

The Magazine You Literally Can't Put Down

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 7, ISSUE 2

MAR./APR. 2022



DRONES

*They fill the skies
with death.*

CHAPLIN

*Portrait of a great
leftist filmmaker.*

FLORIDA

*Its natural wonders
are being destroyed.*



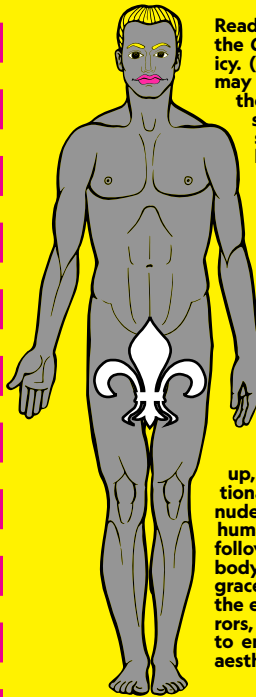
THE INTRODUCTION

"A MAGAZINE WITHOUT AN INTRODUCTION IS UNFIT FOR PUBLICATION" — HENRY LUCE

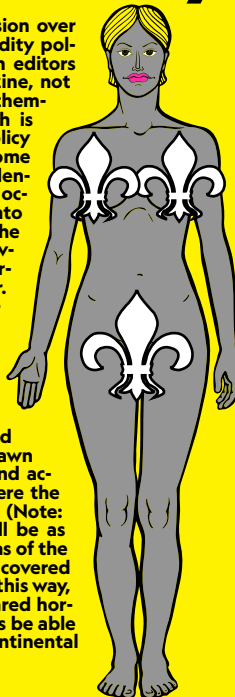
Why Not Renew The Sub?

You know what today is? It's a great day to renew your subscription to this magazine, that's what it is. You'll have to renew sooner or later, so why not do it today? And heck, while you're at it, why not buy forty gift subscriptions for friends, nemeses, and frenemies? And you know what—get a second subscription for yourself, too, while you're at it. You're worth it! Remember, the value of a person is measured in how many *Current Affairs* subscriptions they have.

New Nudity Policy



Readers have expressed confusion over the *Current Affairs* editorial nudity policy. (This is the policy on when editors may place nudity in the magazine, not the policy on when editors themselves may be nude, which is seldom.) The present policy has been ambiguous for some time: a stray areola or pudendum, tastefully presented, occasionally makes its way into print, but other times the areas of interest are covered with a comically oversized black censor bar. "Where is the consistency?" readers ask exasperatedly. Fortunately, the issue has now been resolved. After a multi-day conference in which preliminary plans, revised plans, and final blueprints were drawn up, there is now a concrete and actionable set of procedures where the nude human form is concerned. (Note: human only.) The practice shall be as follows: whenever sensitive areas of the body are displayed, they will be covered gracefully with a fleur-de-lis. In this way, the eyes of children may be spared horrors, but adults will nevertheless be able to enjoy an atmosphere of Continental aesthetic refinement.



ALL DOGS WELCOME



Among the many letters *Current Affairs* receives from readers, by far the saddest are from dogs. Dogs, it seems, subscribe to our magazine but do not feel "spoken to" by it. Instead they merely feel "spoken for." Well, dogs, we have news: there is a special feature in this issue just for you! Go see if you can find it!

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

A Kind Stranger

The editor-in-chief of this magazine was recently luxuriating in the steam room of the downtown Editors' Club when he struck up a conversation with one of the "spamen" who frequent the joint. As the proud father of a young magazine, our editor-in-chief naturally boasted about *Current Affairs*, and upon encountering the stranger once again by the lockers, our editor whipped out the photographs of *Current Affairs* he keeps in his wallet. "Pretty," said the stranger, "but you know how you'd sell more copies? Pictures of naked chicks on the cover." "How right you are," said our editor-in-chief, and the present edition is an effort to heed the stranger's kind advice.

Person
of the
Month

Roy
Orbison



THE NEWS WOULD GO HERE IF WE REPORTED THE NEWS

PIVOTING TO CRYPTO

The only way to make money these days is in "crypto." We don't like it, but we've never met a bandwagon we haven't hopped on, so here we go: *Current Affairs* is introducing its own cryptocurrency, which will be denominated in units of "Curries" and "Affies." Curries are the equivalent of dollars, affies the equivalent of cents. A curry is made of fifty-two affies (Remember: it's the same as the number of playing cards in a pack. We tried to pick a number that would make sense intuitively.) We are confident that within a few years, all major transactions in the contiguous U.S. will be conducted in either Curries, Affies, or some combination of the two. (Remember, fifty-two affies to the curry.) But even if this magazine never truly becomes *Currency Affairs*, we can guarantee that our cryptocurrency will only ever increase in value. It's a fantastic investment! Load up on as many as you can carry out of the store. You can't go wrong converting all of your worldly assets into curries (and affies).



HAVE YOU

CORRECTED
SOMEONE
WHO IS WRONG
TODAY?

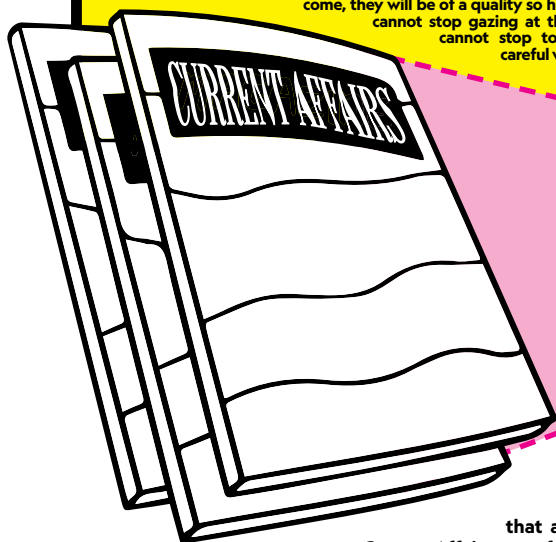


PRODUCT NEWS

Readers are constantly clamoring for new *Current Affairs* tie-in products. "Why," they ask plaintively, "is it only possible to buy sticker packs and posters in the magazine's online shop? Why not oversized novelty dice? Why not letter openers and shoehorns? Are you really so concerned about not diluting the CA brand that you are unwilling to make basic concessions to the reality of public demand?" But these pleas misunderstand the situation. It is not because we fear becoming crassly commercial that we do not expand our product lines—we are utterly shameless in this respect. It is because we value Quality with a capital Q, and we are unwilling to give our readers anything less than the most finely-crafted CA-branded teak and brass shoehorn. If this magazine is to produce novelty dice, they will be artisan-sculpted Italian dice, not dime-store plastic knockoffs. We will bring you more products, dear reader.



Oh, we will. They are in the "works," so to speak. And when they come, they will be of a quality so high that your eyes cannot stop gazing at them, your fingers cannot stop touching them. Be careful what you wish for!



LADIES' EDITION

Reader, you will not be surprised to hear that approximately 85% of article submissions to *Current Affairs* come from male writers. This is not because *Current Affairs* tends to be devoted to subjects historically of interest to men (e.g., demolition derbies, colognes, suits of armor, arson investigations, prostates, lawnmowers, cufflinks, and the like), but for the obvious reason that to submit an article to a magazine, one must have a high level of confidence that one's opinion on a topic is worth sharing with the entire world, and there tends to be a gender imbalance in the possession of this personal quality. And while *Current Affairs* takes great care to throw the overwhelming majority of these men's opinions into the wastebasket, this magazine is not entirely immune from a coverage bias. We have therefore produced an issue specially calibrated to a non-male audience, by covering the subjects least interesting to Men: the history of Italy, contemporary novels, the films of Charlie Chaplin, the neoliberalization of the university, conservative children's books, etc. We realize this renders *Current Affairs* essentially indistinguishable from *Cosmopolitan*, but it is necessary for the sake of balance. The regular bias will be restored in future editions.



HUMAN
FEMALE

A I EDITION

Today, anyone and everyone dreams of the "self-driving car": an automotive vehicle that will transport an individual from Point A to Point B without the individual having to manipulate steering, acceleration, or deceleration. Some (Elon Musk) lie and say that they have already produced self-driving cars. Others are dubious that we will see such marvels soon. We here at *Current Affairs* do not care about self-driving cars; our editors come to work on streetcars and bicycles. But we are certainly eager to see the development of whatever the magazine equivalent of the self-driving car might be. "That's all very well for you, Mr. Musk, but what can artificial intelligence do for US?" we cry out.

We have been informed by those who know that the best we can expect is something they refer to as the Self-Publishing Magazine. This is not a magazine devoted to telling readers how they might self-publish their own work (such as the legendary bimonthly Publish Yourself Today). No, it is a magazine that entirely self-produces indefinitely, without conscious human input. Such a magazine, once developed, would eliminate all need for the tedious labor of writing and editing. The Author, rumors of whose death have historically been exaggerated, could finally be well and truly killed.

How close are we to achieving such a modern miracle? Reader, you simply have no idea! Investigate, if you will, the present edition. First, as you will see, our Table of Contents this month contains pieces of abstract art produced by an Artificial Intelligence named Wombo, each piece of art commenting on the themes of one of the issue's articles. But it does not stop there: approximately 30% of the rest of the issue was produced by the Artificial Intelligence. Which 30%? Reader, if you cannot tell, does that not say all that needs to be said? Have we not shown that the Self-Publishing Magazine is no fantasy, but an imminent reality? The percentages of this magazine produced without human involvement will increase issue by issue until we reach full Self-Publishing mode. And reader, we bet you'll never even know the difference.

SPONSORS



GOVERNMENT
TYPEWRITERS



GOVERNMENT
BINOCULARS



GOVERNMENT
SMOKE-PIPES



GOVERNMENT
ENGRAVED
TORTOISES



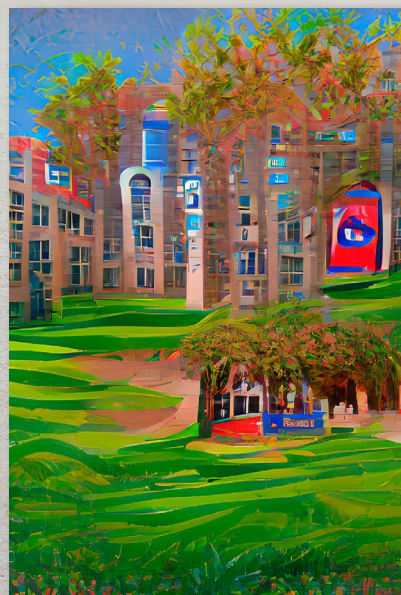
YUVAL NOAH HARARI
P. 6



CHARLIE CHAPLIN
P. 20



ASIAN AMERICAN PSYCHO
P. 42



THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY
P. 52

TABLE OF CONTENTS



DRONE SKIES
P. 50



RIGHT-WING CHILDREN'S BOOKS
P. 14



DEVELOPMENT IN FLORIDA
P. 58



ITALIAN AMERICANS
P. 32

For this edition, we have outsourced the creation of the Table of Contents to an Artificial Intelligence. "Wombo Dream" is an app that creates original artworks on the basis of keywords. It has been hailed by the press as "show[ing] us a glimpse of the future of synthetic or AI-generated media." For each article in the issue, we have instructed the Wombo to create a work of art about the subject matter. Readers may judge for themselves whether they believe the results suggest that Artificial Intelligence will soon render human artists obsolete.



THE PROPHET

The Dangerous Populist Science of YUVAL NOAH HARARI

by Darshana Narayanan

WATCH VIDEOS OF YUVAL NOAH HARARI, the author of the wildly successful book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, and you will hear him being asked the most astonishing questions.

- *“Is genetic manipulation—in the future—the way in which those that are truly seeking to influence humanity, get them to bond around a powerful myth?”* — an audience member at the Intelligence Squared Debate, filmed at the Royal Geographical Society
- *“What I do, is it still relevant, and how do I prepare for my future?”* — a student studying languages at the University of Antwerp
- *“At the end of Sapiens, you said we should be asking the question, ‘What do we want to want?’ Well, what do you think we should want to want?”* — an audience member at TED DIALOGUES, NATIONALISM VS. GLOBALISM: THE NEW POLITICAL DIVIDE
- *“You are somebody who practices Vipassana. Does that help you get closer to the force? Is that where you get closer to the force?”* — the moderator, at the 2018 INDIA TODAY CONCLAVE

Harari’s manner is soft-spoken, even shy, in these encounters. On occasion, he good-naturedly says that he doesn’t possess the powers of divination, then briskly moves on to answer the question with an authority that makes you wonder if indeed he does. A hundred years from now it is quite likely that humans will disappear, and the earth will be populated by very different beings like cyborgs and A.I., Harari said to one, asserting that it is difficult to predict “what kind of emotional or mental life such entities will have.” Diversify,

he advised the university student, because the job market of 2040 will be very volatile. We should “want to want to know the truth,” he announced at the TED Conference. “I practice Vipassana meditation to see reality more clearly,” Harari said to the India Today Conclave, without so much as cracking a smile at the absurdity of the question. Moments later, he elaborated: “If I can’t observe the reality of my own breath for 10 seconds, how can I hope to observe the reality of the geopolitical system?”

If you are not yet disquieted, consider: among Harari’s flock are some of the most powerful people in the world, and they come to him much like the ancient kings to their oracles. Mark Zuckerberg asked Harari if humanity is becoming more unified or fragmented by technology. The Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund asked him if doctors will depend on Universal Basic Income in the future. The CEO of Axel Springer, one of the largest publishing houses in Europe, asked Harari what publishers should do to succeed in the digital world. An interviewer with The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) asked him what effect COVID-19 would have on international scientific cooperation. In favor of Harari’s half-formed edicts, each subverted their own authority. And they did it not for an expert in any one of their fields, but for a historian who, in many ways, is a fraud—most of all, about science.

TIMES ARE TOUGH, AND WE ARE—ALL OF US—LOOKING for answers to literal questions of life and death. Will humans survive the coming waves of pandemics and climate change? Do our genes contain the key to understanding everything about us? Will technology save us, or will

it destroy us? The desire for a wise guide—a sort of prophet who boldly leaps across multiple disciplines to provide simple, readable, confident answers, tying it all together in page-turning stories—is understandable. But is it realistic?

It scares me that, to many, this question appears to be irrelevant. Harari's blockbuster, *Sapiens*, is a sweeping saga of the human species—from our humble beginnings as apes to a future where we will sire the algorithms that will dethrone and dominate us. *Sapiens* was published in English in 2014, and by 2019, it had been translated into more than 50 languages, selling over 13 million copies. Recommending the book on CNN in 2016, president Barack Obama said that *Sapiens*, like the Pyramids of Giza, gave him "a sense of perspective" on our extraordinary civilization. Harari has published two subsequent bestsellers—*Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2017), and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (2018). All told, his books have sold over 23 million copies worldwide. He might have a claim to be the most sought-after intellectual in the world, gracing stages far and wide, earning hundreds of thousands of dollars per speaking appearance.

We have been seduced by Harari because of the power, not of his truth, or scholarship, but of his storytelling. As a scientist, I know how difficult it is to spin complex issues into appealing and accurate storytelling. I also know when science is being sacrificed to sensationalism. Yuval Harari is what I call a "science populist." (Canadian clinical psychologist and YouTube guru Jordan Peterson is another example.) Science populists are gifted storytellers who weave sensationalist yarns around scientific "facts" in simple, emotionally persuasive language. Their narratives are largely scrubbed clean of nuance or doubt, giving them a false air of authority—and making their mes-

sage even more convincing. Like their political counterparts, science populists are sources of misinformation. They promote false crises, while presenting themselves as having the answers. They understand the seduction of a story well told—relentlessly seeking to expand their audience—never mind if the underlying science is warped in the pursuit of fame and influence.

In this day and age, good storytelling is more necessary, but riskier, than ever before, particularly when it comes to science. Science informs medical, environmental, legal, and many other public decisions, as well as our personal opinions on what to be wary about and how to lead our lives. Important societal and individual actions depend on our best understanding of the world around us—now more than ever, with the plague in all our houses. And with climate change, the worst yet to come.

We therefore have to subject any Populist Prophet to some serious scrutiny.

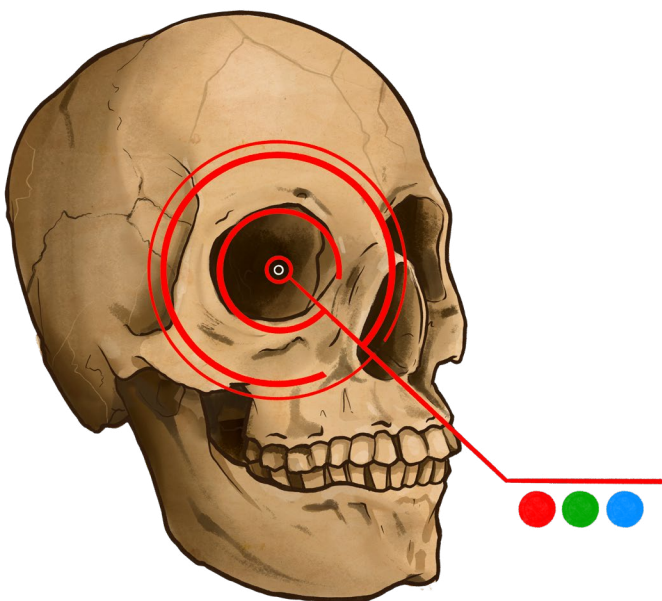
THIS MAY BE SURPRISING, BUT THE FACTUAL validity of Yuval Harari's work has received little evaluation from scholars or major publications. Harari's own thesis advisor, Professor Steven Gunn from Oxford—who guided Harari's research on "*Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History and Identity, 1450-1600*"—has made a startling acknowledgement: that his ex-pupil has essentially managed to dodge the fact-checking process. In the *New Yorker's* 2020 profile of Harari, Gunn supposes that Harari—specifically, with his book *Sapiens*—"leapfrogged" expert critique "by saying, 'Let's ask questions *so* large that no one can say, 'We think this bit's wrong and that bit's wrong.' ... Nobody's an expert on the meaning of everything, or the history of everybody, over a long period."

Still, I tried my hand at fact-checking *Sapiens*—the book that started it all. I consulted colleagues in the neuroscience and evolutionary biology community and found that Harari's errors are numerous and substantial, and cannot be dismissed as nit-picking. Though sold as nonfiction, some of his narratives are closer to fiction than fact. These are all signs of a science populist.

Consider "Part 1: The Cognitive Revolution," where Harari writes about our species' jump to the top of the food chain, vaulting over, for example, lions.

"Most top predators of the planet are majestic creatures. Millions of years of dominion have filled them with self-confidence. *Sapiens* by contrast is more like a banana republic dictator. Having so recently been one of the underdogs of the savannah, we are full of fears and anxieties over our position, which makes us doubly cruel and dangerous." Harari concludes that, "many historical calamities, from deadly wars to ecological catastrophes, have resulted from this over-hasty jump."

As an evolutionary biologist, I have to say: this passage sets my teeth on edge. What exactly makes for a self-confident lion? A loud roar? A bevy of lionesses? A firm pawshake? Is Harari's conclusion



based on field observations or experiments in a laboratory? (The text contains no clue about his sources.) Does anxiety really make humans cruel? Is he implying that, had we taken our time getting to the top of the food chain, this planet would not have war or man-made climate change?

The passage evokes scenes from *The Lion King*—majestic Mufasa looking out into the horizon and telling Simba that everything the light touches is his kingdom. Harari’s storytelling is vivid and gripping, but it is empty of science.

Next, take the issue of language. Harari claims that “[many] animals, including all ape and monkey species, have vocal languages.”

I have spent a decade studying vocal communication in marmosets, a New World monkey. (Occasionally, their communication with me involved spraying their urine in my direction.) In the Princeton Neuroscience Institute, where I received my doctorate, we studied how vocal behavior emerges from the interaction of evolutionary, developmental, neuronal, and biomechanical phenomena. Our work succeeded in breaking the dogma that monkey communication (unlike human communication) is pre-programmed into neural or genetic codes. In fact, we discovered that monkey babies learn to “talk,” with the help of their parents, in a fashion similar to the way human babies learn.

Yet, in spite of all their similarities to humans, monkeys cannot be said to have a “language.” Language is a rule-bound symbolic system in which symbols (words, sentences, images, etc.) refer to people, places, events, and relations in the world—but also evoke and reference other symbols within the same system (e.g., words defining other words). The alarm calls of monkeys, and the songs of birds and whales, can transmit information; but we—as German philosopher Ernst Cassirer has said—live in “a new dimension of reality” made possible by the acquisition of a symbolic system.

Scientists may have competing theories on how language came to be—but everyone, from linguists like Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker, to experts on primate communication like Michael Tomasello and Asif Ghazanfar, are in agreement that, although precursors can be found in other animals, language is unique to humans. It’s a maxim that is taught in undergraduate biology classes all around the world, and one that can be found through an easy Google search.

My scientific colleagues take issue with Harari as well. Biologist Hjalmar Turesson points out that Harari’s assertion that chimpanzees “hunt together and fight shoulder to shoulder against baboons, cheetahs and enemy chimpanzees” cannot be true because cheetahs and chimpanzees don’t live in the same parts of Africa. “Harari is possibly confusing cheetahs with leopards,” Turesson says.

Maybe, as details go, knowing the distinction between cheetahs and leopards is not that important. Harari is after all writing the story of humans. But his errors unfortunately extend to our species as well. In the *Sapiens* chapter titled “Peace in our Time,” Harari uses the example of the Waorani people of Ecuador to argue that historically, “the decline of violence is due largely to the rise of the state.” He tells us

the Waorani are violent because they “live in the depths of the Amazon forest, without army, police or prisons.” It is true that the Waorani once had some of the highest homicide rates in the world, but they have lived in relative peace since the early 1970s. I spoke to Anders Smolka, a plant geneticist, who happens to have spent time with the Waorani in 2015. Smolka reported that Ecuadorian law is not enforced out in the forest, and the Waorani have no police or prisons of their own. “If spearings had still been of concern, I’m absolutely sure I would have heard about it,” he says. “I was there volunteering for an eco-tourism project, so the safety of our guests was a pretty big deal.” Harari uses an exceedingly weak example to justify the need for our famously racist and violent police state.

These details could seem inconsequential, but each is a crumbling block in what Harari falsely presents as an inviolable foundation. If a cursory reading shows this litany of basic errors, I believe a more thorough examination will lead to wholesale repudiations.

HARARI IS OFTEN NOT JUST DESCRIBING OUR past; he is prognosticating on the very future of humanity itself. Everyone is, of course, entitled to speculate on our future. But it is important to find out if these speculations hold water, especially if a person has the ear of our decision-making elites—as Harari does. False projections have real consequences. They could mislead hopeful parents into thinking that genetic engineering will eradicate autism, lead to enormous amounts of money being poured into dead-end projects, or leave us woefully unprepared for threats such as pandemics.

Now here’s what Harari had to say about pandemics in his 2017 book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*.

“So in the struggle against calamities such as AIDS and Ebola, scales are tipping in humanity’s favor. ... It is therefore likely that major epidemics will continue to endanger humankind in the future only if humankind itself creates them, in the service of some ruthless ideology. The era when humankind stood helpless before natural epidemics is probably over. But we may come to miss it.”

I wish we had come to miss it. Instead, over 6 million of us have died of COVID-19 as per official counts, with some estimates putting the true count at 12-22 million. And whether you think SARS-CoV-2—the virus responsible for the pandemic—came directly from the wild, or through the Wuhan Institute of Virology, we can all agree that the pandemic was not created in “service of some ruthless ideology.”

Harari could not have been more wrong; yet, like a good science populist, he continued to offer his supposed expertise by appearing on numerous shows during the pandemic. He appeared on NPR, talking about “how to tackle both the epidemic and the resulting economic crisis.” He went on Christiane Amanpour’s show to highlight the “key questions emerging from the coronavirus outbreak.” Then it was on to BBC Newsnight, where he offered “a historical perspective on the

coronavirus.” He switched things up for Sam Harris’ podcast, where he told us about “the future implications” of COVID-19. Harari also found time to make an appearance on Iran International with Sadeq Saba, on the India Today E-Conclave Corona Series, and a slew of other news channels around the world.

