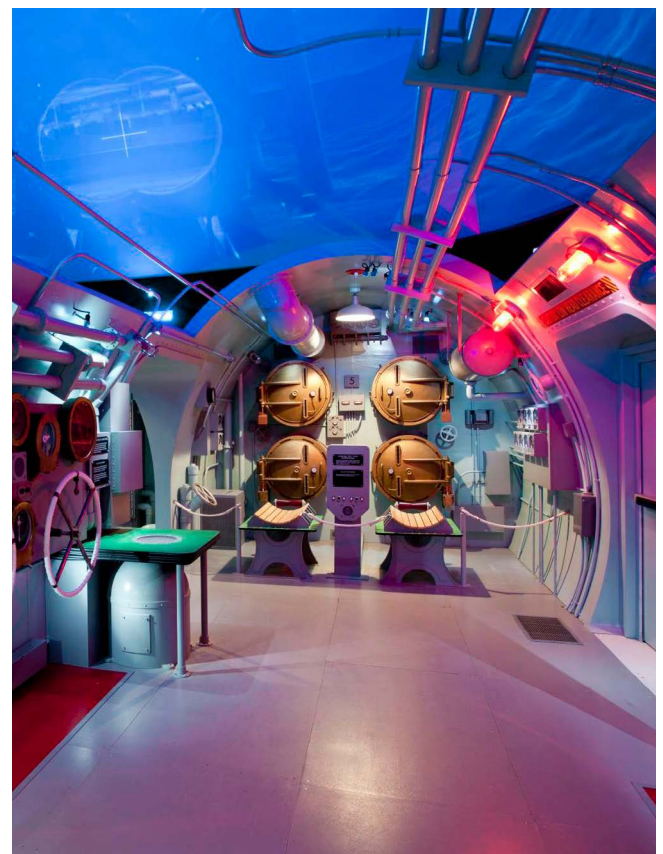
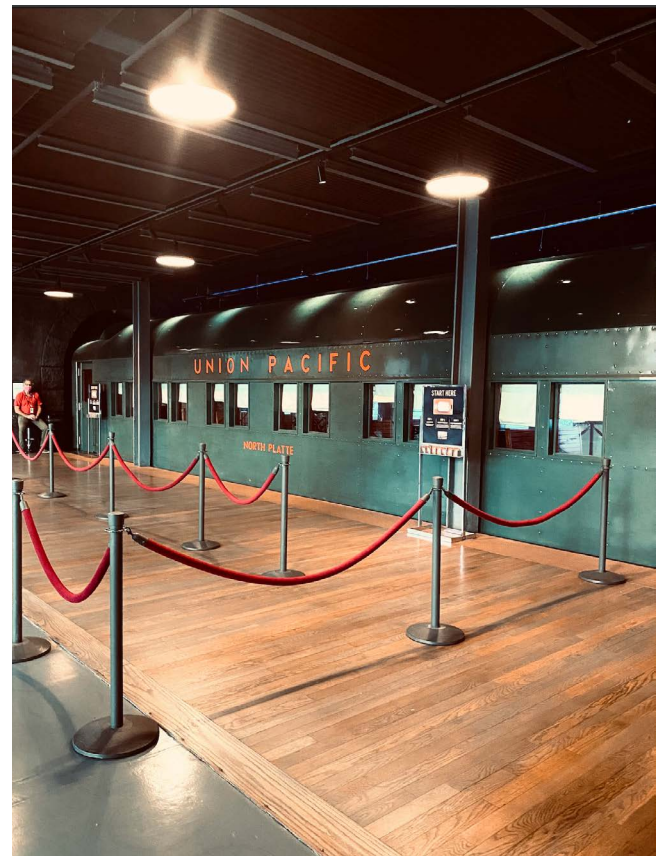
Portraying more of the war does not solely mean more exposure to

violence. America's solipsistic view also leads it to overlook remarkable stories of resilience and solidarity, which have the capacity to inspire. One of my personal favorites is the story of the debut of Shostakovich's 7th Symphony in 1942. At the time, the city of Leningrad (today St. Petersburg) was encircled by the Nazis and cut off from the rest of Russia. Under blockade, the city's residents were starving to death and dying in the streets in huge numbers. But when the great composer Shostakovich wrote a symphony for the city, an incredible effort was made to gather together an orchestra to perform it in the besieged city. Musicians were dying of starvation at the rehearsals, but they practiced and performed it, and it was blasted at the attacking Nazi forces via loudspeakers. Soviet forces had even launched an attack specifically to keep the Germans from disrupting the symphony; one German soldier commented after the war that when he heard the sounds of the Leningrad orchestra, he knew that the city's will was too strong to break.

This is an incredible story, but—probably because it is about Russians—it has never been made into a Hollywood film. There are plenty of other true tales from the war about defiance under impossible odds, and about love keeping itself alive in hopeless conditions. When I contemplate World War II, I don't just think of the mountain of human bodies, but about the people who sang "We'll Meet Again," some of whom did meet again and some of whom didn't. I think about how happy the reunions were, and how strong the friendships were between those who saved each other's lives. And of course I think that while my grandfather was in the jungles of Burma, what he didn't know was that he was to meet my grandmother and would have a long, peaceful life ahead of him. I certainly do not see the war as a full indictment of humanity, only as proof of our capacity to destroy ourselves needlessly.

THE REAL WAR WILL NEVER GET IN THE HISTORY books. Or in the museums. It can't, because the real war only exists in the memories of a diminishing few. But while the rest of us will never know what it was like, we at least need to be aware that words like "dark" and "terrible" and "horror" and "fighting" do not even begin to capture the phenomena that are actually under discussion. Once you have started to realize what was done, to *really* realize it, and once you start to appreciate that the people involved were living creatures and not statistics or arrows on a battle map, I think it is very hard not to feel sick in the museum gift shop. But much as we might resist confronting the unpleasant or the gory or the meaningless and unnecessary, we need to understand how a disaster of this magnitude could happen, if we're to stop one from happening again. The Second World War was the greatest outburst of insanity, the most devastating human-made calamity, in our species' history. It is fairly recent, having occurred within the lifetimes of people still alive today. It is being slowly forgotten, and one service that the Museum performs is reminding new generations that there *was* a Second World War. But that effort will be in vain if the war becomes a hazy, far-off story about something vaguely bad that happened to people we never met. We have to see the participants in that epic tragedy—all of them, not just the Americans—as having been just as human as we are. ♣

All photographs by Nathan J. Robinson except photo of the USS Tang Submarine Experience, right, from WWII Museum publicity material



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