Using the opportunity to promote a false crisis—another core trait of a science populist—Harari gave dire warnings of “under-the-skin surveillance” (admittedly a worrisome concept). “*As a thought experiment,*” he said, “*consider a hypothetical government that demands that every citizen wears a biometric bracelet that monitors body temperature and heart-rate 24 hours a day.*” The upside, he says, is that a government could potentially use this information to stop an epidemic within days. The downside is that it could give the government an enhanced surveillance system, because: “*if you can monitor what happens to my body temperature, blood pressure and heart-rate as I watch the video clip, you can learn what makes me laugh, what makes me cry, and what makes me really, really angry.*”

Human emotions, and our expressions of emotions, are highly subjective and variable. There are cultural and individual differences in the way we interpret our sensations. Our emotions cannot be inferred from physiological measures stripped bare of contextual information (an old enemy, a new lover, and caffeine can all make our heart thump harder). This holds true even if more extensive physiological measures than body temperature, blood pressure, and heart rate are monitored. It even holds true when facial movements are monitored. Scientists like psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett are finding that—contrary to long held belief—even emotions like sadness and anger are not universal. “Facial movements do not have inherent emotional meaning to be read like words on a page,” explains Feldman Barrett. This is why we have not been able to create technological systems that can infer our emotions (and why we may never be able to build these all-reading all-knowing systems).

Harari’s claims are scientifically invalid, but they cannot be dismissed. “We live in a digital panopticon,” as my colleague, neuroscientist Ahmed El Hady, says. Corporations and governments are constantly monitoring us. If we let people like Harari convince us that surveillance technologies can “*know us far better than we know ourselves,*” we are in danger of letting the algorithms gaslight us. And that has real-world implications for the worse, such as deciding who is employable or who poses a security risk based on the supposed wisdom of an algorithm.

HARARI’S SPECULATIONS ARE CONSISTENTLY based on a poor understanding of science. His predictions of our biological future, for instance, are based on a gene-centric view of evolution—a way of thinking that has (unfortunately) dominated public discourse due to public figures like him. Such reductionism advances a simplistic view of reality, and worse yet, veers dangerously into eugenics territory.

In the final chapter of *Sapiens*, Harari writes,

“Why not go back to God’s drawing board and design better Sapiens? The abilities, needs and desires of Homo sapiens have a genetic basis. And the sapiens genome is no more complex than that of voles and mice. (The mouse genome contains about 2.5 billion nucleobases, the sapiens genome about 2.9 billion bases, meaning that the latter is only 14 percent larger.) ... If genetic engineering can create genius mice, why not genius humans? If it can create monogamous voles, why not humans hard-wired to remain faithful to their partners?”

It would be convenient indeed if genetic engineering were a magic wand—quick flicks of which could turn philanderers into faithful partners, and everyone into Einstein. This is sadly not the case. Let’s say we want to become a nonviolent species. Scientists have found that low activity of the monoamine oxidase-A (MAO-A) gene is linked to aggressive behavior and violent offenses—but in case we are tempted to “*go back to God’s drawing board and design better Sapiens*” (as Harari says we can), not everyone with low MAO-A activity is violent, nor is everyone with high MAO-A activity nonviolent. People who grow up in extremely abusive environments often become aggressive or violent, no matter what their genes. Having high MAO-A activity can protect you from this fate, but it is not a given. On the contrary, when children are raised in loving and supportive environments, even those with low MAO-A activity very often thrive.

Our genes are not our puppet masters, pulling the right strings at the right time to control the events that create us. When Harari writes about altering our physiology, or “engineering” humans to be faithful or clever, he is skipping over the many non-genetic mechanisms that form us.

For example, even something as seemingly hardwired as our physiology—cells dividing, moving, deciding their fates, and organizing into tissues and organs—is not engineered by genes alone. In the 1980s, scientist J.L. Marx conducted a series of experiments in *Xenopus* (an aquatic frog native to sub-Saharan Africa) and found that “mundane” biophysical events (like chemical reactions in the cells, mechanical pressures inside and on the cells, and gravity) can switch genes on and off, determining cell fate. Animal bodies, he concluded, result from an intricate dance between genes, and changing physical and environmental events.

Take taste. Reading someone like Harari, one might think that the behavior of newborn human babies, for example, is almost exclusively dominated by their genes, since babies have almost no “nurture” to speak of. But research shows that the six-month-old babies of women who drank a lot of carrot juice in the last trimester of their pregnancy enjoyed carrot-flavored cereal more than other babies did. These babies like the flavor of carrots, but not because of “carrot-liking” genes. When mothers (biological or foster) breastfeed their babies, tastes of the foods they have eaten are reflected in their breast milk, and their babies develop a preference for these foods. Babies “inherit” food preferences from the behavior of their mothers.

For generations, new mothers from Korea have been told to drink

bowls of seaweed soup, and Chinese women have pigs' feet stewed with ginger and vinegar soon after giving birth. Korean and Chinese children can inherit culture-specific taste preferences without the need for "ginger-eating" or "vinegar-wanting" genes.

In this modern world, no matter where we live, we consume processed sugars. A prolonged high sugar diet can lead to abnormal eating patterns and obesity. Scientists have used animal models and uncovered a molecular mechanism through which this happens. High sugar diets activate a protein complex called PRC2.1, which then regulates gene expression to reprogram taste neurons and reduce the sensation of sweetness, locking animals into maladaptive patterns of feeding. Here dietary habits are altering gene expression—an example of "epigenetic reprogramming"—leading to unhealthy food choices.

Nurture shapes nature, and nature shapes nurture. It is not a duality; it's more like a Mobius strip. The reality of how the "abilities, needs and desires of *Homo sapiens*" come to be is far more sophisticated (and elegant!) than what Harari portrays.

Geneticists Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb say it best in their book *Evolution in Four Dimensions*,

"The idea that there is a gene for adventurousness, heart disease, obesity, religiosity, homosexuality, shyness, stupidity, or any other aspect of mind or body has no place on the platform of genetic discourse. Although many psychiatrists, biochemists, and other scientists who are not geneticists (yet express themselves with remarkable facility on genetic issues) still use the language of genes as simple causal agents, and promise their audience rapid solutions to all sorts of problems, they are no more than propagandists whose knowledge or motives must be suspect."

HARARI'S MOTIVES REMAIN MYSTERIOUS; but his descriptions of biology (and predictions about the future) are guided by an ideology prevalent among Silicon Valley technologists like Larry Page, Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and others. They may have differing opinions on whether the algorithms will save or destroy us. But they believe, all the same, in the transcendent power of digital computation. "We're headed toward a situation where A.I. is vastly smarter than humans and I think that time frame is less than five years from now," Musk said in a 2020 *New York Times* interview. Musk is wrong. The algorithms will not take all our jobs, or rule the world, or put an end to humanity anytime soon (if at all). "Today and for the foreseeable future, this is stuff of science fiction," says A.I. researcher François Chollet about the possibility of algorithms attaining cognitive autonomy. By echoing the narratives of Silicon Valley, our science populist Harari is promoting—yet again—a false crisis. Worse, he is diverting our attention from the real harms of algorithms and the unchecked power of the tech industry.

In the last chapter of *Homo Deus*, Harari tells us of a new religion, "The Data Religion." The practitioners of this religion—"Dataists" he calls them—perceive the entire universe as flows of data. They see

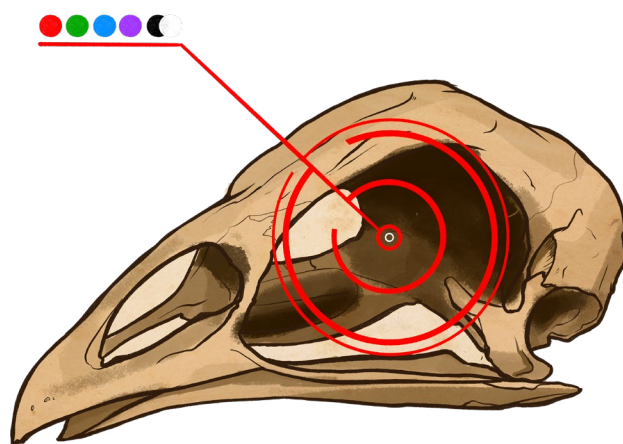
all organisms as biochemical data processors, and believe that humanity's "cosmic vocation" is to create an all-knowing, all-powerful data processor that will understand us better than we can understand ourselves. The logical conclusion to this saga, Harari predicts, is that the algorithms will assume authority over all facets of our lives—they will decide who we marry, what careers we pursue, and how we will be governed. (Silicon Valley, as you can guess, is a hub of The Data Religion.)

"*Homo sapiens* is an obsolete algorithm," Harari states, paraphrasing the Dataists.

"After all, what's the advantage of humans over chickens? Only that in humans information flows in much more complex patterns than in chickens. Humans absorb more data, and process it using better algorithms. Well then, if we could create a data-processing system that absorbs even more data than a human being, and that processes it even more efficiently, wouldn't that system be superior to a human in exactly the same way that a human is superior to a chicken?"

But a human is not a spruced-up chicken, or even necessarily superior in all ways to a chicken. In fact, chickens can "absorb more data" than humans, and "process it better"—at least in the domain of vision. The human retina has photoreceptor cells sensitive to red, blue, and green wavelengths. Chicken retinas have these, plus cone cells for violet wavelengths (including some ultraviolet), plus specialized receptors that can help them track motion better. Their brains are equipped to process all this additional information. The chicken's world is a technicolored extravaganza that we can't even fathom. My point here is not that a chicken is better than a human—this is not a competition—but that chickens are uniquely "chicken" in the same way that we are uniquely "human."

Neither chickens nor humans are mere algorithms. Our brains have a body, and that body is situated in a world. Our behaviors emerge because of our worldly and bodily activities. Living beings are not just absorbing and processing the data flows of our environment; we are continuously altering and creating our own—and each other's—environments, a process called "niche construction" in



evolutionary biology. When a beaver builds a dam over a stream, it creates a lake, and all the other organisms now have to live in a world with a lake in it. Beavers can create wetlands that persist for centuries, changing the selection pressures their descendants are exposed to, potentially causing a shift in the evolutionary process. *Homo sapiens* have unrivaled flexibility; we have extraordinary ability to adapt to our environments, and also modify them. Our acts of living don't just differentiate us from algorithms; they make it near impossible for the algorithms to accurately predict our social behaviors, such as who we

will love, how well we will do at future jobs, or whether we are likely to commit a crime.

Harari is careful to fashion himself as an objective scribe. He takes pains to tell us he is presenting the worldview of the Dataists, and not his own. But then he does something very sneaky. The Dataist view "may strike you as some eccentric fringe notion," he says, "but in fact it has already conquered most of the scientific establishment." In presenting the Dataist worldview as conclusive (having "conquered most of the scientific establishment"), he tells us that it is "objectively" true that humans are algorithms, and our march to obsolescence—as the passive recipients of decisions made by better algorithms—is unavoidable, because it is integrally tied to our humanity. Turning to the footnote in support of this sweeping statement, we find that of the four books he cites, three have been written by non-scientists—a music publicist, a trendcaster, and a magazine publisher.

There is nothing pre-determined about the fate of humanity. Our autonomy is eroding not because of cosmic karma, but because of a new economic model invented by Google and perfected by Facebook—a form of capitalism that has found a way to manipulate us for the purposes of making money. Social scientist Shoshana Zuboff has given this economic model the name "surveillance capitalism." Surveillance capitalist corporations—Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, and others—construct the digital platforms we increasingly rely on to live, work, and play. They monitor our behaviors in astounding detail and use the information to construct digital environments that hijack our behaviors to maximize their profits. As a byproduct, their digital platforms have helped create echo chambers that program our thinking and behavior—resulting in climate denialism, science skepticism and political polarization. By naming the enemy, and characterizing it as an invention of humans—not a fact of nature or technological inevitability—Zuboff gives us a way to fight it. As you can imagine, Zuboff, unlike Harari, is not a loved figure in Silicon Valley.

IN OCTOBER OF 2021, HARARI RELEASED VOLUME 2 OF the graphic adaptation of *Sapiens*. Coming up next are a *Sapiens* children's book, *Sapiens Live*, an immersive experience, and a multi-season TV show inspired by *Sapiens*. Our Populist Prophet is relentless in his search for new followers—and with them new heights of fame and influence.

Harari is a gifted storyteller. A close look at his record, however, shows that Harari sacrifices science to sensationalism, often making grave factual errors, and portraying what should be speculative as certain. The basis on which he makes his statements is obscure; he rarely provides adequate footnotes or references and is remarkably stingy with acknowledging thinkers who have, far in advance of his books, formulated the ideas he presents as his own. And most dangerous of all, he reinforces the narratives of surveillance capitalists, giving them a free pass to manipulate our behaviors to suit their commercial interests. To save ourselves from this current crisis, and the ones ahead of us, we must forcefully reject the dangerous populist science of Yuval Noah Harari. ♣

CURRENT AFFAIRS

EDITORIAL STAFF

Publisher & Chairperson
S. CHAPIN DOMINO

Editor in Chief
NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Online Editor
LILY SÁNCHEZ

Subscriber Relations
ANNE SUMMER

Editor at Large
YASMIN NAIR

House Economist
ROB LARSON

Social Media
SARAH GRATHWOHL

Board of Directors
JESSICA ELLIOTT
NATHAN J. ROBINSON
PAUL WATERS-SMITH

Contributing Editor
BRIAHNA JOY GRAY

Podcast & Video Editor
TIM GRAY



In
terrifying
fulfillment
of every
right-winger's
nightmare,
marauding
Antifa have invaded
an American suburb
and run amok. You are
the police and must
extricate them. Can you
spot all 24 members of
Antifa? **REMEMBER:** some
are VERY well-hidden.

GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE YOUNG

by Rob Larson



*Reactionary children's books
take their awful place in
the wall-to-wall right-wing
media lineup...*

WHATEVER MISDEED I COMMITTED IN A previous life must have been a doozy indeed, because a certain cruel editor of a particular leftist magazine, let's call it *Contemporary Episodes*, has once more sent me a fever dream in a box. On my desk is a package containing copies of the *Heroes of Liberty* library, a series of right-wing books for kids age 7-12. I have a children's book on Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett, one on conservative pundit Thomas Sowell, and finally U.S. president Ronald Reagan.

The box of books is on my desk because of a very slightly critical review I wrote in 2020 for this magazine of a publishing project called *The Tuttle Twins*, which is a series of kids' books that teach a variety of libertarian lessons, like that some workers are more valuable than others and that governments suppress free markets. My review of this political propaganda for kids of pre-critical thinking age was extremely gently critical, concluding that the series was "a hideous fraud and an ugly twisted farce." My good-natured ribbing led to it being covered by some of the big, well-funded libertarian propaganda entities and right-wing think tanks, including the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) and the CATO Institute. This coverage largely consisted of gloating that the mean review made for good ad copy and that more copies of the books had been sold as a result. Typical for the right, the response was to brag about their economic power rather than respond to any of the substantive arguments I made.

I am now, then, apparently this magazine's designated book reviewer for the niche but apparently burgeoning subgenre of reactionary children's literature. And so let us proceed to the present offering: *Heroes of Liberty*.

These new books have the characteristic giant size and conspicuous thinness of books for kids still learning how to read and enjoy it. They're sturdy, with pretty colors and pleasing art design.

They are also the dark bile of the infected toe of the Devil himself. Lacking even the dark sincerity that came from the dedication

of the writer of the dreadful *Tuttle Twins* series, these books are pure synthetic propaganda made to appease the demand of a Sheldon Adelson or a Charles Koch that the children get more naked conservative propaganda in their diets. So let's have a look at the effort to make some *really* young Republicans.

ReactionarYA

LET'S START WITH JUSTICE BARRETT. BARRETT, OF COURSE, is most popularly known for her recent receptiveness to striking down major portions of the *Roe v. Wade* ruling that legalized abortion for the first trimester of pregnancy. Striking down the ruling would activate various "trigger laws" and related acts enacted in a majority of U.S. states that ban the practice, drastically restricting access to family planning and reproductive health care for millions of women—especially women without the money to travel to a blue state for the procedure. Access to abortion remains widely popular in the U.S., but our limited level of democracy means this need not shape policy.

The *Heroes of Liberty* book does not trouble its juvenile reader with such unpleasantness. We learn that Barrett works in the Supreme Court, "in a big, white, majestic building," and "Amy has a very sharp mind. She also has a very big heart: she's the mother of seven children, two of whom she adopted because they had no home of their own." We get her life story—big Catholic family, good student, oldest kid driving the little ones around in a LeSabre. Great humanizing detail.

The art in this book is truly abhorrent, the worst in the books I read. It's a really weird watercolor-y software-generated look with Munchian flowing colors next to photorealistic renderings of people's faces. The artist credit doesn't specify a medium but I'd guess an illustration program named MigraineSoft.

Barrett goes to Notre Dame and learns about our Constitution which gives us freedom and democratic government, with a fun Supreme Court "to make sure that our laws and our government follow the Constitution." Barrett gets married, has kids, and adopts a Haitian child who was "very quiet and rarely got enough to eat. ... She was too weak to sit up or even to cry." This is followed by an illustration of a TV-ready moment showing her taking the child from their hellish country. The couple wanted to collect more orphans, "but they couldn't. The government of Haiti had made everything so complicated: there were too many offices and too many officials who created so much red tape. ... In the end, the government would not let him go."

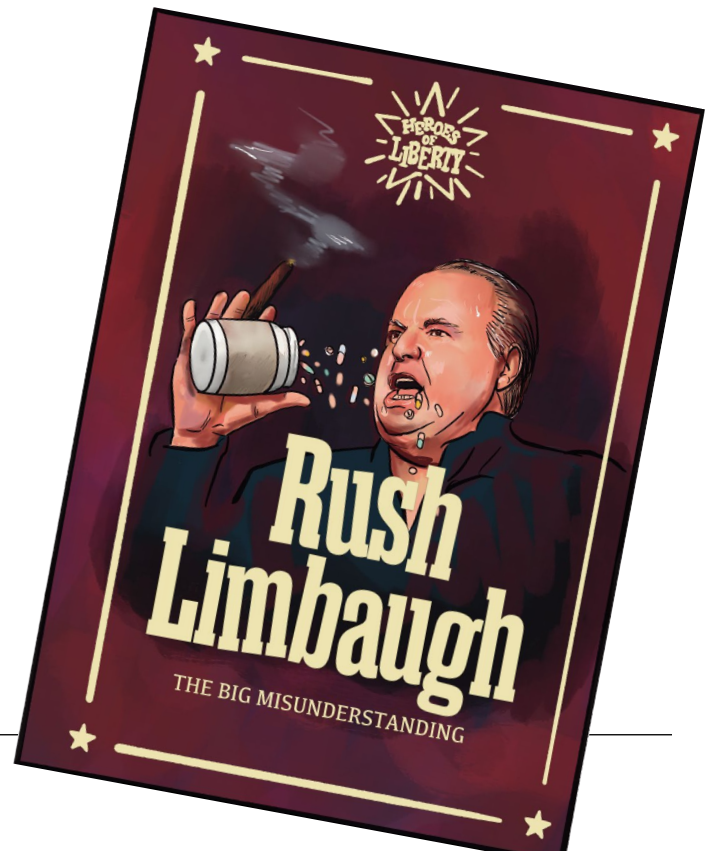
But then, great news! The catastrophic Haitian earthquake of 2010 strikes, and the government has a change of heart. "Amy's eyes welled with tears." Notably, the orphanage where

the Barretts' adoptee, John Peter, lived was "typical of many in Haiti," as the *New York Times* observed, as "many weren't literal orphans—their parents simply couldn't afford to care for them." Notably, the U.S. overthrew the government of Haiti three times in the twentieth century.

Barrett's career takes off as she becomes a federal judge. "She would get up early in the morning to work quietly at her desk while everyone else was still asleep. This way, she would have time to spend with her family later in the day." We learn the criminal justice system will "put criminals in jail" yet gives "everyone a chance to try and prove his innocence." Barrett clerks for a jolly-looking man with impish eyes, a "Justice Scalia" who believes "our laws should follow the Constitution precisely." "Amy liked Justice Scalia a lot. She loved his big rolling laugh and his sense of humor." And his boyish charm while upholding sodomy laws and overturning the main part of the Voting Rights Act!

Barrett gets confirmed, and everyone is impressed that she's speaking without notes at her hearing. Barrett learned that "as a justice ... she would have to put aside her own feelings. ... This is called being impartial ... When you are a judge, your job is not to impose your own thoughts or views on someone else. It is to make sure that the law is followed and the Constitution is upheld."

The book concludes that "her children are lucky to have her as a mother, and we are lucky to have her as a Supreme Court justice." Great kids' stuff here, no way *Star Wars* can compete with this. Just a story about a nice lady who is smart and nice and



becomes powerful and it's our lucky day. Bet your life that one day a kid will read this book without realizing they exist because Barrett helped take away their mom's ability to pick a family size.

Self-Made Black Lives Matter

NEXT, *THOMAS SOWELL: A SELF-MADE MAN*. Readers familiar with the non-stop nightmare hellscape of U.S. media may recognize Sowell as a prominent Black conservative pundit, a libertarian with Ivy League credentials, an economics PhD from the conservative stronghold of the University of Chicago, dozens of books, and a nationally syndicated opinion column. He spent decades at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, a conservative think tank where he was the Rose and Milton Friedman Senior Fellow on Public Policy (readers will be familiar with my intergalactically bestselling book *Capitalism vs. Freedom* on the Friedmans and their bad ideas). Sowell was as regular a guest on Rush Limbaugh and Fox News as the phrase "Black conservative intellectual" makes you think he would be.

"Thomas Sowell started out in life at a huge disadvantage. He was raised by his great aunt in a poor town in the South. Growing up, he never got the chance to know his mother and father. And he often had no money for new shoes or even for bus fare. But Thomas Sowell succeeded because wherever he went, and whatever he did, he never accepted anything he didn't think he deserved. He want-

ed nothing unearned and asked for nobody's pity. Thomas Sowell was determined to make it on his own. And he did."

Get it? Black people who don't take welfare succeed! Meaning they become nationally-known minority supporters of taking away income supports and benefits from poor people, disproportionately minorities. This is the real dark message of the whole reactionary kids' publishing project: Take it from me, kid with no critical thinking skills, if you don't ask or expect anything like welfare or health care from the rich and powerful of society, and instead get a degree in defending them and then work in what is basically a parallel unaccredited university system of think thanks, you can be rich and go on big-time right-wing media and, as a nonwhite person, speak utterly conventional conservative platitudes and be a stupendous smash it that brings down the house every time. Sure, the working class will slow-glide into misery and fascism while the ice caps melt, but by then you've had quite the career!

We get many a page on Sowell's humble beginnings, with no water or power, in "the days of Jim Crow laws in the South. These laws separated Americans based on color. It was unfair." There is no suggestion that this condition has anything to do with right-wing conservatism. (The book does not, for instance, mention that the leading conservative intellectual of the 20th century, William F. Buckley, spent these years defending Southern segregationism.) Sowell learns to read at a young age. His aunt's partner takes him to church and presents him to the congregation, where the partner declares he is stepping down from his church duties to help raise Sowell, illustrated with a glowing scene before a gigantic cross.

The family moves to New York City, where teachers are alleged to have wanted Sowell to repeat the third grade, and because it's a right-wing



indoctrination book, the teachers are depicted as a bullying crowd of sneering freaks. Fortunately the principal, who is handsome, takes young Thomas's side after he proves he can do fourth-grade math. Thomas stands up to bullies, moves out, takes part-time jobs, and when he loses his job, the book notes that "he was sure about one thing, though: the answer wasn't begging or asking for favors. He would solve his own problems by himself, thank you very much." He cuts back on food until he gets a new job, with the clear implication: kids, if you lose your job in some recession wave of million-person layoffs, solve the problem yourself! Eat less! Eat day-old bread! That is literally what is depicted.

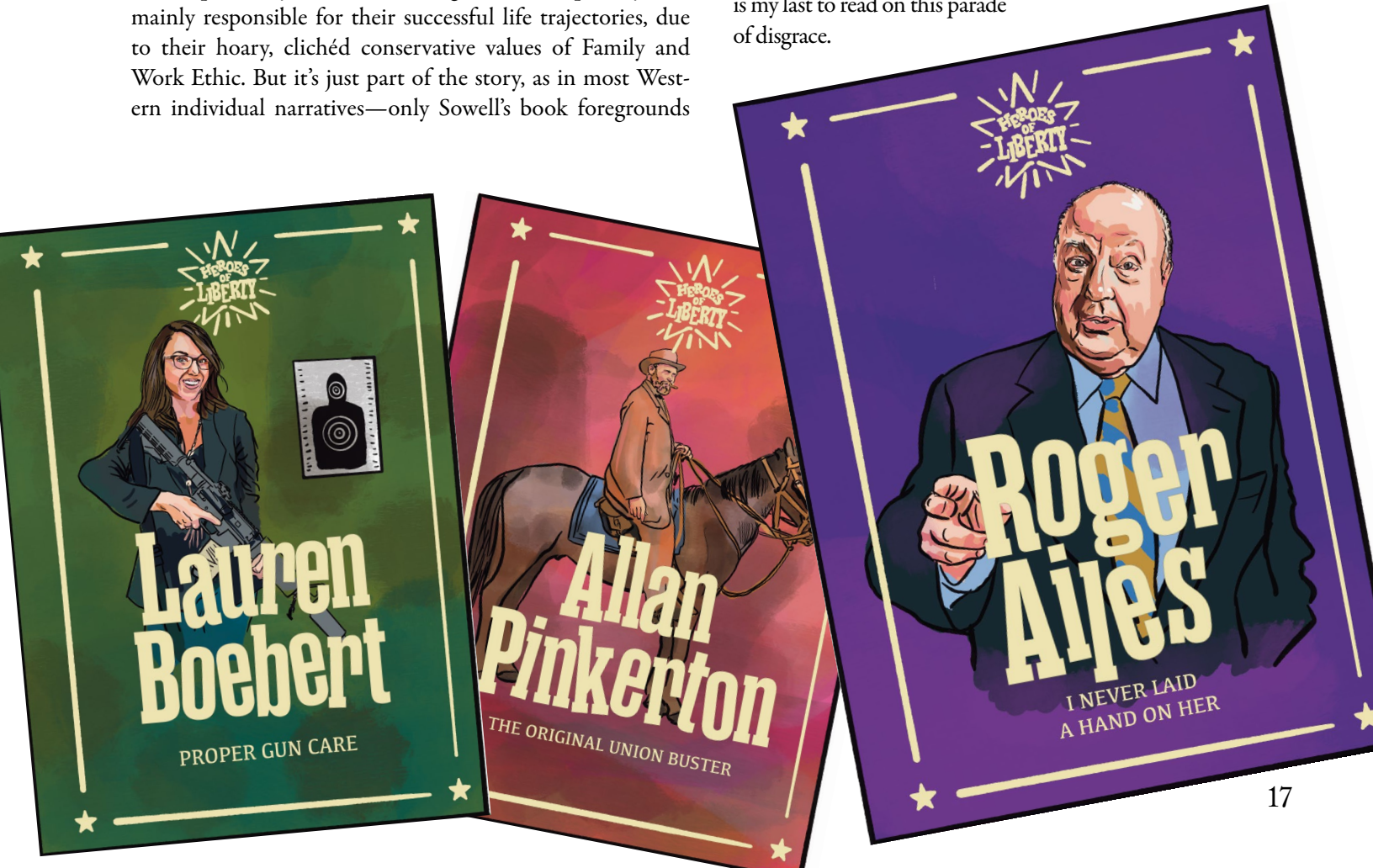
We get page after page of Sowell working with eyes downcast, and when he struggles, "He didn't dwell on the past or blame Aunt Molly, their poverty, his teachers, or American society." He takes night classes, attends Harvard, teaches economics at Cornell as "an esteemed professor." He helps a Black international student through college by tutoring her rather than giving a mercy grade, and "returned to the question of undeserved favors in his many books ... He insisted that in the long run, they just don't help people improve their lives ... if you give people something they didn't earn, they wouldn't learn how to earn it themselves."

Conspicuously, Barrett and Reagan are both portrayed as mainly responsible for their successful life trajectories, due to their hoary, clichéd conservative values of Family and Work Ethic. But it's just part of the story, as in most Western individual narratives—only Sowell's book foregrounds

his self-madness. Could it be because he's the Black one and the Right has a miles-long paranoid legacy of disparaging the work ethic of the Black population originally imported for slave labor? No, it could not.

One consolation in this monumentally evil celebration of knowing your place and conforming to the system is the art. Illustrator Carl Pearce's work here is by far the best in the books I reviewed, with really lovely composition, and incredible feeling in the faces and playful charm in the children. It's a conservative book, so the teacher characters are evil, but their funny evil faces are fun to look at. Pearce does a ton of fine work here, especially considering the script he's working from. Just an impressive talent. Carl, draw for *Current Affairs*!

The books all end with a "fun facts" section, and Sowell's includes this: "He's known for his witty observations. He once said: 'It's amazing how much panic one honest man can spread among a multitude of hypocrites.'" Hope you weren't eating while reading that cheeky zinger, ho ho! For his years of valuable service to the U.S. right wing, Sowell had his brushes with real power, too. He was offered the position of Secretary of Labor and, later, Education—terrible things to contemplate—by president Ronald Reagan. His book is my last to read on this parade of disgrace.



Champion of Tyranny

FINALLY, RONALD REAGAN. LEFTIST WRITERS ARE KNOWN to have a habit of trying to be cool and neutral when discussing his administration and legacy, only to eventually crack and explode into ranty towering condemnations. I'm sure that won't happen this time!

Ronald Reagan: It's Morning in America is a marquee selection for the series and longer than the others, as Saint Ronald is a mainstream conservative icon, often voted the greatest U.S. president. His administration has the real legacy of moving the world's most important country firmly into today's "neoliberal" era of deregulated corporations, lower taxes on the rich, and crushed labor unions. Get ready, folks.

"Ronald Reagan was one of America's toughest presidents. That is why he was able to lead the free world to victory in the Cold War. The Cold War was a contest between two visions: freedom and communism. The United States led the free world ... The fate of the world hung in the balance ... But Ronald Reagan was not afraid. He called the communist bloc an 'Evil Empire,' which is exactly what it was."



But the first story is of President Reagan being "deeply moved" by the story of Reginald Andrews, an unemployed Black man who saved a blind person who fell on subway tracks. Reagan called a meatpacking plant Andrews had recently interviewed for and "put in a good word for Mr. Andrews. Mr. Andrews was overjoyed when he got the job. He had eight children to feed. It was December. Christmas was just a few days away."

It's an oddly-placed effort to whitewash Reagan's racial record, which included fighting doggedly for years against sanctions on South Africa's cruel apartheid regime. Reagan also doggedly resisted the creation of a national holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., resistance which continued until veto-proof Congressional majorities forced his hand.

Then it's off to the man's life story. Salesman father, moves a lot, blows a ball game (aw!). Daddy drinks, little Ronald has to drag him in the front door one night, and, like a lot of children of dysfunctional families, he goes to Hollywood. "Long before he became president, Americans all over the country came to know his warm and friendly voice, his big gleaming smile, and that twinkle in his eye when he delivered a punch line." But he "worried about communism in particular. It posed a major threat to the American way of life."

In America, "our government should protect our freedom, not run our lives for us. It should be up to each person to decide what is best for him or her," like which billionaire's warehouse empire to work for. But the rotten Communists "think the government knows better and that it should control every aspect of people's lives ... In communist countries, governments also think that people should believe in communism and not in God ... There are people in America who believe in communism, too, and they want the government to have more control of our lives. Reagan thought they were dangerous. He decided to enter politics to oppose them."

This is a very healthy and even-handed portrayal of politics for young minds, and they're right, socialist are dangerous. You're in danger of them inflicting health coverage on you and negating your student loan debt. You're in huge danger of a popular jobs program building clean energy, look out! The real danger here is keeping kids from being seduced by our cool sexy ideas.

We see Reagan's days as governor of California the form of his suppressing a hippie demonstration—which in reality was about Israel-Palestine, but in the book is just because the demonstrators won't leave a public park. The signs in the illustration literally all say "Our Park" and "We will not surrender this park," rather than, for

GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE YOUNG

example, “Israel commits crimes against humanity.” Some of the kids are even “supporters of communism,” and in the story they “erupted in riots,” attacking innocent cops. Reagan sends in the National Guard, who are shown helping the police while surrounded by mysterious clouds of something that is not commented upon.

Reagan gets elected and, “when asked what his policy on the Cold War would be, he answered like a tough guy from the movies. His policy, he said, was simple: ‘We win. They lose.’” Reagan’s speech writers did pitch at a level that feels natural in a kids’ book, I’ll say that. Then, of course, we get the failed assassination attempt, which gets page after page of dramatic portrayal, but with no twist ending, sadly.

We then get the child’s version of the end of the Cold War, because Reagan was bravely unsatisfied with the “containment” strategy that kept the USSR encircled by allies and bases, and he had “a very smart plan.” Since our free system incentivizes people to work harder and makes us “much richer than the communists were,” we could “win by means of economic power ... to develop large, advanced, and expensive defense technologies” which the Soviets couldn’t afford. Ha, we out-waste-spend them! No mention of Russia also being poor because it hosted World War II. The Berlin Wall falls and the Soviet Union disintegrates.

The book concludes with Reagan shown next to Mount Rushmore, the Capitol, the Constitution, a Western landscape, a gigantic American flag, and a soaring eagle, declaring “Ronald Reagan believed in God, family, and patriotism. He believed in personal liberty, democracy, and the free market.” The government “should never try to do for people what they ought to do for themselves ... We should all be free to choose our own path in life.” It concludes: “as Ronald Reagan liked

to remind us, it’s always morning in America.”

Of course, the day that dawned with the Reagan Revolution was one of increasingly powerful billionaires, giant crash-prone banks, a labor movement smashed to smithereens, active denial of AIDS for years, a drug war that incarcerated millions of people (a disproportionate number of them Black people), years of austerity cuts to school lunches and public programs, steadily rising global temperatures, and U.S. support for blood-soaked dictators from Zia-ul-Haq to Saddam Hussein. It remains to be seen whether humanity can overcome his calamitous legacy of classes, crashes, and climate change. Reagan and his supporters belong to history’s darkest pages, even if those pages are oversized and filled with pictures for kids.

THE *HEROES OF LIBERTY* SERIES IS GROWING, with a new book out this month on John Wayne, continuing the TV cowboy theme begun with Reagan, I guess. But the existing books are enough to draw the conclusion that the *Heroes of Liberty* series is an abhorrent enterprise to pack the minds of unsuspecting kids with excremental political brainwashing and to prejudice them against any progressive program of social uplift, from universal health care to closing the racial wealth gap. These godforsaken junior texts are the product of a leviathan of hyper-reactionary dark money and an online ad-buying conservative echo chamber striving to take the candy of social democracy away from the babies of the next generation. For years to come, in America’s bookstores, these books will be a lurking threat in the children’s section, like a creep in a raincoat.

I wash my brains of it! ♡





THE PEOPLE'S TRAMP

by Ciara Moloney

EVEN IF YOU'VE NEVER SEEN A silent movie, you know Charlie Chaplin's *The Tramp*. His too-big trousers and too-tight jacket, his bowler hat, his toothbrush moustache, his cane, his too-big shoes pointed at right angles to his body: you can recognize him from his silhouette. Samuel Beckett doodled him in his manuscripts, and Pam on *The Office* dressed up as him for Halloween. You can buy a poster of the Tramp in every pop-up poster shop in the world. He is the most iconic figure in classic cinema, one of the most iconic figures in any visual art, and was certainly one of the most beloved.

A hundred years or so later, it's fascinating to consider that *The Tramp* was a character living in extreme poverty, frequently homeless—that is, the kind of character who has almost no place in the biggest, most popular movies of *our* time, even as homelessness and extreme poverty are as endemic as ever.

Charlie Chaplin, a committed socialist who was kicked out of the U.S. during the Red Scare, spent decades of his career playing a man in poverty with boundless empathy, humour and humanity. In a world where discussion of old movies is laser-focused on whether something “holds up,” his work is not just worthwhile for modern audiences, but vital. His films are not just beautiful, ambitious, funny, and moving: they're key works of leftist, humanist art. And although Chaplin made plenty of sound films, ranging from the pretty great (*Limelight* forever!) to the thoroughly mediocre (*A Countess from Hong Kong* never), his silent films are the glittering gems in which his artistry shines the brightest.

When your conception of silent movies is a jumble of myths and clichés, from women being tied to railroad tracks to people run-





ning from cops in fast motion, it can seem like silent films are talkies minus the talking; that before the innovation of sound, filmmakers tried their best with the paltry tools available, but then sound made way for what cinema was always supposed to be. This makes it seem like silent films might, at best, be interesting curios. But silent cinema was a blindingly bright burst of technical innovation and artistic expression at the dawn of the century. Film was a newborn art, the rules of which had not yet been established. Silent filmmakers moulded the conventions with their own hands. They weren't making talkies without the talking: they were creating a whole new art form, a universal one that required no translation. The nascent nature of cinema in the silent era saw many women gain positions of power as screenwriters, directors and producers until the profit potential of film became clear to Wall Street investors, pushing women out and ushering in a new era of corporate consolidation.

By the time *The Jazz Singer* pioneered synchronized sound in 1927, silent films just *flew*. Buster Keaton made *The General*, still the greatest action movie of all time, and the whole thing is a chase, prefiguring *Mad Max: Fury Road* by nearly a century. Watch *7th Heaven*, a delightful romcom that becomes a heartbreaking war drama, anchored in incredibly vivid and modern performances from Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, and try telling me that it's worse off for not having dialogue. Watch *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* and thrill with every sweeping move of the camera. There's a purity to silent cinema, neither influenced by nor aspiring toward the conventions of theatre or literature, and by 1927, silent filmmakers had

nurtured the spark into a big, beautiful fire.

But then *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length synchronized sound film, came out. There have been plenty of major changes in cinema since—color usurping black and white, the rise of digital over film, the birth and death of the Hays Code's censorship rules—but none so fundamental to the very nature of the medium. In the short term, synchronised sound made it a lot harder for both cameras and actors to move: you don't want the mics to pick up the noise of the camera, and you *do* want the mics to pick up the actors' voices. In the long term, an entire way of making movies was snuffed out more or less in an instant. A lot was gained in the transition to sound—knocking over the first domino in a chain that leads to Michael Keaton yelling, "You wanna get nuts? Let's get nuts!" in Tim Burton's *Batman*, for one—but a lot was lost, too.

But there was one guy who kept defiantly making silent movies after everyone else had moved on: Charlie Chaplin.

LIKELY BORN IN A ROMANI/IRISH TRAVELLER halting site in England to a pair of music hall entertainers, Chaplin was raised in extreme poverty. His father left the family when he was a toddler and provided no financial support; he spent his childhood in and out of workhouses and institutes for destitute children. When he was nine, his mother was committed to a mental asylum. "I was hardly aware of a crisis because

THE PEOPLE'S TRAMP

we lived in a continual crisis,” Chaplin wrote in his autobiography. “Being a boy, I dismissed our troubles with gracious forgetfulness.”

Chaplin performed on stage from the age of five, and when he abandoned his somewhat intermittent schooling at thirteen, he worked as an actor in plays, circuses, and touring comedy sketch shows. He got picked up by a company that toured the American vaudeville circuit in 1910, and the rest is, more or less, history. By 1915, he was one of cinema’s first real stars—writing, directing, and playing the instantly iconic character he’d portray for another twenty years: the Tramp.

Chaplin didn’t do the kind of daredevil stunts that Harold Lloyd (who lost his thumb and index finger to a bomb mistaken for a prop) or Beater Keaton (the Johnny Knoxville of his generation) did, but he was able to use slapstick in emotionally astute ways. When the Tramp falls over, “we laugh at the physical event, but feel a twinge of guilt because of our sympathy for him, which we redouble to salve our guilt, and so slapstick is used to bind our sympathies to characters of lower social status even as we laugh at their misfortune,” Dean Buckley writes. “Later, we’ll find it even funnier when the policeman trying to lock him up for loitering gets smacked in the face, because our sympathy lies with the Tramp.” This enables the incredible pathos that runs through Chaplin’s work—a pathos that illuminates his deeply felt humanist almost-parables, which hang somewhere between social realism and fairy tale.

THE KID WAS CHAPLIN’S FIRST FEATURE film, even if at about an hour it’s barely one by today’s standards. An opening intertitle introduces it as “a picture with a laugh, and perhaps a tear.” That’s underselling it: it’s incredibly funny, and there are sections it’s near-impossible not to bawl through. In the opening scenes, an unwed mother’s heart breaks as she abandons her newborn baby, leaving a note that reads, “Please love and care for this orphan child.” The Tramp finds the baby, and he does just that.

Five years later, the Tramp and the Kid (Jackie Coogan) are living in a tiny one-room apartment. Their love for each other saturates the screen: Coogan, lit up with adoration for his adopted father, gives one of the best child performances of all time. Chaplin’s turn was almost certainly colored by the death of his infant son just ten days before the production began. The film nails that delicate balancing act of showing characters who are happy and poor without implying there’s some correlation between the two. They’re a loving, happy little family, but money is a constant issue. Their clothes and blankets are worn out and full of holes. They run an array of scams to get by, ranging from the tiny—they’ve rigged the gas meter in their apartment to give them back their quarter—to the small-to-medium-sized: they pick a street, and the Kid will hock a stone to smash somebody’s window so the Tramp, working as a glazier, can come along and offer to repair it. In another movie, all this could seem as fun as it does here, but with a dark undercurrent—a criminal raising another criminal. But in *The Kid*, our sympathies are so thoroughly with the Tramp that their scams are just lovely and charming. They’re just doing what they have to to get by, after all.

The Kid falls ill, and though funds are as tight as always, the Tramp calls a doctor. When the doctor realizes the Tramp isn’t the Kid’s father, he alerts the authorities. The Tramp, too honest for his own good, can’t seem to get the words out to explain what he and the Kid are to each other, how he is his father in every way that matters. Your heart is in your throat. And soon men show up in a car marked “County Orphan Asylum” to take the Kid away.

It’s hard to watch the scene without at least tearing up: the Kid standing in the back of the car, arms stretched out, sobbing like his heart’s been cleaved in two, crying out for his papa; the Tramp struggling as cops hold him on either side, his eyes wild. If the on-the-books reason they’re taking the Kid away is that the Tramp isn’t his father, there are unarticulated reasons just beneath the surface, ready to poke through. The Tramp is a single father, and then and now single fathers are treated as suspect and inadequate. And most importantly, the Tramp is poor. It’s hard to imagine that if a millionaire had taken the Kid in and raised him that the doctor would have called the authorities—he’d probably congratulate him on his generosity. But our society hates poor people, and especially poor parents: “There is a pervasive idea in our culture that poor parents are acting irresponsibly by bringing kids into the world that they can’t afford or can’t afford to do better by,” Carmen Rios puts it for *Everyday Feminism*. “There’s a pervasive idea in our culture that poor parents are inferior parents because they can’t raise their kids up to the arbitrary standards put in place” by the media and the state. The Tramp loves the Kid, and the Kid is healthy and fed and safe and *happy*, but the characters in positions of power cannot fathom that this cramped apartment could be the best place for him.



THE PEOPLE'S TRAMP



The Tramp chases the car along the rooftops, then jumps down onto it. He fights off the guy from the orphanage—kicks him right into the road—and rescues the Kid. He hugs him so tight you can practically feel it through the screen. On the run and newly homeless, they spend the night in a flophouse. The Tramp pays for himself and then sneaks the Kid in through the window, and when they get caught, he pays for the Kid, too. But the guy who runs the flophouse recognizes the Kid as the missing child the authorities are offering a one thousand dollar reward for, and as the Tramp sleeps, the guy takes the Kid to the police station.

In parallel to the main story, the Kid's mother—who instantly regretted giving him away—has become a wealthy actress and dedicated philanthropist. She unknowingly crosses paths with the Kid while distributing food to the poor. And when the doctor shows her the note that the Tramp showed him—"Please love and care for this orphan child"—she realizes the Kid is *her* kid. The film ends with the Tramp being brought to the door of the mother's mansion and embracing the Kid.

If the rest of the film has a social realist touch, the ending feels closer to fantasy. I don't mean that it doesn't really happen—although it does immediately follow a dream sequence—but it's the best-case scenario of all best-case scenarios. The Kid isn't put in an orphanage; he's reunited with his mother. His mother is open-hearted enough to bring the Tramp into her home, not toss him aside. *And* she's rich. This slightly fantastical quality gives the rosiness a bittersweet edge. Boy, if life were only like this.

THAT BITTERSWEETNESS RUNS ALL THE way through 1931's *City Lights*, Chaplin's first film of the sound era. It makes use of synchronised sound with its score (composed by Chaplin) and sound effects (in one hilarious sequence, the Tramp swallows a whistle and gets the hiccups) but it's a silent film in style and spirit. It's a sweet romance, a gut-busting comedy, and an incisive film about class as performance and perception. It's one of the best films ever made and a contender for my favorite.

"If only one of Charles Chaplin's films could be preserved, *City Lights* ... would come the closest to representing all the different notes of his genius," Roger Ebert writes. "It contains the slapstick, the pathos, the pantomime, the effortless physical coordination, the melodrama, the bawdiness, the grace, and, of course, the Little Tramp."

This time, we meet the Tramp at the unveiling of a monument to peace and prosperity. After political speeches in the form of squawking sounds—Chaplin's dig at talkies—the veil is removed to reveal the Tramp, asleep in the statue's lap. There may be so much peace and prosperity that they're putting up statues to it, but not enough for the Tramp to have a better place to spend the night.

The film's two main plots each follow the Tramp forming a friendship: on one hand, he befriends a drunken millionaire by saving him from suicide, and on the other, he falls in love with a blind girl selling flowers on the street. As Ebert notes, the millionaire and the blind girl are both people "who don't or can't see him." The millionaire, who adores the Tramp drunk, doesn't recognize

THE PEOPLE'S TRAMP

him sober. The girl *literally* can't see the Tramp, but more than that, she mistakes him for a wealthy man on their first meeting because of the sound of a chauffeured car.

The blind girl can't see the Tramp, so she doesn't have the prejudices others have when they see him, a man sleeping rough in shabby, ill-fitting clothes. She tells her grandmother about her new rich friend, emphasizing that more than wealth, he has a kind heart and gentle nature. Mistakenly thinking he's a wealthy man allows the girl to see his most essential qualities more clearly, the ones most people miss because when it comes to the homeless, they don't care to look. Every scene they share *aches*. The Tramp is determined to play the role of a gentleman. I don't know what's sadder: that he can pull it off—that the only difference between the Tramp and a millionaire, when you get down to it, is the clothes—or the persistent, poignant question of whether she loves and accepts him only because she can't see what he looks like.

The blind girl and her grandmother are about to be evicted, and the Tramp promises to give her the money to cover their rent. But if the Tramp had rent money lying around he wouldn't need to sleep on city monuments. And he certainly doesn't have money for the new surgery he saw in the newspaper: a cure for blindness. But he wants to help, is stubbornly generous even as he has nothing. He tries a bunch of schemes to scrounge up the cash—including entering a prize fight, leading to one of the funniest sequences of all time—but none of it works. Finally, he meets the millionaire again, and, drunk, he is moved by the Tramp's story and gives him the money.

But later, the millionaire doesn't remember giving the Tramp the money, and he assumes the Tramp stole it. So he sics the cops on him. When the millionaire is drunk, he sees the kind of man the Tramp is, his fundamental kindness, and is honoured to be his friend. When the millionaire is sober, he sees the Tramp as he appears before him. He sees him as a vagrant, as homeless, and looks down on him with revulsion. He's sober, and his heart freezes over. You can understand why he wanted to kill himself. He has built a prison around himself, where his goodness can only be set free when he's three sheets to the wind.

The Tramp just manages to get the money to the girl before he gets arrested. For the rent, and for her eyes.

Months later, the girl has had her sight restored. She no longer sells flowers on the street corner, but runs her own flower shop. She perks up whenever a well-dressed young man enters, wondering if he is her benefactor. The Tramp, newly released from prison, passes by, and when he picks up a crushed flower from the gutter, he sees the girl. He gives her a wide smile.

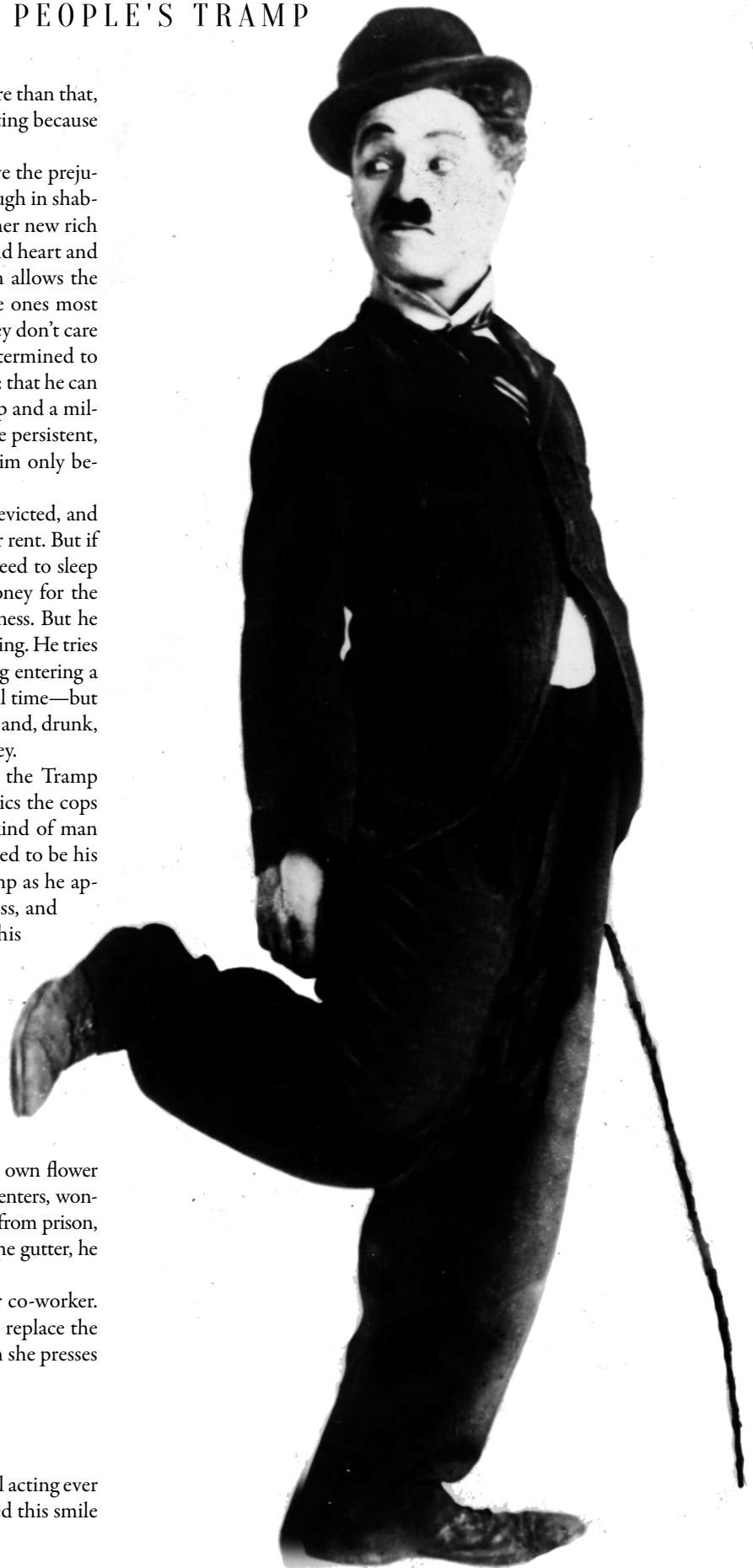
"I think I've made a conquest!" the girl jokes to her co-worker. She goes outside and gives the Tramp a fresh flower to replace the crushed one. She also gives him some money, and when she presses it into his hand, recognizes his touch.

"You?" she asks.

The Tramp nods. "You can see now?"

"Yes," the girl says, "I can see now."

The final shot of the movie is the Tramp's smile. Of all acting ever committed to film, James Agee in *Life* magazine dubbed this smile the very greatest.



THE PEOPLE'S TRAMP

"To make a silent film in 1931, four years after *The Jazz Singer*, was to buck the trend in a film industry rapidly divesting itself of silence," Saul Austerlitz writes, "To make another in 1936, nearly a decade after the advent of sound, appeared downright perverse."

That perversity was *Modern Times*. But if *City Lights* pushes at the boundaries of what makes a silent film, *Modern Times* explodes them. You immediately recognize it as a silent film (it's often dubbed the last one) yet sound abounds through all of it, until the film's finale, mechanized and menacing. There's the rattle and hum of machinery in the factory, voices played from records or making pronouncements over loudspeaker. And, despite seemingly being made a decade late, the film never feels creaky or old-fashioned. In a lot of ways, it still hasn't aged a day.

Modern Times is about the Great Depression. Yet it's timelessly timely, feeling as applicable to our modern times as to Chaplin's. The Tramp, in his final appearance, is a factory worker, tightening bolts on an assembly line. The pace is brutal, as the boss who spends his time on jigsaw puzzles demands higher and higher rates of productivity. When the Tramp goes to the bathroom and lights up a cigarette,

the boss appears on a giant screen to tell him to get back to work—the sound of spoken dialogue jars, intruding on the silent world. When the factory trials the Billows Feeding Machine—designed to eliminate the lunch hour by shoving food into the employee's mouth while they work—the Tramp is the guinea pig. It's a disaster, obviously, and the machine ends up shovelling nuts and bolts into the Tramp's mouth. It's simultaneously hilarious and horrifying. The boss rejects the feeding machine for the only reason that matters to him: it's inefficient.

Eventually, the Tramp has a nervous breakdown from overwork. He starts tightening not just the bolts that come along the conveyor belt, but everything: bolts on the machinery, his supervisor's nose, the buttons on a woman's dress. As Austerlitz puts it, the Tramp works the assembly line "until he becomes the assembly line." He gets stuck inside the machine and, when all is said and done, he gets sent to the hospital.

It's shockingly easy to watch the factory sequences and think of Amazon warehouses, where workers must meet punishing hourly rates, no matter the circumstances, are constantly under surveillance, and are discouraged or outright prevented from taking their required lunch and rest breaks. And sure, the Tramp is spied on and harassed in the bathroom—but at least he doesn't have to pee in a bottle.

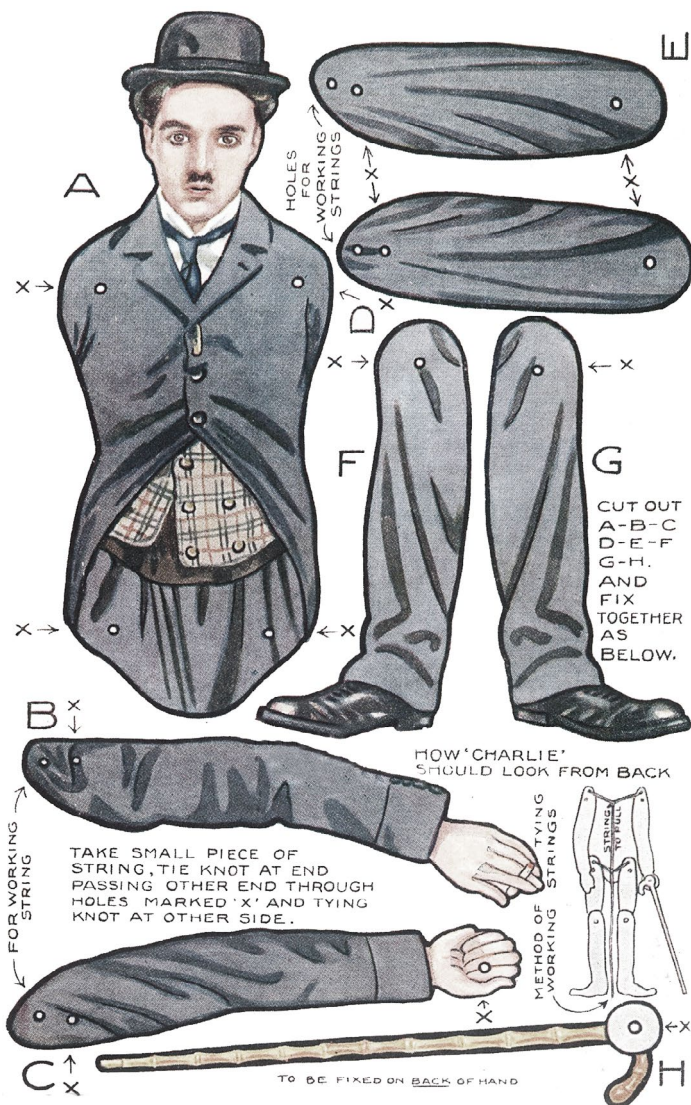
MODERN TIMES WAS, UP UNTIL THAT point, Chaplin's most overtly political work. He wanted to make a film about the harm done by "machinery with only consideration of profit" and the conditions during the Great Depression. The entire film is full of strikes, riots, and rallies, and corresponding arrests and police violence.

But what is most interesting is that the film reveals the underlying political nature of all his previous films. They're all about how the world treats the destitute, about struggling to get by and being mistreated. *Modern Times* takes those eternal themes of Chaplin's and contextualizes them in political reality.

The Tramp (accidentally!) ends up in communist march, waving a red flag he found on the ground with a crowd behind him holding signs with "liberty" in different languages. When the police break up the peaceful demonstration, the Tramp is arrested. After a bunch of delightful shenanigans involving an attempted jailbreak and a whole lot of "nose powder," he's given early release. The Tramp spends a good chunk of the rest of the film trying to get sent back to jail. Prison sucks, but at least there you get three square meals and a bed to sleep in.

When Ellen (Paulette Goddard), a teenage orphan, steals a loaf of bread for her young siblings, the Tramp tries to take the rap. She'll go free, he'll go back to jail—win-win. But of course, some witness has to tell the cops the truth and ruin it. But later, when the Tramp manages to successfully get himself arrested, he and Ellen end up in the back of the same police van. When it crashes, they escape together.

When he reviewed the film for *The New Republic*, Otis Ferguson characterized *Modern Times* as four one- and two-reel shorts stitched together: "proposed titles being *The Shop*, *The Jailbird*, *The Watchman*, and *The Singing Waiter*." The film certainly has that episodic





structure to it, but each builds on what comes before it, just as the film as a whole builds on everything that came before in Chaplin's filmography. It was always going to be the Tramp's last hurrah. On one hand, that acts as an excuse to jam in as many gags and slapstick sequences as possible. On the other, it lends the film an elegiac quality. The Tramp, the perpetual outcast, always down on his luck, seems to finally be made obsolete.

In the film's final section, Ellen gets the Tramp a job as a waiter and singer. He makes a bumbling mess of the waiter part, and when he goes on stage to sing, he loses his cuffs on which he'd written down the lyrics. The Tramp had never before uttered a sound. As Ebert notes, while most silent films maintain the illusion that their characters are speaking even though we can't hear them, speech was clearly not the Tramp's preferred way of expressing himself: "Although he can sometimes be seen to speak, he doesn't need to; unlike most of the characters in silent films, he could have existed comfortably in a silent world."

"I forget the words," the Tramp pantomimes at Ellen. And when he opens his mouth to sing, out comes a string of faux-Italian gibberish. But with the effortless charm of a totally natural showman, he sells it. The Tramp doesn't need language to communicate, after all. It's wonderful. And, like everything the Tramp had ever done, it requires no translation.

Modern Times ends with the Tramp and Ellen on the run again. When Ellen despairs, the Tramp assures her: "Buck up—never say die. We'll get along!" He pantomimes for her to smile. As they walk off arm and arm into the dawn, the film's theme swells. That instrumental later became the pop standard "Smile" when it was given lyrics, and the words come to mind automatically, solidifying the ending's bittersweet ache:

*Smile though your heart is aching
Smile even though it's breaking
When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by*

CHAPLIN NEVER PLAYED THE TRAMP AGAIN. He followed *Modern Times* with his first and best sound film, *The Great Dictator*, a sharp satire of Nazism and fascism in which he played dual roles as a Jewish barber and an Adolf Hitler analogue. After two years of preparation, *The Great Dictator* began filming in September 1939, six days after World War II began. It was released in 1940, when the U.S. was still at peace with Nazi Germany. If *Modern Times* is timelessly timely, *The Great Dictator* is very specific to its historical moment: watching it with 21st century moral clarity on the Nazis, it's easy not to grasp its daring, its moral fortitude and historical

importance. If *Modern Times* revealed the politics undergirding all Chaplin's work, *The Great Dictator* is bolder, exploiting Chaplin's resemblance to Hitler to eviscerate fascism's antisemitism, militarism, and repression. The bits where the dictator gives speeches in faux-German gibberish, perfectly emulating Hitler's body language and speaking style? Incredible.

In *The Great Dictator*'s final moments, Chaplin directly addresses the camera, delivering an incredible speech about fascism, militarism, and the lost opportunities of modernity:

*Greed has poisoned men's souls,
has barricaded the world with hate, has
goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed.
We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves
in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our
knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and
unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than
machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need
kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be
violent and all will be lost...*

It's strange: Chaplin's work was so concerned with modernity—with the technological innovations that enabled his career yet, in the hands of profiteers, brought misery, impoverishment, and horror. Yet the nature of his art, his brilliant use of the silent cinematic form, makes it easy to assume his work is antiquated. Most people have never watched silent movies. Increasing working hours leave us with precious little leisure time as it is, and when streaming services like Netflix have stripped out their licensed catalogue to pivot to exclusive original content, when the entire media—social and otherwise—is built to bombard you with the hot new thing, it makes sense that people don't block out half a day to research silent movies and the other half to watch *Intolerance*, a three-and-a-half-hour D.W. Griffith movie about why prejudice is bad. "The internet promises a century's worth of multimedia output at your fingertips," Zach Schonfeld wrote for *Newsweek* in 2017, "but ruthlessly privileges whatever got released yesterday." Or, as Emily St. James puts it for *Vox*, the paradox of film watching in the internet age is that "the gap between 'casual film fan' and 'film history buff' has never been harder—or more expensive—to bridge."

But Chaplin's films exemplify why it's worth making that additional effort, why the film ecosystem needs to be refigured so that in the future, classic cinema is as accessible as anything new. Chaplin's films are insightful explorations of issues that still plague us: poverty, homelessness, how modern technology can be harnessed for the benefit of humanity even though it's now controlled by callous moneyed classes. But more, they exemplify cinema's capacity to act as a small empathy-generating machine. The Tramp is an avatar of all the impoverished, and he is impossible not to love. You love him so much that your heart bursts open to love all the real tramps out there. ♣



THE TRAMP'S COMPANION



currentaffairs.org



Ship of State
Guide
the Ship of State
between the
partisan whirlpools

ARCHIVE OF ACTUALLY USEFUL
HISTORICAL MATERIAL

CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC

CHANGE
CHANGE

COMING SOON
7
GENTRIFICATION
THE GAME ALL YOUR NEIGHBORS ARE TALKING ABOUT

OBAMACARE
MARKETPLACE
SIMULATOR

Ship of State

← GALLERY OF THINGS
WE DIDN'T QUITE GET TO
BUT NEARLY ACCOMPLISHED

← GALLERY OF PEOPLE
WHO DESERVE BLAME
FOR FOILING THESE PLANS

WELL YOU TRY FIXING
THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

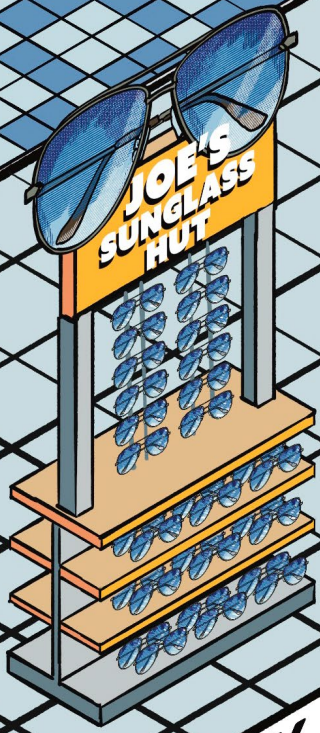
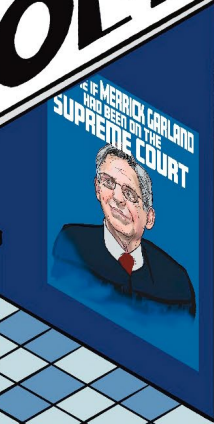
ARCADE

GIFT SHOP

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW
Current Affairs has been fortunate enough to be granted exclusive access to plans for the Barack Obama Presidential Center, currently under construction in Chicago's Jackson Park. Here, readers can glimpse some of the exhibits and attractions that will commemorate our 44th president.

IMAGINATION ROOM

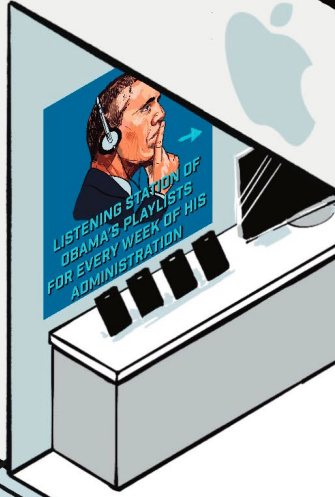
IMAGINE
A PUBLIC OPTION



BARACK H. OBAMA
PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY CENTER,
MEDITATION FACILITY, AND GIFT SHOP



VIP SECTION
CORPORATE DONORS ONLY



ROAD TO
DISAPPOINTMENT
AND FRUSTRATION



WHICH ITALIAN AMERICA?

by Vinnie Rotondaro

EVERY NOW AND THEN I GET AN EMAIL FROM a distant Italian American relative. Usually someone older—in their 60s or 70s—almost never my age, 40, or younger. As it goes, they tend to be looking for information about our shared family history. At the level of genealogy, it's simple enough. Uncle so-and-so came over with Aunt such-and-such from Italy to some industrialized U.S. locale, where they found work and started a family. But when it comes to the social dynamics that propelled our ancestors' immigration—or the cultural mythology that now surrounds their experiences in Italy and in the U.S.—I tend to keep mum. I'm not trying to upset my caller's view of the past. After doing a deep dive into my own southern Italian history—and discovering more than a few surprising truths, such as that many Italian immigrants were radical leftists, or that our New World history is rich with militant labor uprisings and unionized strikes that were often seen as anti-social and unpatriotic—I've found it's usually best to keep things light, especially when speaking with people from deindustrialized places where white ethnic identity still exists and Italian American identity has been called a "significant indicator of support for Donald Trump."

A similar dynamic holds true with my (mostly white) creative and professional class friends in Washington, D.C., where I grew up and live. Their big-city consciousness keeps them tethered to a script: quick to label things racist, disdainful of anything having to do with Trump or his voters, and generally dismissive of "white ethnic" identity—to say nothing of the fact (and the context that comes with it) that not too long ago Italians, Poles, and other eastern and southern Europeans were hardly considered white. In my experience, both relatives and peers seem all too happy to stick with what they *think they* know about Italian American identity and experience.

Perhaps my own story is unique, touched with the double consciousness of a person who grew up with the name Vinnie in a place with few red sauce spots and almost no white ethnic enclaves. On the one hand, I was just another white kid from the suburbs of D.C.

On the other, my father was Fred Rotondaro, the Executive Director of the National Italian American Foundation. Fondly remembered for his messy hair and gregarious smile, with a cigar hanging out of his mouth, dad read his ethnic history deeply, and was equally aware of America's legacy of racism and slavery: entire walls of our house were filled with books on the subject. As an academic, he studied American intellectualism and gravitated toward the Transcendental. As an ethnic ambassador, he believed that human identity comes in a variety of shades, hues, and traditions, all of which should be shared and celebrated.

Born and raised in an immigrant mining town near Scranton, Pennsylvania, dad cut a unique figure in Washington. A longtime friend once described him as "an old-line, unreconstructed liberal who really believed in the struggle of the working man," and a "walking advertisement for an Italian American success story." In D.C., with his PhD in American Studies and years of experience running anti-poverty programs, he charted a career in ethnic politics and race relations, becoming a beloved connector of people and ideas. As Native activist Suzan Harjo recalled, the two befriended each other over a discussion about their respective struggles to maintain the language of their ancestors despite pressure to speak English. "And then we started going to lunch," she said. "We just hit it off right away." As co-founder of the Arab American Institute James Zogby wrote in a moving tribute: "When, in the 1970's and 1980's many in Washington refused to work with Arab Americans, Fred took me under his wing and taught me, often by example, the nuts and bolts of ethnic politics. ... Quite simply, Fred gave me and my community a boost at a time when other people were not interested in including Arab Americans."

Despite his leftist leanings, he was also willing—and able—to reach across the aisle. Dad never forgot where he came from. Often, when trying to humanize a conversation with someone he disagreed with politically, he would talk about his family and bring up the story of his father, my namesake: Angelo Rotondaro, an immigrant who came to this country at the age of six and entered the coal mines at 11, where he worked his entire adult life to provide for his family, surviving a horrific mine flood and ultimately dying of Black Lung. For dad,

PHOTOS: PEASANTS IN ROGGIANO GRAVINA (1950); BREAKER BOYS PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEWIS HINE; RINALDO CAPPELLINI GIVING A SPEECH



grandpop's story was a chief means of communication, which he used to bridge myriad cultural, political, and ethnoracial divides.

But when my father died in 2017, shortly after Donald Trump became President, many of the human connections he lived for no longer felt viable. The election was unbearably toxic, and in Pittston, Pennsylvania, where he grew up, family ties had been severed over politics. It pained my father to see how the region's anger and abandonment had been preyed upon, though he never turned his back on his family, many of whom voted for Trump. In the years that followed, I went looking for the nuance that had been lost in a culture that collapses society into black and white. I scoured my own family history, reading every book I could, talking to social scientists and labor historians, and visiting the tiny southern village where my family comes from in Calabria, as well as the woodsy, mountainous region of Northeastern Pennsylvania, colloquially known as NEPA, where they eventually settled. What I found cast a net of dissonance over the picture of Italy that many Americans hold in their head, including those of Italian descent.

If Italian Americans like to imagine their ancestors landing on Ellis Island with the American Dream swelling in their hearts, they might be surprised to learn that for most of those immigrants, that dream meant all of the Americas—not just the U.S.—and that as many as half returned home to Italy. If Americans in general associate Italian Americana with the mafia, they might be doubly surprised to learn about my ancestors' historic battles *against* the mafia (who colluded with supercapitalists to exploit the mining rank and file), a tale of resistance that shaped our own version of that "Dream." In researching my past, I unearthed stories about Rinaldo Capellini, a fiery, one-armed labor leader who led massive strikes in NEPA, and Salvatore Lucchino, a Sicilian immigrant who turned on the mob in Pittston. Yet to this day NEPA remains better known for figures like Russell Bufalino, the Pittston-based mafioso played by Joe Pesci in the 2019 Martin Scorsese film *The Irishman*. Equally problematic is that the true history of (southern) Italian Americans—so heavily steeped in experiences of race, class, and immigration—has simply been buried, subsumed in large part by the general whiteness that now characterizes us. In an age of petrified cultural and political polarization, with the specter of whiteness looming large, Italian American identity has almost come to represent a fault

line of division. Yet looking back through my own ethnic history has been like peering into a portal that helps decipher the complexities of modern politics. I see so many connections between past and present. The social divisions that prevent multiracial solidarity today are similar to those of the past; economic justice for all remains an elusive political goal. Perhaps it is time for us all to look back and correct our amnesia, so that we can begin to move forward together. As my father wrote in an email shortly before he died, "I always found that my analysis of current issues was helped by my reading of bygone ages. Pop."

MY FIRST INKLING THAT ITALY MEANT more than red wine and Renaissance art came as a teenager when my father gave me a book of photography depicting life in Naples. Paging through it, I happened upon a black and white photo of a somber looking boy with a stony, "thousand-year stare in his eyes," as described in the picture's caption. What history lay behind that thousand-year stare?

Between 1880 and 1980, an estimated 13 to 15 million Italians left Italy, more than three-quarters of them coming from the south, forming the largest voluntary diaspora in world history. While one cannot conflate the southern Italian peasant lot, which was comprised of people with a bewildering array of linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious practices, all shared in some form of historical socio-political oppression. This exodus was indeed thousands of years in the making.

Around 280 B.C., Rome colonized the southern Italian peninsula and imposed its systems of law and taxation. Southern slaves were used to log the Silar mountains for valuable pitch, or resin, which caulked the seams of warships used to build the Roman empire. I was struck to see this history alluded to on the website of my family's hometown of Roggiano Gravina, in the province of Calabria, which mentions the city's independent "spirit," and the fact that the Roman historian Titus Livius referred to the Roggianese as "ignoble" for their resistance to Romanization.

In the centuries that followed, ruler after ruler planted their flag

upon the southern Italian landscape. Roggiano's website states: "*The town was subject to the domination of the Goths, the Longobards, the Saracens, the Normans, the Angevins, and the Aragonese. It was a fief of Pietro Paolo da Viterbo, Bernardino da Bisignano, Sanseverino, Ametrano, Cavalcanti and Sanseverino Conti della Saponara.*"

In the Middle Ages, southern feudalism wrought a society blighted by extreme inequality and virtual slavery for agrarian peasants. Serfs were tied to landscapes ruled by nobles and aristocrats, or the Catholic Church. As Margherita Ganeri, Director of the "Italian Diaspora Studies" Seminar at the University of Calabria told me, if a peasant tried to escape their lot in life, outlaws known as brigands could be hired to hunt them down, or persecute their family.

Today in Italy, many romanticize the brigands as Robin Hood-like figures, with their colorful costumes and fetching hats—and in the distant past this may have been partially true. But scholars now see how they morphed into a decidedly exploitative force, used by aristocrats to crack down on grain theft, and into mercenaries who terrorized peasants in petty local wars. Many scholars now believe the social space once held by brigands was eventually filled by the cold and violent mafia: the *Cosa Nostra* in Sicily, the *Ndrangheta* in Calabria, and the *Camorra* in Naples.

Peasant misery peaked during Bourbon rule in the 18th and 19th centuries. In rural hilltop villages like Roggiano Gravina, entire families lived in single-room, cell-like structures where barnyard animals often slept. Peasants were typically short in stature and malnourished. Their diet largely consisted of bread and oil, perhaps some wild greens, with meat rarely eaten. In the mornings, workers filed into the fields and valleys below to toil under oppressive heat, using primitive agricultural tools and methods of tilling soil in land pockmarked with malarial water. As late as 1859, one ethnohistorian told me, an estimated 98 percent of the Calabrian peasantry was illiterate.

In 1910—the same year my great grandparents left Italy with three out of five of their children—the British writer Norman Douglas traveled to Calabria through desolate, deforested land, and later penned an account of his adventures titled *Old Calabria* which gets at the social decay and squalor that prompted southern exodus. "The lot of the southern serfs was bad enough before America was 'discovered,'" he wrote, "and quite unendurable in earlier times. There is a village not many hours from Naples where, in 1789, only the personal attendants of the feudal lord lived in ordinary houses; the two thousand inhabitants, the serfs, took refuge in caves and shelters of straw."

"You are badly treated, my friend?" Douglas asks a theoretical peasant. "I quite believe it; indeed, I can see it. Well, go to Argentina and sell potatoes, or to the mines of Pennsylvania."

ONCE THE LARGEST URBANIZED MINING REGION in the country, modern day NEPA is characterized by long stretches of interlocking, formerly coal company-owned "patch towns." Pittston, Pennsylvania, where my Italian great grandparents settled in 1910, is one of those towns.

As a kid, I remember visiting Pittston and eating at Sabatini's Pizza, established 1958, in nearby Exeter. The pizza had an utterly unique, sweet-smoky sauce, the flavor of which sticks somewhere deep in the back of my mind. Pittston is where Main Street has come and

gone, and come back again, with busted up storefronts revitalized, and the street reimagined in recent years. It's where my no-nonsense aunt staged a family walk-out in the middle of mass one Easter, pissed off at the priest who was taking forever with his sermon, knowing well he had a captive audience (for once). It's where the people speak with a distinct regional accent (like a Chicago twist on the way the actors speak in *Mare of Easttown*), and there is a big, bright red sculpted tomato in the center of town, as Pittston is the "Quality Tomato Capital of the World."

I have nothing but fond memories of growing up in Pittston. But people in D.C. tend not to appreciate the complexities of such a place. Nowadays, Pittston carries a bit of an unfortunate reputation, as the city of just over seven thousand people is located in the northeastern tip of Luzerne County, which the reporter Ben Bradlee, Jr. profiled as a national political bellwether in the 2017 book *The Forgotten: How The People of One Pennsylvania County Elected Donald Trump and Changed America*. Like the rest of the region, the county is heavily populated with the descendants of eastern and southern Europeans, as well as Brits, Germans and Irish, who came in the 19th century looking for work in the mines, and were subsequently exploited. Like other economically abandoned parts of the country which used to vote solidly blue, it went for Obama twice before lurching toward Trump. In short, it epitomizes the kind of middle- and working-class anger that propelled Trump into office. But where did that anger come from?

IN 1861, NORTHERNERS MARCHED SOUTH TO UNIFY ITALY and free the peasants—or so the argument went. But by all accounts the social exploitation only took on new forms, and the poor and oppressed remained poor and oppressed. A tremendous sense of disappointment followed unification. But also a new opportunity—the ability to leave—which peasants and other poor Southerners lunged at when they finally had the chance.

They were leaving behind poverty *as well as* extreme social prejudice. Following Italian unification, the "Southern Question" gave rise to a racist northern ideology which viewed the South as "a ball and chain that prevents a more rapid progress in the civil development of Italy," as explained by Antonio Gramsci in 1926:

"*Southerners are biologically inferior beings, either semi-barbarians or out and out barbarians by natural destiny; if the South is underdeveloped it is not the fault of the capitalist system, or any other historical cause, but of the nature that has made Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric.*"

In 1910, the African American educator and orator Booker T. Washington visited southern Italy, where he saw women in fields using "heavy wrought iron hoes" that were "much like the heavy tools I had seen slaves use on the plantations before the Civil War," and child slaves working in sulfur mines, which were about "the nearest thing to hell that I expect to see in this life." He observed: "One of the first things I learned in Italy was that the people in northern Italy look down upon the people of southern Italy as an inferior race."

The racism described by Gramsci and Washington was nothing new. "An ascription such as 'Calabrian'... has been racially charged for centuries," writes the scholar Peter D'Agostino. "Medieval and early modern commentators considered the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and its Neapolitan capital a 'paradise inhabited by devils.' Counter-Reformation missionaries considered Calabria 'our Indies' populated by savages readily compared to animals."

Southern stereotypes were given a pseudoscientific stamp at the

end of the 19th century, when the northern eugenicist Cesare Lombroso and the Italian School of criminal anthropology appealed to positivism and phrenology to “measure the craniums, ears, foreheads, jaws, arms and other body parts [of Southerners] in search of anomalies that marked the born criminal.”

According to the historian John Dickie, “The south was one of Italy’s most important banks of images of Otherness.” Southerners were derided as fatalistic, unchanging and backwards. Southern society was thought to be afflicted by what an American anthropologist would later term “amoral familism,” or a morality which directs behavior only towards the good of the nuclear family, at the expense of social progress. Racially speaking, Southerners were commonly associated with Africa, or the “Orient.”

“Europe ends at Naples and ends badly,” as the French poet Auguste Creuzé de Lesser wrote in 1806. “Calabria, Sicily and all the rest belong to Africa.”

In NEPA, this racialization only continued. “Blacker than any Africans” is how the New York City reporter Henry Rood described immigrant anthracite miners in 1898 as they came out of the mines covered in coal dust. Writing for the *Century* magazine—the *Time* of its day—Rood referred to eastern and southern Europeans as “domesticated animals,” and dwelled on their ability to vote. He described an anthracite mining community at night: “Some of the more intelligent lounge from one group to another insisting that every good foreigner obtain his ‘papers’ as soon as possible, and vote at the coming election, lest the ‘white man’ throw too many votes into the ballot box, and pass a law to drive them out of the country.” Italian immigrants “were about three centuries behind Americans in their standards of living, and general intelligence,” Rood wrote.

It was like this all over the country as an Anglo nativist frenzy raged. A decade after Rood’s 1898 visit, a 41-volume bicameral government report called the Dillingham Commission appealed to eugenics to assert a *Dictionary of Races and Peoples* and dehumanize new immigrants in America. The report’s chapter on the anthracite coal industry remarked on the “limited imagination” of the miners and listed the “South Italian” race as the least desirable and most dangerous. In another ten years, deeply nativist anti-immigration laws would be passed which virtually halted all immigration from Europe.

This history lives on in the present in more ways than one. In 1996, a right-wing northern Italian political party called for secession from the Italian south. In 2000, a large-scale sociological study of prejudice in Italy found that the strongest signals of bigotry in the country were

intra-Italian, directed against Southerners by Northerners, followed by all Italians against Eastern Europeans and African immigrants. The findings were published in a 2002 book called *The Outsider: Prejudice and Politics in Italy*, which stated, “In a word, if Northern Italians do not think much of immigrants, they think even less of their compatriots.” Since then, immigration from Africa has spiked.

In Italy today, Southerners are still referred to as *terroni*, literally meaning “dirt people,” but carrying an untranslatable social weight. Meanwhile in America, the collective psyche of affluent whites in cosmopolitan parts of the country tends to view people in places like NEPA as the “Other,” regardless of education, wealth or occupation — a “ball and chain” in their own right.

FEW HISTORICAL INCIDENTS OF LABOR UPRISINGS existed in southern Italy, save for the example of Sicily. In the town of Montedoro, the sulfur mines were run by the mafia, producing a system of exploitation and human bondage that was transported to NEPA, finding fertile ground in the anthracite mining industry, where coal barons relied on the practice of “subcontracting” to systematically undercut labor demands, skirt safety rules, and reduce wages.

In NEPA, mafiosi known as “The Men of Montedoro” (later led by Russell Bufalino, who my father recalled buying him and his friends milkshakes in Pittston when they were kids) infiltrated the subcontracting system and worked hand in hand with mine ownership, sometimes becoming mine owners themselves.

The exploitative scheme that followed only made an already dangerous job even more perilous. Coal mining had one of the highest mortality rates in the country, and anthracite coal—glassy and jet black, winding through the ground in every which way—was particularly difficult to mine. Today it is estimated that as many as 35,000 men and boys lost their lives in the anthracite mines. Yet anthracite coal barons in faraway places like New York and Philadelphia “continually recruited labor from overseas, offsetting the high death rate and ensuring low wages and high profits,” as University of Maryland anthropologist Paul Shackel notes in a 2018 paper studying the transgenerational effects of NEPA’s history of “structural violence.”

Because Italians and other new immigrants “were not seen as equals, they more frequently faced extreme physical, nutritional, and mental hardships as they dealt with substandard housing, dangerous living and working conditions, and frequent encounters with undernourishment,” Shackel writes. In order to make ends meet, many mining families sent children to work as quickly as possible. Such was the case for my grandfather, who became a “breaker boy”—one who separated rock from coal—in America at age 11. Between the years 1890 and 1899, as the sociologist Peter Roberts noted in the 1902 study *The Anthracite Coal Industry*, nearly 700 boys lost their lives working in the anthracite mining industry.

But the rank and file rebelled. By the turn of the 20th century, the region had seen a diverse array of immigrant workers—representing more than two dozen nationalities—unite under the banner of labor to fight against their exploitation. For many, this resistance marked the first time in their respective histories that they rose up against their masters; and through it all, Italians led the way, proving their stereotypes wrong at every twist and turn.

In 1910, a “pitched battle between picketers and state troopers” occurred during a wildcat strike when a “band of Italian women” gathered around a mine entrance near Pittston, as historians Robert



Wolensky and William Hastie, Sr., write in *Anthracite Labor Wars: Tenancy, Italians, and Organized Crime in the Northern Coalfield of Pennsylvania, 1895–1959*. In a nearby township, Italian miners stoned a docking boss. A few days later, troops assaulted 300 striking miners led by a ringleader named Angelo Campamassi.

New immigrant unionism was viewed with extreme suspicion by Anglo America. As Wolensky and Hastie Sr. note, the sociologist Roberts, who held racist views against Eastern and Southern Europeans, wrote that Italians and Slavs were “possibly the most dangerous element of the anthracite population” because they were “dominated” by the spirit of unionism.

Indeed, large numbers of Italians held political views that might piss off their modern day descendants (as well as many of my D.C. friends, too). In 1907, the socialist International Workers of the World, nicknamed the “Wobblies,” entered the anthracite scene. The union was one of the first to recruit women, Black people, and workers of different skills. Italian immigrants proved instrumental in building the IWW nationally as well as in NEPA, where they formed the largest ethnic contingent.

Other immigrant Italian leaders may not have been socialist, but were no less captivating, which begs the question: why have their stories been forgotten?

FEW REMEMBER SALVATORE “SAM” LUCCHINO, A Montedoro-born mafioso who turned on the mob to go undercover with the Secret Service in New York City and later as a cop in Pittston. Claiming he had “some ancient wrong to right,” Luchino survived four attempts on his life before being gunned down in 1920. As Wolensky and Hastie, Sr., note, over six thousand people marched in his funeral, which was one of the largest in Pittston’s history, with “what seemed to be the entire Italian population of Pittston and surrounding towns present,” according to a local newspaper report.

A Sicilian-born mafioso with a crisis of conscience who turns on the mob in hard coal country? Scorsese, De Niro, DiCaprio, what are you waiting for?

Similarly, there is no movie about Rinaldo Cappellini, the one-armed labor leader who commanded District 1 of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in NEPA. With fiery rhetoric and a shock of black hair, Cappellini targeted subcontracting for extinction, staging massive strikes and directing tens of thousands to walk off the job at a time when the country depended on anthracite coal for its continued growth. Many of these strikes were seen from the outside as unpatriotic, especially during wartime.

Cappellini’s life was full of ups and downs, drama and intrigue. When it became clear that the UMWA was unable (or unwilling) to represent the miners’ interests, Cappellini lost favor with the rank and file, and was thrown out of office. But he roared back shortly after—helping to form an insurgent union which targeted subcontracting anew, giving way to a string of high profile shootings, murders and bombings—when mine-owner (and mafia) interests naturally resisted. In the end, it took President Roosevelt himself—beloved among mining folk—to intervene and pressure the men to go back to work.

While it was easy to sensationalize the violence, “what was most significant in the struggle of anthracite-region people in the 1930s was the powerful statement they made about life’s priorities,” writes the historian John Bodnar in *Anthracite People: Families, Unions, and Work 1900–1940*. Immigrants relied on the “family economy”

to survive in America, which involved the pooling of money, with mothers frequently controlling the family budget and children helping out however they could. Women were everywhere during the Labor Wars, Bodnar notes, holding the picket lines and even beating would-be scabs to the ground. “The attitudes of most workers were rooted, ultimately, in the loving concern which united both family and neighborhood, and also in the tensions which pervaded these relationships,” he writes. This sense of autonomy, belonging, and optimism carried NEPA’s coal mining communities for years moving forward.

But in NEPA, that optimism came crashing down on January 22, 1959, when the Susquehanna River breached the walls of a mine just outside of Pittston, where my grandfather was working. The Knox Mine Disaster occurred around 11 a.m. as my dad was halfway through his junior year college midterm exams. When news of the disaster reached, dad rushed down to the mines, where makeshift tents were erected and families huddled around fires, waiting for word. A massive whirlpool churned at the spot in the river where the mine ceiling had collapsed. It looked like a black hole. In a desperate attempt to plug up the breach, officials diverted train tracks running parallel to the river, sending dozens of massive railroad and coal cars into the churning water. Around 2 p.m. a group of miners found an air shaft, and an immigrant named Amadeo Pancotti made a perilous escape, scaling a nearly vertical 50-foot pit using the tips of his fingers. As night fell, my grandfather was one of the last men to be rescued. Incredibly, he was uninjured after spending eight hours wandering in the dark through rising ice water, searching for light. The next morning, my father ached his test.

The disaster was precipitated by the subcontracting system and facilitated by mafia-mine-owner corruption, including individuals connected to the Bufalino crime family. Scores of indictments were made, but the damage would be final as the water seeped and spread, spelling an end to deep mining in the region (which was already in decline as America shifted to other forms of energy).

In the decades that followed, various forms of corruption infested the region as an “economic development of last resort,” and the psychological resilience that once marked NEPA’s immigrant communities began to falter. “The suddenness with which this disaster came to our community has utterly shocked and crushed us,” said retired mineworker George DeGerolemo at an event commemorating the first anniversary of the Knox Disaster.

Meanwhile, my father’s life was taking off. In 1960, he graduated with honors from the University of Scranton, becoming the second Rotondaro to earn a college degree. In ‘61, he earned a Masters Degree in English, and spent the following decade teaching at the University of Scranton, while also running a community newspaper in Pittston. In 1970, he earned a PhD in American Studies from NYU before leaving academia to run anti-poverty programs in Wilkes-Barre and later York, Pennsylvania, where he met my mother, who ran the city’s housing authority. In York, his entire staff and board of directors were Black, and they nicknamed him “the Godfather.”

Moving to D.C. in 1975, dad worked for a deep-thinking Catholic priest named Geno Baroni, who was himself the son of a Pennsylvania mining family. Baroni got his start in Washington in the early 1960s starting social service programs and advocating for African American families in the U Street Corridor, a historically Black part of town that has since gentrified. In ‘63, he served as the Catholic coordinator for the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, where Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. Later, he founded the National

Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, where my father worked as Communication Director, before becoming an Assistant Secretary at HUD. Along the way, he founded the National Italian American Foundation, and appointed my father as Executive Director.

Baroni spoke in a brusque, stream of consciousness manner. He foresaw the political trouble brewing within white working-class America, and was terrified by it. “We’ve seen the revolt in our youth group, as we’ve seen the revolt in the black, brown and Chicano communities,” he once said, giving a speech at a nonprofit café, bookstore, and event space in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, D.C., called Potter’s House, shortly before dying of cancer in 1984. “Are we going to see some kind of radicalization in the white working class? Will that radicalization be positive or negative?”

Baroni believed that monolithic thinking about identity, black and white, majority vs. minority, was inherently problematic. He did not view America as a “melting pot,” but instead as a “rich mosaic of cultures, ethnicities, histories, regions and values.” “Everybody has to have a story,” he said, “everybody has to have values. But there are no values in the private, corporate sector...and there are very little or no values much in Government...The values are where you come from. The values are your story...You have to know who you are, before you can relate to someone else.” Often, he lamented how quickly Italians had lost touch with their roots in America, and failed to see their own history reflected in the struggles of others.

“How can you teach my nephew, Rodney Ruggiero, about black history when he has an historical amnesia about himself?” he asked at Potter’s House. “You can’t talk to kids in Steubenville College [in Ohio] about why the Black Panthers, why Angela Davis, why Huey Newton, why black rebellion ... It takes a very smart teacher to understand and recognize that somebody in Steubenville has to go back and look up the Republic Steel strike, the coal mine struggle, the Molly Maguires in Pennsylvania, the riots, the violence of this nation and the true history of this country.”

My father was deeply influenced by Baroni’s teachings. “As an Italian American, I might point out that my prior experience includes extensive work in community action programs, poverty programs, particularly in one area where for six years virtually my entire staff and Board of Directors were Black,” he said in 1983, testifying before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. “The one lesson I learned there was that the best way to combat discrimination and to fight against the problems that affected the Black community [was] to involve other elements of the community as well. In this particular case it was York, Pennsylvania, where there were many elements of the German and Dutch community. But we reached out...”

“As an Italian American,” he continued, “I think it would be foolish on my part to say that the civil rights problems of Italian Americans or southern or eastern Europeans are *nearly* as grievous now, nor have they ever been, as those affecting Blacks and Hispanics. But there are some such problems. And I would like to see my own Italian American community involved actively in a national fight to help make the imagery of the Constitution a living reality for all Americans.”

BUT AS WE ALL KNOW, THIS IS NOT WHAT HAPPENED. In the ‘70s and ‘80s the gap between the working and professional classes widened into a chasm. Work was disappearing at the same time that Democratic Party began to abandon its blue-collar white constituents, realigning its base with Wall Street interests and white professionals (many of whom used to vote Republican), while presenting concern over the plight of “minority”

voters. Needless to say, the messaging that followed did not jive with the aggrieved consciousness of blue-collar whites.

Meanwhile, Republicans were swooping in to pick up what the Democrats had left behind, and both parties were giving “the store away to the more affluent,” as the sociologist Lillian Rubin wrote in 1993 preface for the 20th anniversary edition of her classic study, *Worlds of Pain: Life In The Working-Class Family*. What seemed to underlie this tectonic shift was a “declining significance of class in favor of increasing salience of race,” she wrote, as right-wing politicians with nativist rhetoric were making inroads with working class white ethnics that would have seemed fanciful just a generation before. Indeed, where Italians, Poles and other southern and eastern European immigrants were once seen as racial others, now their anxieties were being channeled and politically preyed upon as White Working Class anger and resentment. In the decades that followed, with the interventions of deregulation, the offshoring of jobs, and 24-7 cable news (read: Fox News), this dynamic only grew more and more pronounced.

TODAY, ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION TAKES ON NEW forms in NEPA as Amazon and other big box warehouses employ Latino immigrants as independent contractors, denying benefits and forcing immigrants to work in rank conditions, just as Italians and others were treated one hundred years before. The closure of churches and other public spaces, along with incidence of subsidence—or the caving of land due to mining—adds an experience of decay to cap off an overall feeling of “solastalgia,” or “the homesickness you have when you are still at home.”

Tragically, where the experience of labor once united people and the “family economy” held strong, now politics rips NEPA apart, as families fight bitterly over Trump. Nationally, we hate on each other and fall for caricatures at a distance—with liberals calling Trump supporters Nazis, and Trumpers calling liberals pedophiles. This is despite the fact—which I see, caught somewhere in between—that the overwhelming majority of both sides are good, decent people, sharing the same basic wants and desires while struggling to make sense of a rapidly changing world.

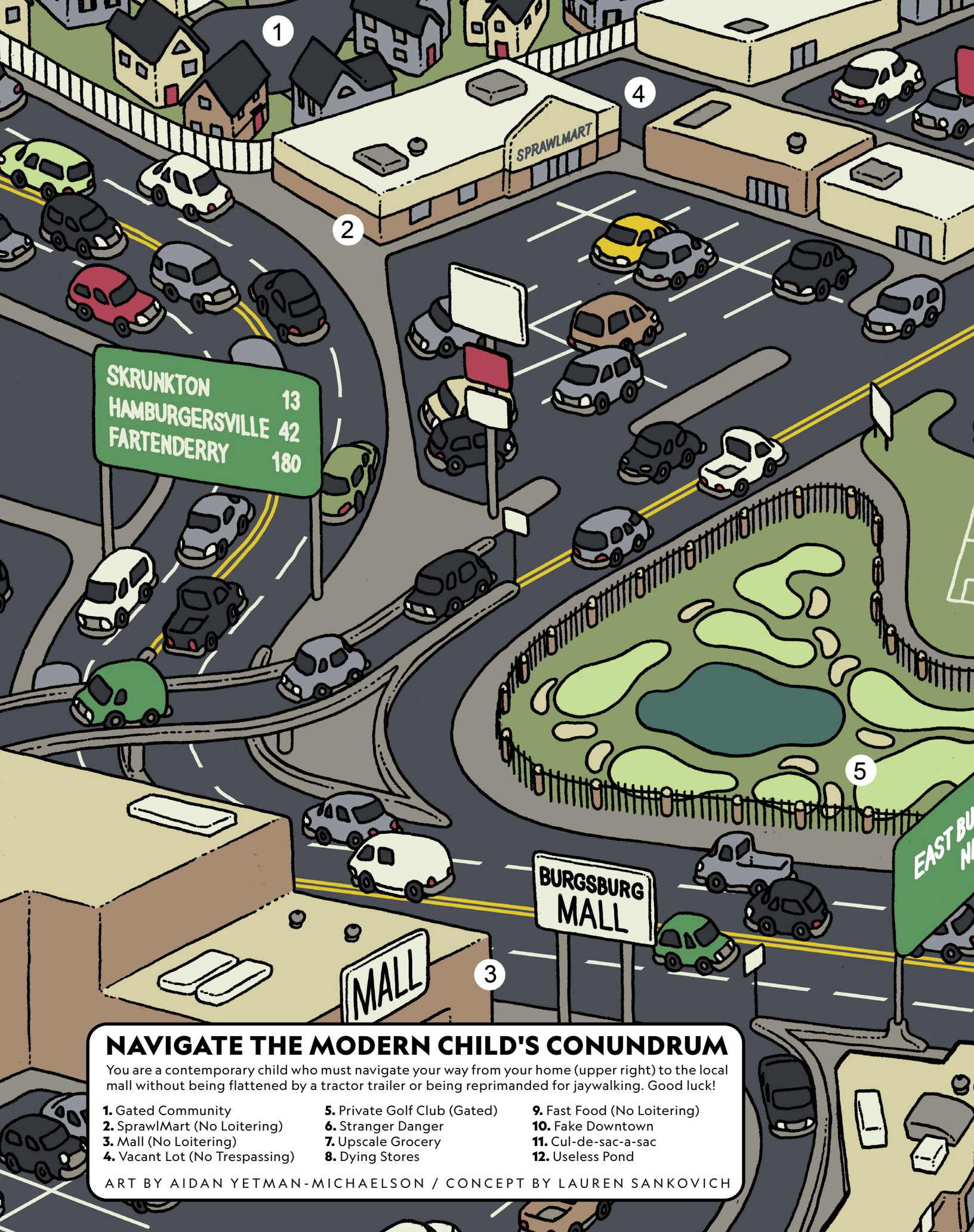
Meanwhile, something interesting is happening in NEPA. In recent years, waves of Black and Latino newcomers have been moving to the region from places like Philadelphia, New York City, and New Jersey, escaping gentrification and impossible costs of living. Interviews with local educators suggest the children of these newcomers, along with those of the older white populations, are busy forming a new consciousness, one that increasingly pays no mind to the old racial and political hang-ups. How might the forgotten stories of NEPA’s immigrant mining communities—fighting for their families, and against super-capitalist exploitation—color this multi-racial consciousness as it moves into an uncertain future?

The stories that we tell ourselves can hold us back or move us forward. As NEPA’s Italian American experience shows, both left and right alike, and every faction in between, has a thing or two to learn about its own history. We could all stand to improve our understanding of race and identity—and the past can lead the way, if only we look back and remember. I’m reminded of a quote by the author David B. Morris, who wrote in the *The Culture of Pain*: “The future of pain will reveal its shape distinctly only if we recover and understand the past. It is the past that helps us understand how we got where we are now. It is where the future begins.” ♦

PORTABLE CONGRESS



WORLD'S MOST BORING TOY!™



NAVIGATE THE MODERN CHILD'S CONUNDRUM

You are a contemporary child who must navigate your way from your home (upper right) to the local mall without being flattened by a tractor trailer or being reprimanded for jaywalking. Good luck!

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Gated Community | 5. Private Golf Club (Gated) | 9. Fast Food (No Loitering) |
| 2. SprawlMart (No Loitering) | 6. Stranger Danger | 10. Fake Downtown |
| 3. Mall (No Loitering) | 7. Upscale Grocery | 11. Cul-de-sac-a-sac |
| 4. Vacant Lot (No Trespassing) | 8. Dying Stores | 12. Useless Pond |

ART BY AIDAN YETMAN-MICHAELSON / CONCEPT BY LAUREN SANKOVICH

GET OFF THE COMPUTER
AND GO OUTSIDE!



ASIAN AMERICAN PSYCHO

by Chris Lee

Americans love Asian psychos. The angrier the characters, the bloodier the drama, the better. Consider some of the most popular imported cultural works from Asia in recent times. There's the Oscar-winning *Parasite*, a film seething with class rage that climaxes with an orgy of violence at a child's birthday party. Last fall, nobody could take their eyes off of *Squid Game*, a drama series that likewise explored social inequality in a literal death game where life and morals were cheap. *Oldboy*, a brutal story of obsessive vengeance, is one of the most revered Asian films in America (let's pretend the American remake never happened), while *The Vegetarian*—an unsettling narrative of a Korean woman's descent into madness—became a literary sensation several years ago upon its translation into English.

But take a look at the cultural works coming out of contemporary Asian America, and the picture is remarkably different. The mad, the bloodthirsty, and the depraved are replaced with the sad, the lovesick, and the eager-to-please. Asian psychos are great, so long as they remain in Asia. If Asians make the journey across the Pacific to become Asian Americans, however, we must repress any such disturbing complexity. The lord of a manor—once wicked and unrestrained in his domain—becomes the agreeable and obsequious guest. That mentality has a degenerative effect on our creative expression, trapping us in an adolescent mindset that's too afraid to explore the darker sides of our humanity that make for the most intriguing art. Consequently, Asian American culture becomes emotionally and developmentally stunted.

This timidity is especially rife in supposedly race-conscious contemporary Asian American literature. Many authors write with just enough racial awareness to flatter their readers into thinking they've read something bold and insightful, all the while avoiding any exploration of truths that would make both author and reader uncomfortable.

It's literature as lifestyle affirmation art.

Two prime examples can be seen in *New Waves* by Kevin Nguyen and *Days of Distraction* by Alexandra Chang, both of which were published in 2020. The novels share many elements: 20-something Asian American protagonists who work in or around tech, a consciousness of modern Asian American racial identity and grievances, and a slice-of-life mode of storytelling. However, the books do differ in the genders of their protagonist, with Nguyen and Chang's protagonists matching the gender of their authors.

New Waves has the veneer of a thriller-type story involving data theft, but at its heart, it is a more grounded narrative of how its protagonist Lucas deals with the sudden death of his best friend, Margo, a Black woman with whom he vents about race-related topics. Eschewing any pretense of a high-concept plot, *Days of Distraction* is about its protagonist Alexandra's decision to uproot herself from San Francisco to follow her boyfriend J (his full name is never given) across the country upon his graduate school acceptance. This allows her to extensively ruminate about the racial underpinnings of her relationship with her white boyfriend, and why she and so many other Asian American women choose to be in such pairings.

Both novels received stellar reviews, making lists such as *Vanity Fair's* Best of 2020 List. Nguyen received praise from noteworthy novelists like Viet Thanh Nguyen and Celeste Ng, and George Saunders named Chang as one of her generation's most important writers, a distinction reinforced by her recent selection as a National Book Foundation "5 Under 25" honoree. Given the plaudits these books have received and the subject matter they touch upon, they ought to provide some of the most insightful and fresh racial takes on young Asian American life. *New Waves* was even published under Penguin Random House's One World imprint, which bills itself as racially groundbreaking and publishes writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ibram X. Kendi. Yet despite the centrality of race in these novels—and the first-person perspective that ought to give readers a glimpse into the fascinating unspoken thoughts of young Asian Americans—nothing exciting or shocking is explored.

In *New Waves*, Lucas is an overweight and underemployed Asian American man in his mid-20s who works a low-paying customer service job at a tech company. He is not racially oblivious, and one of the first scenes in the novel shows Lucas griping with Margo about all the racism they have to endure in the workplace. This anger is supposed to be so intense that it drives them to steal their company's data. But these grievances never go further than the type of Twitter bluecheck-approved complaints one would see on social media, such as how white people assume Black people like hip-hop or how Asians get ignored in workplace meetings. With such meager fuel, it's no wonder the corporate thievery revenge plotline is dropped after Margo is suddenly killed in an accident early in the novel.

Lucas's racism radar continues to only go off at the safest of offenses, such as when he notices an ethnic fast-casual restaurant (cultural appropriation!) or when his starving-writer white girlfriend—whom he meets after hacking into Margo's laptop after her death—applies for a housing lottery presumably meant for low-income minorities (gentrification!). Frustratingly, Lucas refuses to offer the reader any insights into underexplored racial matters that he's uniquely qualified to testify on: what it's like to be a broke unattractive Asian guy in a world that

often laughs even at rich handsome Asian guys. When Margo is infuriated by yet another dating article about the dating difficulties of black women and Asian men, he shies away, not even offering anything in his internal monologue to the reader.

"There's nothing new in that article," I offered, trying to find her some closure so we could both move on and talk about literally anything else. "You don't even do online dating. You don't even date. What's the big deal?"

"I don't want a boyfriend. I don't want a house. I don't want a family, not that anyone is asking. I don't want this job, but I also don't know what better job there would be. I don't want to live in New York, but I'll never leave. My entire life is just things I don't want," she said. "It's exhausting."

"I feel like you're mad I am not angrier about this article."

"No, I want you to get why I'm so mad."

It's not just racism in dating that Lucas bovinely accepts. When he faces racial abuse on the subway, it's his white girlfriend Jill who has to stand up for him. Again, all he does is shrug his shoulders.

"Jill, come on, it's not worth it." I pulled her back.

"Yeah Jill, come on, it's not worth it," the man said, kicking his voice up an octave. "Listen to your chink before you make him more upset."

"I'm technically more of a gook," I said, figuring I could end this before it turned into a confrontation.

Like Margo, Jill is baffled by Lucas's placidity and even becomes angry at him for it. In another instance, Lucas again tries to make light of being called a *gook* by telling himself he's impressed that a racist old white man had correctly identified his Vietnamese heritage. Is this supposed to be critical commentary on the debased state of the modern Asian American man as someone who can't even stand up for himself? It is indeed believable that outwardly, a guy like Lucas would want to present an unflappable front as a coping mechanism. But it's less believable that in the privacy of his own mind, he would feel absolutely no anger at being the low man on the dating totem pole, or at the ease with which people hurl racial insults at him in public.

COWARDLY DULLARDS WHO ARE TERRIFIED OF even thinking an aggressive thought do exist. But even cowardly dullards can be riveting characters if written honestly. For example, Mr. Stevens from *The Remains of the Day*—Kazuo Ishiguro's Booker Prize-winning novel about an old English butler who reflects on his life of impeccable service—is a captivatingly tragic figure precisely because of his repressed feelings for Miss Kenton and his delusions about his Nazi-sympathizing employer, Lord Darlington. All that Mr. Stevens refuses to say or acknowledge becomes subtext as to what kind of a man he is. Lucas, however, lacks such honesty as a character because he is more of a fantasy device that allows his author to gesture at identity consciousness, but from a safe distance. By doing so, Nguyen excuses himself from having to craft a more realistic Lucas, replete with all the embarrassing elements of Asian American male bitterness. Masculine rage is out of fashion at this moment, so it's easy to see why Nguyen didn't go down that particular road. But he has written a novel ostensibly about straight 2nd-generation Asian American male identity, a demographic not commonly seen in contemporary Asian American

literature. One can't help but wonder if Nguyen—who is of the same tribe as Lucas, including having once worked in a low-paying job in the tech industry—is trapped by the limits of contemporary literary fiction and its tendency to veer into autofiction. In a *Bookforum* review of *Phil- ip Roth: The Biography*, Christian Lorentzen wrote:

"Authorial image management now seeps into the writing of fiction itself. The more readers (and critics) are content to conflate alter egos with authors, the more authors are tempted to idealize their fictional selves: confessional literature cedes the field to the autofiction of self-flattery."

Lucas's absence of rage is precisely that self-flattery, for both the author and his demographic. Lucas may have a lot working against him in this society, but fear not, readers: he will not rise to anger. And for that, he will be narratively rewarded by having little trouble finding a girlfriend, and a white girlfriend at that. And even when they break up, she will compliment him on how dynamite he is in bed and what a good guy he is:

"Fine, I'll start," Jill said. "I was sad and you were sad and we could do that together, and you turned out to be a surprisingly good lay."

"Why surprising? Because you assume...?"

She cut me off. "Because you are strangely considerate for a twentysomething who drinks too much and doesn't know anything about the world," Jill said. "And I really, really hate that I know you well enough that you were going to imply I was being racist."

"You assumed correct."

"Lucas, you need to stop blaming everything on how shitty other people are."



"That's easy for a white person to say."

A reader should naturally wonder: does Lucas seek out white women to date as a way to thumb his nose at stereotypes of Asian male undesirability? Lucas also almost has a fling with an attractive Indian woman at his company while he's in a relationship with Jill. Is he a sex addict or rampant cheater because of a racial chip on his shoulder? Is his lack of Asian female love interests, or even friends, a deliberate decision, perhaps a vengeful way to get back at the Asian American women who refuse to date Asian men? If these answers are yes, then that would make him a less presentable character, but an infinitely more fascinating and honest one at that. It's just too bad this type of literature has no interest in doing that.

AT LEAST *DAYS OF DISTRACTION* DIRECTLY addresses the topic that *New Waves* only dares to tip-toe around. It's a topic that is at the root of so many online Asian American political, social, or cultural discussions: the disproportionate prevalence of white-man-Asian-woman couples. Often derided as fuckability politics, it's been the singular obsession of both its critics and its defenders alike. It's only natural that such a topic would be an all-encompassing issue in a minority population that has: (1) has lacked identitarian confidence and viewed assimilation as aspirational, and (2) long been subjected to the gendered racism of hyperfeminization of both women and men.

Alexandra shares this obsession as she is unable to stop thinking about this racial couple combination. She even seeks out porn fea-

turing Asian women and white men (but only if they act like a real couple). Living in San Francisco, Alexandra finds the sight of white men with Asian women all too frequent for her liking, making her wonder if there's something "sinister" about how common the pairing is and whether her own relationship is somehow tainted in the eyes of others. She even voices this concern to her boyfriend:

"I'm not bothered," I say. "I'm just thinking about it right now and I'm explaining to you what I'm thinking and how I feel. There are so many Asian-woman-white-man couples, and it's like, why? Are all of the white men fetishizing the Asian women? Or are Asian women more prone to dating white men, and why? Or something else? Why don't we ever find ourselves in a place with all Asian-man-white-woman couples? Or Asian-woman-black-man couples? Or black-woman-white-man couples? Or Latina-woman-Asian man couples? Or—"

"Maybe you just notice them because you're Asian and I'm white," he says. "Maybe they just love each other and race doesn't have anything to do with it."

I burst out with fake laughter. "Yeah, right. Sure."

This concern is especially vexing for Alexandra because with her best friend Jasmine (who's also an Asian American woman), they frequently bond over how infuriating and racist white men are as their boyfriends, bosses, and employees. Yet separating themselves from such men, especially on a personal level, is never entertained as an option. Laughter is often the only way to deal with these uncomfortable realizations, such as when Alexandra expresses her insecurities to her sister:

Why are we with white men? Is it because we've been taught all of these years from all of this white American media that whiteness is the epitome of attractiveness? And even though we are aware of it, have we internalized it so deeply that it can't be rooted out? (That might have something to do with it.) Or are we subconsciously trying to climb social and political ladders? Are we fitting into this stereotype of the gold-digging Dragon Lady Asian wife? (We hope not!) Or was it that, where we grew up and went to school, white people were more readily available? (Must play a role.) Or, my sister muses, are we trying to ensure that our kids are part white? (I am probably not having kids, I say. Okay, she says.)

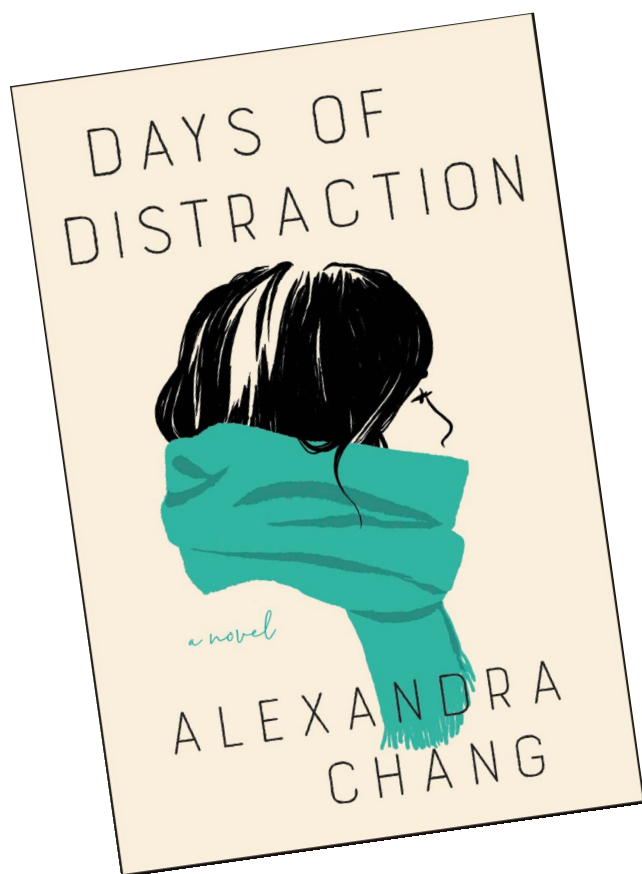
"I've thought about that a lot lately—am I dating a white guy to make sure that my future kids are also white, and have it easier? Is that a form of survival?"

"Well, are you?"

"I don't think so? But I don't know! Maybe it's subconscious!"

We laugh for a while. It is funny. It's all too funny. We survive through the laughter.

To Alexandra's credit, she's willing to voice these uncomfortable thoughts aloud to others, even acknowledging that being with a white man confers the privilege of half-white children (a notion that may get her tarred and feathered in some Asian American social justice circles). She cites all sorts of information from OKCupid, Pew, historical anti-miscegenation documents, and sociological studies on race and desirability. She extensively reads the accounts of Yamei Kin and Pardee Lowe, two Asian Americans from the turn of the 20th century who married white partners. She references posts from Reddit by angry Asian American men, and even expresses some sympathy with them. That's all quite informative, but a novel is not a research paper. A novel, particularly one from the main character's perspective, presents



an opportunity to diverge from facts and enter tantalizing subjectivity. No other medium allows for this to such a degree, yet Alexandra does little more than recite facts and express standard-issue liberal guilt. If one suspects Nguyen of holding back in *New Waves* because of his identification with Lucas, then it must go doubly so for Chang who has outright stated how autobiographical her novel is.

Alexandra would be far more memorably intriguing if she were ruthlessly honest, even if only in thought. What if she expressed utter disdain for those angry Asian men on Reddit? And even toward the Asian American men who are good to her, what if she ultimately saw them as beneath her, as barriers on a specific type of well-trod path to a higher stratum of society that's available to her as a straight Asian American woman? Unlike Lucas, Alexandra is repeatedly told that she is beautiful and in high school, she had been eventually included in the popular white girls' clique. Their life experiences are worlds apart. What if, in another hypothetical scenario, a ruthlessly honest Alexandra met a ruthlessly honest Lucas? What would she think of him, and vice versa? That would've been the groundwork for an engrossing story.

But as befitting posh liberalism, proper observation of manners and recognition of one's own privilege are of utmost importance as it's the pathway to atonement for whatever guilt you have about your own blessed lifestyle. Having properly confessed all her anxieties, Alexandra is absolved by her best friend Jasmine, who tells her that she and J are not like those bad white-man-Asian-woman couples because she's been with him since college and that they're the best and sweetest couple ever. Jasmine would appear to be correct since throughout the novel, Alexandra describes J as an excellent boyfriend: he is "beautiful," "lithe," listens to all her racial neuroses, and gets along with her family. Jasmine also states that there are simply more white men around than any other race of men in America, so case closed. She concludes by saying:

"No! I mean, to be honest, I'm still staying away from white guys. But that's me and my bad experiences. Hashtag boundaries. Hashtag self-care! But I'm staying away from psycho misogynists, too, whatever race. Only enlightened men for me. Which means maybe I'll be single forever!"

I laugh. Already I feel better.

Toward the end of the novel, when Alexandra travels to China in order to get away from J for a while, both her parents assure her that he is a good man and boyfriend, thus paving the way for a mini-reconciliation after a mini-crisis. All's well that ends well. As Jasmine says, it's all about self-care. And that may be the ideal choice to make in one's personal life: to choose happiness over some quixotic moral crusade to defy societal peer pressures that, in the end, will help no one and only hurt you. But this is a novel, where anything should be possible, including exploration into the dark and depraved. It's what the safety of fiction and artistic expression is supposed to give us.

Instead, what is produced is little more than a coddling of both the artists and audience. Neither Nguyen nor Chang are willing to impugn themselves or their demographics with any harsh truths. The function of the Lucas character is to offer a racial CAT scan of the straight 2nd-generation Asian American man's brain and find that there's nothing to worry about, that even the biggest losers among us—with no money, no looks, and no respect—will never get mad. We might not even acknowledge we have problems of feeling alienated

and unwanted! And for that good behavior, the novel implies that we'll stumble into multiple romances with non-Asian women. In contrast, the Alexandra character is portrayed more as an intellectual hypochondriac, needlessly fretting over something that she shouldn't feel bad about. The thrust of the narrative is less focused on true introspection than on validation of the life choices of the author's demographic, to flatter such an audience that no matter what queasy racial implications are involved in their romances with white men, they deserve to live laugh love without inconveniences.

IF THERE SEEMS TO BE HYPER-FOCUS ON INTERPERSONAL relationships in contemporary Asian American cultural works, it reflects the priorities of the established Asian American culture class. With so many writers, filmmakers, and other artists coming from well-to-do upbringings (I too come from this background) or aspiring to its values, their primary racial conflicts involve assimilation anxieties at a personal level. Themes of not feeling pretty/handsome/cool enough pervade a lot of these works. Such sources of angst, even if they appear to be the unresolved childhood issues of mundane two-parent middle-class households, are not automatically worthless. There is no problem that's too small to be the genesis of a great narrative. The status quo's artistic misdeeds are not necessarily because of the happy accident of the artists' personal histories, but rather, because the artists have allowed themselves to be limited by these histories. Assimilation into a white liberal metropolitan culture is treated as inevitable. The process may be bittersweet, confusing, and maddening, but it is a foregone conclusion. And since that is the path chosen by the exclusive club of contemporary Asian Americans artists, it cannot be questioned.

The result is lifestyle affirmation and ego-protection for everyone involved: the authors and their demographics are ultimately good people, and their readers are enlightened progressives for learning about authentic minority experiences. The grand problem in all this is not necessarily whether certain life decisions were correct. Rather, it's how the writers have devoted their creative drive to the mission of justifying those decisions. All this makes for terrible art. Or worse, boring art.

There are some rare exceptions to this rule of sedated Asian American cultural works. In *Private Citizens* by Tony Tulathimutte, one of the main characters is Will, a wretchedly insecure young Asian American man who clings to his white girlfriend for status and also does things like digitally alter his vast porn collection to feature more Asian men. *Free Food For Millionaires* by Min Jin Lee is about a flawed and often unlikable Asian American woman, Casey, using all the tools at her disposal to rise from her Queens roots to the top of the white-collar world in 1990s Manhattan. And despite its reputation as a breezy wealth-porn type of novel, *Crazy Rich Asians* has a razor-sharp scene that bluntly discusses why the protagonist, Rachel Chu, was loath to date Asian men until she met the Singaporean Prince Charming in the story (this scene was, of course, eliminated in the movie for sensitivity reasons). The film *Better Luck Tomorrow* depicts a group of studious and ambitious Asian American high schoolers' slide into crime and murder.

There are also some notable attempts that don't quite work. *White*

Ivy by Susie Yang has a great premise about a relentlessly social-climbing Asian American woman, Ivy, who is determined to marry into a Kennedy-like clan at any cost. Unfortunately, the novel holds back on truly examining the anti-heroine's mind. For example, when Ivy's family sets her up with a dorky fobby Asian man, she is irritated, but we never see just how full of contempt she would be towards a man like that, even though she's supposed to be a sociopath. And Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* delves into the crippling effects that Asian American self-loathing can have in a marriage with a white partner. In the novel, however, Ng writes the self-hating Asian character as the husband instead of the wife, even though significantly more Asian American women are married to white spouses than Asian American men are. The switching of race and gender is a curious decision in the genre of literary fiction, a genre that's often guilty of solipsism and being little more than thinly disguised memoirs. Charles Yu won the National Book Award in 2020 for *Interior Chinatown*, which explores the troubles of contemporary young Asian American men. However, it's still politely well-restrained, culminating in the protagonist's impassioned tirade where he still acknowledges his straight Asian male privilege.

But these types of works are the exception, not the rule. *Better Luck Tomorrow* is well-honored in Asian American circles, but nothing has truly followed in its footsteps. Instead, we get things like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Farewell*, *Always Be My Maybe*, *To All The Boys I've Loved Before*, *The Half of It*, *Tigertail*, *Minari*, and *Shang-Chi*, all of which serve to make us Asian Americans feel better about ourselves, either through aspirational fantasies or crying sessions. It's not that I want *Crazy Rich Asians* (which I enjoyed watching) to be like a Na Hong-jin movie. But will there ever be an Asian American equivalent of *The Chaser* and all its brutality and bleakness?

WHEREAS AMERICA WANTS ASIAN American works to be toothless and pacified, it thirsts for the exact opposite from Asian ones. It's not that Asia doesn't create its own share of quietly introspective or life-affirming works; it's more that Asian America can't create anything except that. The pressure likely comes both externally and internally because the fear is not that Asian American anger is irrational, but rather, such anger would be all too rational. And if such justified discontent was to be voiced by our cultural representatives, then the societal consequences could be immense. America's racial self-esteem would plummet if Asian Americans could no longer be propped up as shining examples of its racial generosity. Asian Americans may lose our place as junior partners in the progressive diversity coalition if we demand too much attention for ourselves, especially on divisive issues like school testing and physical safety if we advocate for standardized testing and for stricter measures in the criminal justice system. And if Asian Americans become too much of a problem, then nobody will stand with us as Yellow Peril ideology returns full force with the rise of China.

Thus, Asian Americans must be eternally happy or contently resigned or heartbrokenly wistful. What we can never be is angry. Asians in Asia can be as psycho and insurrectionist as they want, though. If there is turmoil in those faraway societies, it would be quite the spectacle of Orien-

tal madness, like those wacky samurai and their seppuku rituals.

Just look at how differently the financially desperate Asian characters of *Parasite* and *Squid Game* act when compared to their counterparts in *Minari*. In *Parasite*, Kim Ki-taek (played by Song Kang-ho) finds himself and his family in a humiliating position in society. They have to freeloader off of others' wifi and they fold pizza boxes to try to make ends meet, only to get berated by a teenage superior for not being fast enough. Their children's educations have been halted, eliminating any chance of the next generation climbing out of the figurative and literal basement of Korean society. To fix this, his son hatches a scheme to ingratiate themselves as employees of the wealthy Park family. Every single member of the family engages in underhanded ploys, from lying about credentials to getting competitors fired. Ultimately, Ki-taek proves willing to commit murder to assuage his wounded pride and take revenge on a society that has disdained him for too long.

In *Squid Game*, very few of the characters are heroic role models. Even the protagonist Seong Gi-hun (played by Lee Jung-jae) is a deadbeat dad who prefers gambling to responsible fatherhood. Well into middle age, he lives with his mother and is a financial burden to her. He is constantly disappointing his daughter, to the point where his ex-wife has no qualms about taking her away permanently to America. When Gi-hun finds out about this, his solution is to participate in a contest where he is expected to be indifferent to others' deaths, inflict such deaths himself, and betray friends' trusts. Other characters in dire straits—Cho Sang-woo the financier, Han Mi-nyeo the con-woman, and Jang Deok-su the gangster—have no reservations about doing whatever is needed to survive, and the show's unsparing depiction of what people are capable of in such difficult circumstances was one factor that made the show so compelling, especially in today's heavily moralistic American pop cultural landscape. And the few genuinely good-hearted characters, like Ali and Ji-yeong? All mercilessly killed off.

But shift the stage to Asian America, and it's hard to imagine the farmer dad in *Minari*, Jacob Yi (played by Steven Yeun), behaving so depravedly, though his situation as a heavily indebted Korean immigrant farmer in America is not much better than that of Kim Ki-taek or Seong Gi-hun. After a decade of, as he puts it, "looking at chicken assholes" for a living, he achieves a piece of his dream of owning a farm. But it's in rural Arkansas, in a mobile home in a tornado alley, with few potential friends around except for a kooky religious neighbor. One bad harvest could wipe him out, his water supply is unreliable, his wife is losing faith in him, his only nearby community is an all-white church, and a grocer screws him over by reneging on their agreement. And in the climactic ending, with his marriage on the rocks, his mother-in-law accidentally burns his entire crop down, just when he has finally closed a deal to supply a grocer. Furthermore, there are implications that he has a selfish delusion of grandeur, of putting his desire to become an independent farmer above the welfare of his family. All the elements of a psychological meltdown are there.

But instead, his story is that of quiet fortitude and dignity. The calamitous fire turns out to be a blessing in disguise that teaches their family the most important thing in life: that they have each other. This is not to say *Minari* is a bad film. It is well-made and moving. Lee Isaac Chung had a specific, heavily autobiographical story he wanted to tell and he has no obligation to be someone he's not. But why must almost



MINARI (2021)

every Asian American narrative be like this? Why is there never any fury, any degeneracy, any insanity? Why's it always ceaseless melancholy, in both art and real life? In a panel hosted by Sandra Oh, there was a teary conversation between the Asian American moderator and cast as they reflected on the pain and difficulties they'd faced as 2nd generation Asian Americans. The Korean cast was a bit confused by this, as they had no personal experience with such Asian American matters. Maybe Youn Yuh-jung, who won an Oscar for her role, was also wondering why Steven Yeun's character didn't go psycho in the end.

ASIAN AMERICAN PAIN ROOTED IN THE children-of-immigrants experience is real and worthy of respect, but there comes a point when only expressing that pain through sadness or self-censorship becomes detrimental to artistic possibilities. The problem with *Minari* is not that it's gentle and tender; it's that we rarely see anything different from Asian American art. *The Farewell*—a film in which a young Asian American woman and her family must go to China to say goodbye to their terminally ill grandmother who has been purposefully kept ignorant about her own diagnosis—was another well-received and well-made Asian American film, and it too dwelled on the aching wistfulness of the 2nd generation experience. What are the chances of an Asian American supernatural revenge fantasy novel or movie being made about Yang Song, where she becomes resurrected to take revenge on the NYPD officers who abused and raped her? How can Asian Americans ever hope to effectively critique a society if we're so desperate for acceptance and love from it, to the point where we dis-

place all our legitimate anger into the impotent, almost adorable, rage against office microaggressions and white people making dumplings? What does an Asian American pushed beyond his or her brink by American society look like? Most people right now, including Asian Americans, likely do not want to know. But great art should make us push past such inhibitions.

There will be much resistance to dangerous and angry Asian American art. From within, there'll be many who still need our creative works to function as feel-good therapy for racial melancholia and self-loathing. From the outside, there'll be discomfort—even fury—at Asian Americans refusing to be the good boys and good girls of American race relations, the one true success story that Uncle Sam and Lady Liberty can be proud of. But the purpose of Asian Americans is not to make other groups feel better about themselves, to spice up their palate, to make their lives less lonely. Asian Americans have a purpose of our own. To many 2nd generation Asian Americans, Asian America is all we have. Feeling neither Asian nor American may be a trite sentiment, but it isn't false. The only thing we can truly be is Asian American. A genuine Asian American culture cannot be a simulacrum of its Asian or American counterparts. Asian Americans must delve deeper and more critically into our own unique experiences. A culture is nothing without a rich artistic tradition. Whether art and culture precipitate change or reflect the status quo is a common debate. Either way, the debased state of Asian America is exposed in our cowardly and juvenile art, and only by being more truthful and less image-conscious in our creative self-expression will we finally mature as a culture. Otherwise, we will remain a lost generation that has resigned itself to insignificance, a transitory and ephemeral nation between the pathetic journey from Asian to American. ♣

DISPATCHES FROM THE GOOD FUTURE

Dateline: 2056 A.D.—Humanity has made it to The Good Future. There were a lot of bad futures we could have ended up in, but somehow we managed to avoid them. Yay humanity! Maybe we're not so incorrigible, malicious, and stupid after all. Maybe there's hope for us! *Current Affairs* has obtained some exclusive images and testimonies from our wondrous tomorrow on what we shall accomplish together in this new world.



How We Rewilded the Suburbs

We were destroying an awful lot of the natural world, and realized it needed to stop. Wild animals were given almost no consideration when new developments were designed, and as a result they were struggling to survive. The birds weren't singing in the spring anymore. Well, we finally decided that animals are important. We took some of our more useless and depressing suburbs and turned them over to nature, which made something much better out of them. We also filled our cities with wild animals, too, which made for a most interesting experience.



How We Met The Aliens

A lot of people were afraid to contact aliens. "What if they're like us, and colonize and destroy everyone weaker than them?" Fortunately, the aliens turned out to be socialists, and we all get along well together now, despite some amusing cultural misunderstandings here and there.



How We Demolished The Walls

Borders were a nuisance and an injustice. For some reason, even though militarized borders hadn't existed for most of human history, we'd become used to them and stopped thinking of them as an absurd restriction on freedom. Well, we finally woke up and saw how silly it was to draw lines on the Earth and put up walls to stop people crossing them. Borders were abolished and we all smashed the walls together.



How We Kept Ourselves From Boiling

We finally realized we ought to do something about climate change, and just in the nick of time. "Hey," humanity said to itself, "why do we constantly talk about the need to switch to green energy but we never seem to actually do it?" Everyone agreed this was a very good point. So we shot Joe Manchin into space and passed a comprehensive Green New Deal that set us on the path to eliminating our carbon emissions. Solar panels were erected over every parking lot, which turned out to not only provide a lot of power but made your (electric) car much more pleasant to get into on a sticky summer day. Vast wind farms crisscrossed the nation, and we researched remarkable new storage technologies to make sure we always had energy on hand. (We still haven't got fusion, alas.) The nations of the world finally got off their asses and realized it made no sense to compete instead of collaborate on stopping problems that threatened us all.



How We Made Ourselves More Free

We realized something in the 2030s: it's fun to wear costumes. But there was a stifling social convention that said you could only dress boldly on Halloween and Mardi Gras. This, it was eventually recognized, was silly and arbitrary. So a new custom developed: wear whatever the hell you like, whenever you like, and you won't be judged. If you want to walk down the street dressed as a giant insect, or a daffodil, it is your God-given right to do so, and nobody's going to look at you askance or ask you suspicious questions in a job interview. It turned out that once all social judgment had been removed from dress styles, people's true selves came out, and those selves were wild. But this, too, made the world more interesting to walk around and look at.



How We Gave Everyone What They Needed

Free college, free health-care, free housing: we made sure that all of people's basic needs were covered. It turned out not to be terribly difficult. The hard part was getting people to start caring about strangers more, not finding the resources to care for those strangers.



How We Redesigned The Buildings

Buildings had become boring and everyone knew it. A skyscraper in Dubai looked like a skyscraper in London, and there was almost no point going anywhere anymore, because everywhere was beginning to look identical and deathly dull. So a movement developed for eclecticism in architecture, emphasizing the importance of local variation and experimentation. Soon people were coming up with all kinds of buildings that looked like nothing we had ever seen before. The built environment came alive again! Wherever you looked, there was something remarkable to behold.



How We Built Playground Towns

Playground are great. Everyone knows this. But many playgrounds are small and pitiful. "Wouldn't it be better?" humanity asked itself one day, "if there were playgrounds the size of entire towns?" And because everyone agreed instantly that this would indeed be much better, the Playground Towns were commissioned and built. They were something like theme parks, but free to the public and filled with endless nooks and crannies to get lost in. (Yes, finding children in the playground town was a nightmarish inconvenience for parents, but it's the way the children wanted it.) Everyone got to build the playground towns together, meaning that if you wanted to build a giant sculpture of a tuba with a slide down into the middle, the government would provide you with supplies and help you recruit volunteer builders. Everyone agreed that the only thing more fun than building the playground towns was playing in them afterwards.



drone skies

by *Matthew Byrne*

ON THE BATTLEFIELD, THERE'S A BRIEF DELAY between when a drone captures an image and when that image arrives on its operator's screen. It's called "latency." Video has to be beamed to a U.S. base from Pakistan or Yemen or Syria or Iraq or Somalia or Afghanistan or—it's a lot of ground to cover, and it takes quite a while, so by the time it's delivered, the file that the operator analyzes has become an artifact, a snapshot from the past.

A lot may have changed on the ground while the image was in transit. (Think of a postcard as opposed to an email.) The drone may have crashed, crumpled in a flaming heap, before the operator is any the wiser. Or maybe a child wandered into the blast radius of the cruise missile. The situation isn't always clear before the operator pulls the trigger, but he still pulls it. He always does. He's trained to as a part of the "kill chain."

If you look for a clear picture of casualty counts in America's drone wars, the image will likewise be slow to materialize—if it does at all. The United States has avoided enmeshing itself in what General Norman Schwarzkopf once called "the body-count business." "It's ridiculous to do that," he jeered, dismissing offhand the idea that his military should keep track of the dead—which happens to be a requirement of the Geneva Conventions. That was 1991, and the United States had just dropped its first bomb on Iraq.

The road to America's despoliation of the Middle East begins not in the 1990s, however, but in the early-20th century with high-flying sorties, explosive ordnance, and a high tolerance for bloodshed. While imperial powers have

long attempted to bomb their unruly subjects into submission, it was Italy, in 1911, that first explored the potential of aerial bombardment to enforce obedience. Spain, France, and Britain quickly followed suit, fearful of ceding an upper hand to their rival. Aerial bombardments would become routine within the decade.

European powers originally developed strategic bombing as a shortcut to war-making, to crush insurgencies with minimal effort and expenditure. Their justification was straightforward and clinical. Ground wars risked soldiers dying and civilians protesting mounting casualty counts. Air wars bypassed that risk. And although Europeans soured on the technique during World War II—it revealed what the region's colonial powers had known all along, that indiscriminate bombing is terrorism—the architects of modern warfare show no signs of abandoning aerial bombardment.

On January 23, 2009, three days into his Presidency, Barack Obama authorized his first drone strikes (Pakistan was the target), accelerating his predecessor's program of extrajudicial assassination in the Greater Middle East. (In October of that same year, he would accept the Nobel Peace Prize to thunderous applause in Oslo City Hall.) The former professor of constitutional law had, incredibly, no time for the constitutional guarantee of a "speedy and public" trial before meting out capital punishment on what were deemed "high-value" targets. Instead, he and a cadre of unnamed ghosts in the U.S. government would play judge, jury, and executioner.



TODAY'S MILITARY PLANNERS LOVE DRONES not for what they are but for what they are not: a ground invasion. But what becomes of the human targets?

For those subjected to America's drone wars, the threat of violence pervades everyday life. Catastrophe clings to them like a shadow, and nothing is too sacred or too mundane to escape it. In 2013, a wedding procession just outside of Rad'a, Yemen turned into a mass funeral after an American drone rained four Hellfire missiles on the revelers. Three years later, a 16-year-old U.S. citizen was struck by a CIA drone while eating with his friends elsewhere in Yemen. Then there are the survivors who eke out a life amid the smoldering rubble—either too poor or too stubborn to leave. Hundreds of thousands of survivors have lost limbs—along with their hope for the future. In Syria alone, experts believe 30,000 people are maimed every month as the country's civil war drags on.

To honor the dead is to rescue them from oblivion, count them, and ward off body snatchers. Scholars at Brown University's Costs of War Project, a multi-disciplinary enterprise that calculates the human fallout from wars in the Greater Middle East, estimate that more than 801,000 people have been killed in the U.S.-led bombing

campaigns in the region since 2001. "More than 335,000" were civilians: nearly 40%. And that's to say nothing of the estimated 37 million people the wars have displaced. Pakistan counts 56,611 dead. "Of these, about 23,000 are civilians."

Do those subjected to America's drone wars ever look up at the sky and daydream?

"I no longer love blue skies," thirteen-year-old Zubair ur Rehman told Congress in 2013. A U.S. drone strike on Pakistan had killed his grandmother the previous year. She was "the= string that held our family together ... not a militant but my mother," Zubair's father, Rafiq, testified. Zubair watched as she was blown to pieces. "The drone had appeared out of a bright blue sky, the color of sky most beloved by his grandmother" and Zubair. Now she's gone, buried somewhere underground. For Zubair and his family, she no doubt lives on, but only in memory. Her spirit reverberates in the empty space she left behind, never cast fully into oblivion.

But the cosmic rhythms of the universe continue on. The sun keeps shining, the Earth keeps turning, and drones keep bombing from blue skies above. "In fact," Zubair continued, "I now prefer gray skies. The drones do not fly when the skies are gray." ❖

The Academic as ENTREPRENEUR

BY JACKLIN KWAN

PROFESSOR COSKUN KOCABAS JOINED THE UNIVERSITY of Manchester as a materials engineer in 2017. The university seemed like a perfect fit for his research interests—the applications of the novel material graphene. Graphene was first successfully isolated in 2004 by a pair of scientists at Manchester, winning them the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2010. Since the discovery, the university has been ramping up graphene research and has since created two expensive new research institutes devoted to finding applications to substantiate early media hype about the material.

In Manchester, Dr. Kocabas discovered a new technology: an optoelectronic graphene device that can tune the radiation emitted by a body. To put it simply, it was a graphene-based technology that could control the light given off by an object.

What Dr. Kocabas had helped develop was basically a cloaking device, which sounds like science fiction but has profound application to military and civilian life. For instance, human bodies and machines give off heat in the form of infrared radiation when they're burning energy, and if you put on a pair of infrared goggles, you can see these hot objects even in the dark. Kocabas' device would be able to cloak such hot objects and control the infrared radiation they give off and make them invisible to infrared sensors. From a military standpoint, it would definitely be a strategic advantage to cloak the presence of tanks and troops from the gaze of infrared-sensing drones. On the civilian side, Dr. Kocabas gives the example of how this could help thermally manage satellite systems as they orbit around the Earth at ten times the speed of bullets. Such satellites need to control how much heat they absorb and emit depending on whether they are directly exposed to the sun's rays during their orbit.

Seeing the ramifications of his technology early on, Kocabas filed for a patent through his university before the publication of his paper on the subject. Most universities now are equipped to help their academics file patents. What was once a laborious and expensive process is expedited with the help of in-house patent attorneys and intellectual property offices. Once his university got a look at Kocabas' invention, they strongly encouraged him to create his own spin-out company using their facilities and resources. Fast-forward to SmartIR, a company commercializing "disruptive technologies for space and defense," according to their website. Kocabas is now the founder

and scientific director of a company that has recently signed a contract with the European Space Agency Business Incubation Centre, receiving over USD \$57k (or GBP £43k) in incentives to test their technology in space.

THE RISE OF ENTREPRENEUR-CUM- ACADEMICS

STORIES LIKE KOCABAS' WOULD HAVE BEEN UNHEARD of just two or three decades ago. Direct commercialization of research by academics was not only rare but was even frowned upon as it was seen to distract scientists from "real" research. Such times seem like a far cry from the present, as the biggest research universities have entire innovation arms dedicated to helping academics create businesses out of their realms of expertise. The University of Manchester has the Innovation Factory—an arm that identifies internal research that has market potential and then develops them into businesses. Other big universities, such as Stanford and MIT, which each spin out around 20 to 30 companies per year, have similar incubators and accelerators.

Even Kocabas seems surprised at how rapidly he became a researcher-cum-entrepreneur. "I'm a very scientific person, I had no interest for this kind commercial business and to be honest, I didn't have any education on business." He mentions via video interview that he bought *Business for Dummies* to understand concepts like "value-creation" and "business plans," and he pulls out his latest read, *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries.

Kocabas is one of many scientists and engineers who have found themselves as new business owners, a trend that is quickly intensifying as universities reorganize their research ecosystems to become more market oriented. It's not quite clear what implications such a trend will have on research quality and research priorities, but some see it as a trend that is very much in line with the growing neoliberalism of academic spaces. Such neoliberalization entails the application of competitive market dynamics in higher education: universities run like businesses for profitability and growth in the context of dwindling public funds. Neoliberalization has produced

profound effects such as higher tuition fees and the transformation of academic jobs from highly secure, full-time employment to tenuous part-time or adjunct positions.

Dr. Erkkö Autio, the Chair in Technology Venturing and Entrepreneurship at Imperial College London Business School, has been monitoring the university spin-out space since the 1980s. “In that time span, it’s been a revolutionary transformation,” he says. He charts the change in administration mindset. “Universities started gradually; they started building science parks,” he says. Science parks are property developments built typically around universities, aimed at commercializing academic research. Autio says: “But that was kind of a way to try to box the activity—you have a building somewhere and anyone who wants to develop a business from their research is put there. They were in their own ivory tower and there was no connectivity with anything else.”

Slowly but surely, entrepreneurship became much more integrated into mainstream university activity as universities began to realize the economic potential of spin-out companies and began investing heavily in infrastructure to facilitate their formation. Between 2008 and 2011, the rate of university spin-out formation in the UK increased by 46%, and is likely to be even higher presently. Faculty members who were engaged in entrepreneurship were seen to be more ‘research-productive,’ counter to previous beliefs that running a business would distract from research obligations. These faculty published more papers, and received more grants and citations. When asked why this was the case, Dr. Autio says: “It’s mostly because they tend to keep their doors open more and they occasionally look out from the window and see how the world looks like. That’s how you discover interesting research topics: by talking to industry and asking, ‘What are your challenges today?’”

Such an approach encapsulates neoliberal logic. It is the marketplace—not necessarily other scientific experts—that best determines what is in the public interest and hence what the most pressing scientific challenges are. To Dr. Autio, such a shift is positive. It represents a move away from the ‘navel-gazing’ of

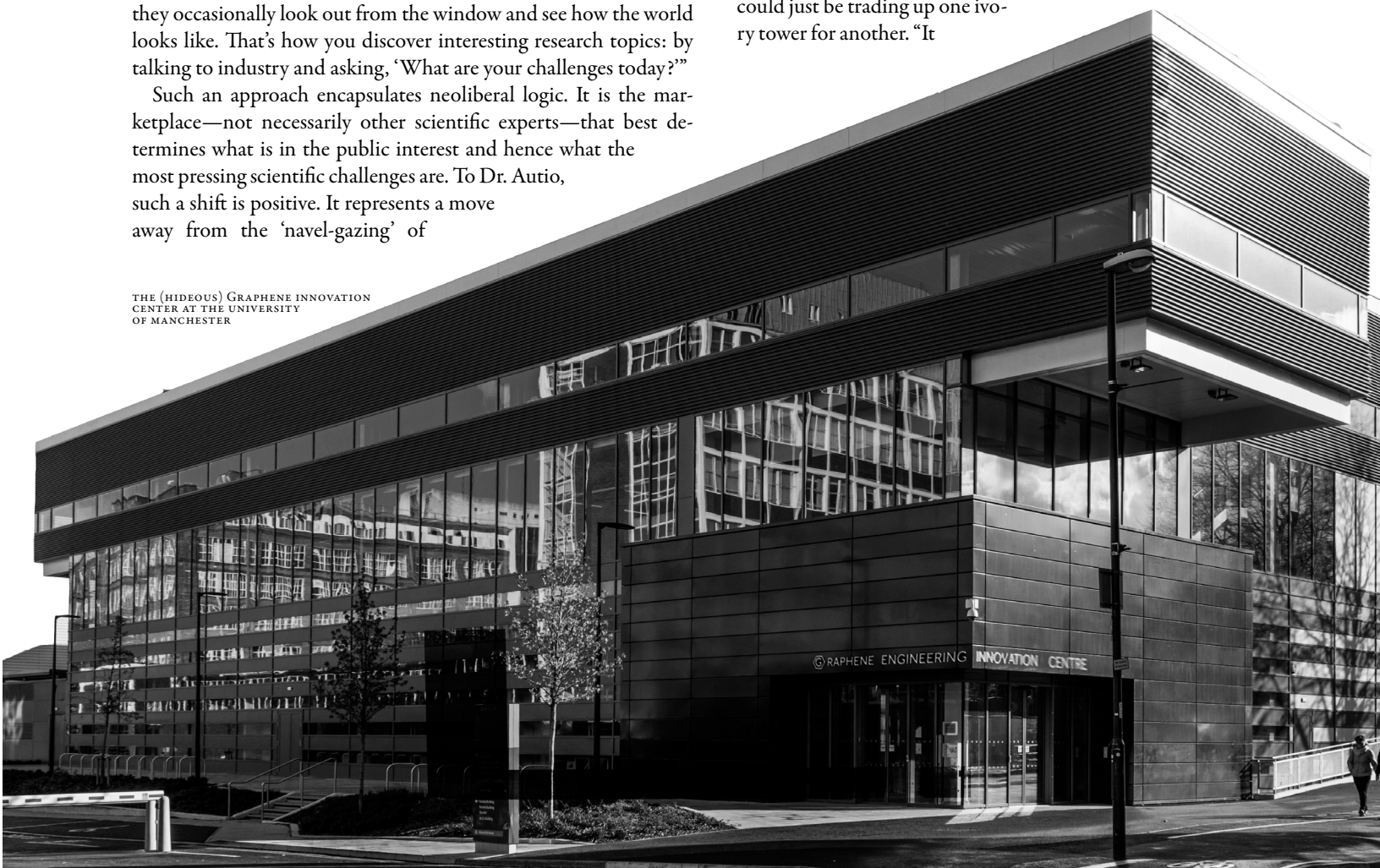
previous ivory-tower research and instead prioritizes the practical impacts of what researchers do. By emphasizing those practical impacts, research becomes more attractive to industry and enhances industry collaboration, helping universities to raise funding. Such is the start to a virtuous cycle, Dr. Autio says. “It’s a beneficial loop where everyone benefits: you get more funding for your research; your students become more employable; you become more attractive to students because you are known for doing things that are interesting.”

Market-focused universities now have a host of mechanisms they use to commercialize their research. Beyond help with filing patents, they help connect their in-house startups with industry partners that can provide funding. Many also now teach tailored entrepreneurial skills to the student body so graduates can go on to staff the business teams of those startups. Some universities even host internal schemes where academics and students compete against one another for a limited pool of startup capital, directly provided by the university.

BUT AT WHAT PRICE?

But this trend has had its fair share of controversy. Dr. Rebecca Lave, Professor and Chair of the Department of Geography at Indiana University, has written about the impacts of neoliberalism in environmental sciences. She suggests that researchers could just be trading up one ivory tower for another. “It

THE (HIDEOUS) GRAPHENE INNOVATION
CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF MANCHESTER



definitely makes sense to me that you could have products developed more quickly from academic research if there were stronger industrial-university links,” she says. “Where I have a problem is the transparency.”

WHEN THE GOAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH is to create a marketable product, there are incentives for researchers to patent emerging technologies or processes in an attempt to gain a future monopoly. While patents do not necessarily limit nonprofit research from happening, they do prevent the development of the patent’s other commercial applications by other people. The patent holder has huge discretionary power to charge high prices when their product eventually hits the market, no matter how socially valuable the innovation may be. So, academics like Dr. Lave worry about the implications marketization has on who ultimately can access the knowledge created under this model.

She argues that plenty of public interest research occurred before the marketization of research: “Public health scientists that are teaming up with communities that are trying to prove the impacts of pollution in their neighborhoods; humanities professors that are working in low-income schools to help people learn to write; science professors that are doing vaccine development.”

But neoliberal logic holds that market imperatives are social imperatives, and vice versa. The underlying argument is that what is considered socially valuable is what people are willing to pay for. Furthermore, because publicly valuable institutions such as higher education are generating profit, they should be run like for-profit companies in terms of structure and organization—a trend that has affected many other aspects of higher education such as the payment and treatment of academics themselves.

Dr. Lave points to this logic as distinct from other historical processes of commercialization in science. On top of the rationale of the ‘marketplace of ideas’ being applied to scientific ideas, there is a greater emphasis on the privatization of knowledge and the application of property rights over knowledge, she says. Dr. Lave also adds that there is an increased emphasis on selling the knowledge that has been removed from the public sphere through privatization back to the public—a recent example being the COVID-19 vaccine. Government spending may actually increase as a result of privatization of knowledge. States would still be investing public money into research and development, but would now be forced to buy the fruits of their investment. Kocabas’ company, for instance, has received €150,000 in EU funding to develop its graphene thermal shields. But when the product is eventually completed, public bodies like the European Space Agency will have to spend more public money to purchase it.

However, Dr. Autio believes that knowledge within the public realm will increase as a result of strengthened industry links. “Knowledge commons are different—knowledge does not get diminished by consumption, it is increased by consumption,” he says. He gives the example of software code or artificial intelligence where companies like Google have the interest to keep a large chunk

of their research or technology open-access so that others can work on it. Allowing this open, transparent access also speeds up the pace of innovation, Dr. Autio says. However, if we were to look a gift horse in the mouth, these companies may have ulterior motives in promoting such open-source projects. Software giants like Microsoft and Google may promote open-source projects in order to maintain market control—having something be free is a great way to ensure your developer and community reach is increased and that new users are exposed to your platform. Market control, though it doesn’t result in immediate revenue, allows corporations monopoly power over, for example, price controls. Having big behemoths able to develop and maintain open-source projects may also make it impossible for hobbyists or smaller interest groups to compete, crowding them out.

Dr. Autio cites the success of the race to develop a COVID-19 vaccine to prove how beneficial public-private collaboration can be:

“When we see start-ups, such as biotech, and we see the central role that biotech played in advancing and validating the technology that enabled us to develop COVID vaccines in less than a year, we see an astounding achievement with global impact.”

But those vaccines came at a price, and they went to the countries that could afford the price tag. At the end of 2021, the World Health Organization announced that only 9% of people on the continent of Africa had been fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

“Rich governments are buying the doses and they’re paying enormous amounts of money for something that was developed with huge amounts of public sector input,” Dr. Lave says. “It’s nuts if you think about it—a few companies are making large amounts of profit out of a collective effort that involves enormous numbers of publicly-funded researchers.”

IT’S NEOLIBERALISM ALL THE WAY DOWN

In this model, public bodies may end up paying twice to access the fruits of research in an age where public funding for research is growing scarce. Both Dr. Autio and Dr. Lave acknowledge that universities are increasingly strapped for money due to funding cuts, which has pressured them to seek alternative income streams. The shrinking number of grants increases competitiveness among researchers, and there is now an enhanced burden of proof on scientists to show that their research is high-impact.

In the United Kingdom, for example, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is used to assess the quality of research in UK higher education providers. The REF is historically preceded by the University Grants Committee, which during the 1980s Thatcher administration was used to demonstrate “value for money” for its public spending—in other words, to achieve economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Results of the REF inform the allocation of around £2 billion in funding per year. As part of the REF’s criteria, impact on society accounts for 25% of the assessment. Impact is generally assessed as the extent to which research changes or bene-

fits the economy, society, culture, or general quality of life. Universities are not only pressured to pursue market-based impact strategies for their research to attract private sources of income (such as industry-funded grants), but also when competing against one another for public funding.

Spin-out companies are an efficient solution. They ensure that research has a clear impact in terms of delivering a product to market. This secures public funding and helps attract private investors. Conducting market research and market analysis is cheaper than it ever has been with digital technologies that make it easy to gather market information (e.g., conducting online surveys), especially when supplemented by the spin-out company facilities that universities will now provide. These facilities are no longer the segregated science parks that Dr. Autio saw in the past. Many innovation incubators and accelerators rely on being heavily integrated into the university.

Scientists do the research and the university helps them file and maintain the patent. Then an entrepreneurial team works with scientists, who lack real-world business experience, to create businesses out of their patents. These business teams are often staffed by former students of the university. Universities are scaling up efforts to teach undergraduates and postgraduates entrepreneurial skills to make them more “employable,” particularly in the university’s own spin-out spaces.

For instance, the Chief Operating Officer of Dr. Kocabas’ company completed her PhD in the Graphene Condensed Matter Group at the University of Manchester, after which she joined a graphene company which spun out of her alma mater. Eventually, she took a job at SmartIR. Dr. Autio’s own institution, Imperial College London, has its own Enterprise Division, which is responsible for helping external investors looking to license university technologies, as well as its own Business School.

The heavy integration of entrepreneurship and commercialisation into university operations may seem intuitive at first. If the amount of public money is shrinking as per neoliberalism’s demand to decrease state involvement in the economy, then these alternate income streams surely just expand the available pool of funding for research that otherwise would not have existed at all. However, this scenario is not like a tide that lifts all boats. Dr. Lave says that the drive to commercialize research may shape research priorities and goals. She gives the example of plant engineering.

Referencing analysis by rural sociologist Jack Kloppenburg, she explains that public sector scientists were blocked from developing seed varieties that could not be patented due to the interests of agrochemical companies like Cargill and Pfizer. She says, “Seeds are inherently very difficult to commercialize because, if you grow a plant, you can save the seeds and replant them.” Therefore, there was no money to be made if farmers could just use replenishable seed varieties—that is, until hybrid seeds were developed. Hybrid seeds are designed to grow high yields when they are first used, but are such that any saved seeds will produce lower yields.

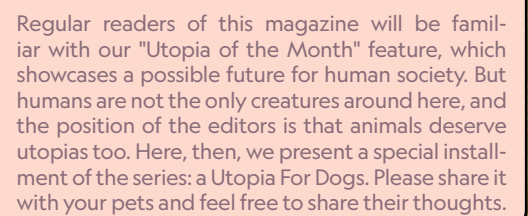
“What happened is that the process of marketization forced public sector scientists to develop hybrid seeds rather than working on basically open-access varieties,” Dr. Lave says.

SIMILAR CONTRACTIONS IN THE FOCUS OF RESEARCH can happen when other public sector sciences come into conflict with the mega trend of neoliberalization. We can ask whether or not opinions critical of industry or research not guaranteed to result in successful marketization would succeed in gaining any funding or traction. Consider a case in which freedom of speech in a research university was influenced by industrial ties. In 2011, the University of Wyoming Art Museum featured a sculpture by British artist Chris Drury that examined the connection “between global warming and the pine beetle infestation that has ravaged forests across the Rockies.” The installation not only faced huge opposition by pro-energy officials in politics but also representatives from the energy sector. The university was bombarded by emails from displeased officials from Cloud Peak Energy, BP, and Encana. As a placating measure, the director of the School of Energy Resources (SER) reaffirmed the university’s loyalty—reminding the companies that the SER had committed \$1.5 million in additional investment to the Encana Lab earlier that month. The Encana lab produces research related to oil production. As private enterprise becomes more and more vital to a university’s life line, the buck stops with them and not the other parties involved in research production. The controversy ultimately led to the “quiet removal of the artwork.”

We can also ask what happens to the art and humanities departments of universities when they fail to attract industry partnerships. Such departments are often the ones that produce research that is critical of corporate behavior. When universities begin to filter research through the sieve of industrial needs, it’s possible that departments training students in politics, art, history, philosophy—the subjects that create a well-rounded citizen (but not necessarily an ideal consumer)—will be left to the wayside or also be made palatable to industry. For instance, many universities may heavily encourage academics in social science and humanities to provide consulting services and contract research to private clients, incentivizing them with promises of career progression. Like their peers in STEM, humanities researchers may find themselves increasingly embedded in inherently commercial research environments. Earlier this decade, “social science parks”—the humanities equivalent of science parks—became the new craze, with one being constructed in Cardiff University in Wales. The social science research park (SPARK) encourages and facilitates the connection of researchers with policy-makers, NGOs, and also private companies. Academics in SPARK quite literally work in the same space as those in the private sector, blurring the line between them. The research priorities of SPARK are then heavily shaped by what these private third parties think are the most pressing social problems.

Humanities and social science professors may one day end up in the dual roles Dr. Kocabas finds himself in: both academic and businessperson. To him, helping to run a company is more work on his plate. “At the end of the day, you have 24 hours. No one is really reducing my duties because of the company, so I have to do this on top of what I already do,” he says. Expectations of innovation and entrepreneurial spirit are yet other things in the growing job description of the overworked academic, but as Dr. Kocabas says, “If you can do it, why not?” ♣





FLORIDA BEFORE & AFTER





DANGER

*An accelerating race to
destroy Florida's wilderness
shows us what we value and
previews our collective future
during the climate crisis...*

BY JEFF VANDERMEER

YOU CAN TELL MANY STORIES ABOUT FLORIDA, but one of the most tragic and with the worst long-term consequences is this: since development in Florida began here in earnest in the 20th century, state leaders and developers have chosen a cruel, unsustainable legacy involving the non-stop slaughter of wildlife and the destruction of habitat, eliminating some of the most unique flora and fauna in the world.

In his 1944 book *That Vanishing Eden: A Naturalist's Florida*, Thomas Barbour bemoans the environmental damage caused by development to the Miami area and writes,

"Florida ... must cease to be purely a region to be exploited and flung aside, having been sucked dry, or a recreation area visited by people who ... feel no sense of responsibility and have no desire to aid and improve the land."

Even then, a dark vision of Florida's future was clear.

Most of this harm has been inflicted in the service of unlimited and poorly planned growth, sparked by greed and short-term profit. This systematic murder of the natural world has accelerated in the last decade to depths previously unheard of. The process has been deliberate, often systemic, and top-down, with out-of-state developers flooding the state with dark money that has been given to both state and local politicians and in support of projects that bear no relationship to sound management of natural resources. These projects typically reinforce income inequality and divert attention and money away from traditionally disadvantaged communities.

Consider this: at least two football fields-worth of forest and other valuable habitat is cleared *per day* in Florida, with 26 percent of our canopy cut down in the last twenty years.

The ecocide happening here is comparable to the destruction of the Amazon, but much less remarked upon. Few of those involved understand how they hurt the quality of life for Florida residents and systematically lay waste to any possibility of climate crisis resiliency. Politicians like to pull out estimates of the millions who will be flocking to Florida by 2040 or 2050 to justify rampant new development, but these estimates are a grim joke, and some of those regurgitating them know that. By 2050, the world will likely be grappling with the fallout from two-degree temperature rise. It's unlikely people will flock to a state quickly dissolving around its edges.



THE CORRIDOR TO A BETTER FUTURE?

ABOUT THE SIZE OF GREECE, FLORIDA IS THE jewel in the crown of the amazingly biodiverse Southeastern U.S. Coastal Plain. The state has 1,300 miles of shoreline, 600 clear-water springs, 1,700 ravines and streams, and over 8,000 lakes. More than 3,000 native trees, shrubs, and flowering plants are native to Florida, many unique to our peninsula and many also endangered due to development. Our 100 species of orchid (compare that to Hawai'i's *three* native orchids) and 150 species of ferns speak to the moist and subtropical climate across many parts of the state. Florida has more wetlands than any other conterminous state—11 million acres—including seepage wetlands, interior marshes, and interior swamp land.

As Jen Lomberk of Matanzas Riverkeeper describes it, Florida's aquifer is unique because it is "so inextricably connected both underground and to surface waters. Florida's limestone geology means that pollutants can readily move through ground water and from ground water to surface water (and vice versa)." In a sense, the very water we drink in Florida lays bare the connections between the often-invisible systems that sustain life on Earth and shows both the strength of these systems and their vulnerability.

Land trusts and other environmental groups across the state are doing heroic conservation work to protect the state's unique biodiversity. Thirty thousand acres of Apalachicola River floodplain just received substantial protections, for example. But this occurs in the face of ever-stiffer opposition, "the worst I've ever seen," the head of one major Florida-based conservation group told me, referring to the predatory and anti-science environmental actions of our Republican-dominated Florida legislature.

There are new proposals for a Florida Wildlife Corridor, an idea that stands out from most Florida conservation efforts because this monumental vision has an allure hardwired to a biological truth: Without sufficient connection between the remaining wilderness areas within the state, even our most remote sanctuaries will be walled-off islands of biodiversity that, over time, will lose their richness. Animals like bears and panthers rove over vast areas, and habitat fragmentation makes their lives almost impossible.

Those who conceived of the corridor have largely been apolitical. But they imagine the corridor not just as a set of connected places but also

as a narrative that combines "conservation science with compelling imagery and rich storytelling to ... inspire [the corridor's] protection." Advocacy on behalf of the Florida Wildlife Corridor includes "documentaries, books, videos, and vivid photographic presentations that introduce these natural areas to Florida residents and visitors of all ages."

Shown on maps as a slow curve up through South Florida, Central Florida, and into the North Florida Panhandle, the wildlife corridor offers hope for the future. The ultimate goal is for it to cover 17.7 million acres, with 9.6 million acres made of existing conservation land (some of it compromised by other uses, like ranching and silviculture) and 8.1 million acres made of "opportunity areas" for future conservation, including through the underfunded Florida Forever land acquisition program and the Rural & Family Lands Protection Program. The creation of the corridor also gives an overriding purpose, or story, to other environmental projects that feed into the corridor goal, while emphasizing the importance of the 75 state parks, 32 state forests, and 171 springs that form part of the corridor.

Will the Wildlife Corridor form the core of a re flourishing of Florida's wild spaces? Or will it be a last stand, becoming in time a wildlife fortress or land-bound island surrounded by pollution, unnecessary infrastructure projects, and urban sprawl?

The answer lies in whether rural Florida can fight off the predations of its own state government, including what many here call "the toll roads to ruin."

THE TOLL ROADS TO RUIN

IF THE IDEA BEHIND THE WILDLIFE CORRIDOR REPRESENTS a profound expression of a sustainable, biodiverse future, then the toll roads are the purest distillation of capitalist evil. Governor Ron DeSantis, the Florida legislature, and the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) seem determined to ram these roads through rural central and north Florida—even as the people who live there, regardless of political affiliation, are united in fighting the roads and the destruction brought with them.

The Northern Turnpike Extension is just the latest attempt by politicians and developers to crack open some of the last truly wild and rural lands in the state, through Citrus, Levy, and Marion Counties. This roughly 79-mile highway, first conceived of by a billionaire developer, would connect Wildwood, where I-75 begins, northwest to the city of Chiefland. The ostensible reason is to relieve congestion on I-75, which runs down the middle of the state, but the highway





would bring the sprawl of South Florida north, even though Florida already has more miles of toll roads than any other state.

Despite the cautionary example of the consequences of other controversial highway boondoggles, the Northern Turnpike Extension and future toll roads may be approved and completed over land that is part of the Wildlife Corridor. This is purely due to pressure from special interests, as these toll roads are useless and devastating projects that will cost billions. The last time the governor and state legislature tried to shove them through, in 2019-2020, their own task forces created for the project preferred an option of “no build.”

With 93 percent of public comments opposed, according to a group against the roads, FDOT tried to minimize the public outcry by failing to record those comments. Even former governor Jeb Bush, coming out of pandemic slumber to pen a disgraceful pro-roads editorial for the *Tampa Tribune*, couldn't convince Floridians. Residents also saw through politicians' inaccurate claims that the roads would be necessary to expand broadband internet to rural areas.

Not only will most sensible urban planners tell you that adding more highways to solve congestion just leads to more congestion, but as environmental organizations and residents are quick to point out, existing roads are underused. The FDOT's own map for this new toll road project could be considered deceptive or, at best, incomplete. “Opportunity zones” for economic development near a Withlacoochee River that regularly floods its banks by eight feet have become an object of scorn among the locals—and exemplify the engineering problems that would, in the aftermath of a road being built, plague residents for years to come.

“I have no idea what big employers in Citrus County are at SR 200 and SR44 near the Withlacoochee River? Maybe places to buy beer,” Robert Roscow, an architect who lives in the area, posted in the Facebook group Suncoast and Northern Turnpike Connector. The response to Roscow's query to FDOT about these businesses revealed incompetence or deception: a dairy that is actually in a different county and no mention of the largest employers (educational and medical), who do not need the toll roads to do business.

The remote location of the toll roads would be a warning sign to most large companies, who would likely prefer to build near the central artery of I-75. However, FDOT appears to have deemphasized its analysis of the feasibility of widening I-75 to make the Northern Turnpike Connector seem like the only option.

The anguish of people who have a connection to the land and understand the importance of complex ecosystems is palpable.

“They can have the house,” one resident commented on an anti-toll-road Facebook thread with hundreds of similar comments. She had posted a photo of the huge oak tree in her yard. “But damn it if it makes me cry thinking this tree will be bulldozed.”

Marjorie Shropshire, a lifelong Florida resident active in environmental causes and organizations, sees part of the problem as lawmakers who “do not understand how they fit into nature or how nature works. Perhaps they just don't care. Many hold the belief that there is no ‘value’ to nature ... if it isn't ‘improved,’ it's worthless. There is a lack of recognition of the ecosystem services that conserved lands can provide, therefore it is easy to claim that more conservation lands are not needed, or that they are too expensive.”

The FDOT's own studies of the proposed toll roads demonstrate substantial effects on wetlands and long-term pollution and degradation of water quality. Two of four potential routes found to be “moderate” in these impacts are only moderate *in comparison to the remaining routes*. The state's Southwest Water Management District has come out against the toll roads.

Even the Ocala Horse Alliance opposes the project: “The toll road will destroy hundreds of small farms and trail areas [and] will be accompanied by irreversible negative environmental damage [including] massive urban sprawl, will decimate pastures and open spaces and promote excessive commercialization.”

Currently, FDOT has fast-tracked the selection of a route by year's end even as horrific images of the destruction wrought in Pasco County, just farther south, hit conservation Facebook groups from the already-approved Suncoast connector toll road.

Having driven through Pasco and adjacent counties down to Tampa in early 2020, before the pandemic hit, I can attest to the horror of the destruction caused by the new road and adjacent road-widening. Heavy bulldozers were everywhere, leveling everything, the immediate cost to wildlife apparent right there on the road. The sense of bearing witness to the first, vigorous days of the creation of Mordor hung heavy in the air.

You may think this is an exaggeration, but the feeling of dread only grew as I came upon a whole family of seven raccoons slaughtered along the roadside. The mother had clearly gone back for her babies, only to perish with them. Later on, I saw a gopher tortoise eking out an existence on the trough of grass between Route 19 and



the decimated area that used to be their home. And on the stretch near Homosassa Springs, a rare Florida mouse, terrified, dodging for its life through four lanes of heavy traffic—just to get to a tiny clump of sod next to a newly erected crosswalk sign. Its palmetto habitat had just been razed by developers.

HOW ROADS BRING RUIN

JUST RAMMING SUCH ROADS THROUGH FARMS, FOREST, and swamp destroys many hundreds of acres, perhaps thousands. But the roads are always just a pretext for developers and others to come in and transform an area forever.

The process works roughly like this: road construction results in flooding, erosion, and water quality issues. In addition, the road builders often don't follow proper environmental guidelines, resulting in pollution to the surrounding areas.

This initial phase kills and displaces wildlife, liquidates the mature pines and live oaks that support the most organisms, destroys rare plants and trees, and allows extremely harmful invasive plant species a foothold. For large animals like bears, the roads will be deadly and drive them further into more distant, smaller territories. If verges are fenced or median strips become concrete barriers, this accelerates ecosystem fragmentation via isolation of populations. 50 percent of all Florida panther deaths annually are roadkill deaths. (Nationally, roadkill deaths add up to more than one million vertebrate animals per day.) No care is taken to check and decontaminate heavy equipment. Rare native plants are largely granted no legal protections or rights, and Florida native plant groups frequently stage interventions for habitat about to be destroyed for development, by trying to transplant rarities to other areas.

Street lights immediately create additional light pollution in formerly dark-sky rural areas. The now-favored white LEDs, more energy friendly, are actually worse for nocturnal wildlife and insects, because their glow disrupts life cycles and further degrades ecosystems. Every year, the world loses another two percent of dark skies to light pollution.

Next come the gas stations: huge complexes with dozens of pumps, built on a half-acre of concrete, and with full-service convenience stores, which levels more forest and increases light pollution, as well as pollution in general. In the opinion of experts, building new stations easily leads to contamination of groundwater and the aquifer due to gasoline tank leakage.

This stage may or may not be accompanied by the building of single-family homes on large lots of one to five acres. While these homes may have a lower environmental footprint than some forms of high-density housing, they bring more clearcutting, use of pesticides and herbicides, and, usually, homeowners whose relationship to the surrounding wildlife can be antagonistic, causing further disruption of ecosystems.

On the heels of these changes, the larger-scale developments appear, often extending from the existing urban areas. Creating these subdivisions and planned communities is always the main goal for developers. Single-family home development involves wholesale clearcutting, similar to what's done by ranchers in the Amazon—sometimes as much as

3,000 to 5,000 acres at a time: completely wiped clean, including the topsoil. That means almost every tree, every organism on that property, is killed or displaced. In place of this complex ecosystem: thousands of overpriced, poorly-made houses.

Ironically, mining operations that follow the law have to protect the environment to a far greater extent than developers. When properly cared for, topsoil is treated like gold, Jeremy Gilmer, a mining consultant, told me. The topsoil is separated and stored in piles and nurtured with "water, mixing, and care" so that organisms can continue to thrive. The process is costly and timely, but it is essential if land is to be restored after completion of a mining project. But, Gilmer noted, on most civic construction and development sites, "contractors strip ground and the materials are mixed, piled and often left to rot and eventually wasted in use as regular fill or left in a pile. No effort [is] made to retain the valuable, important and 'live' top soil."

Any wildlife that manages to flee often perishes in new, unfamiliar environments. In place of the native organisms comes terraforming: lawns of useless sod and trees like crepe myrtles that have very limited value to butterflies, bees, birds, and other organisms. Often, developments will creep right up to the doorstep of state parks and national wildlife refuges, and without a buffer, runoff and other pollution will contaminate what are meant to be sanctuaries for nonhuman life.

THE DAMNING THING IS HOW INVISIBLE THIS ecocide feels to those of us who live here and care. The nature of clearcutting with soil removal leaves no evidence of the crime behind—just a void. The ways in which much of the ultimate green-lighting for ecocide occurs at the local government level also makes much of it invisible, doomed to reside at best in regional news cycles, but often not even reported on there.

Manatees and panthers are iconic Florida species that people often rally around, but such sporadic enthusiasm is not enough if nothing happens when so many of them are killed. Palmettos are critical to other species' survival and can be over 5,000 years old, but they are also low to the ground, considered a nuisance to developers, and are the first thing to be bulldozed.

Gopher tortoises often suffer a horrific fate. If you have bought a house of a certain age in the dry sand scrub that was once prime tortoise territory, chances are you live on top of the dead bodies of gopher tortoises—slaughtered outright and their shells cracked, or sealed alive in their burrows to suffocate or starve to death. Reports estimate more than 100,000 gopher tortoises have died this way. The true number may be twice that. Just as with the palmettos, a keystone species, gopher tortoises support all sorts of other organisms, which use their burrows. What this means is that development wipes out entire ecosystems and kills a host of other animals when either of these species is extirpated. This then affects in a profound way the benefits these ecosystems provided to human beings.

These days, there is a relocation program for gopher tortoises, but it is of dubious quality, with fudged mortality rates, and now further weakened by a typically pro-business Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission. Treating the most docile, harmless, and important of Florida species with such cruelty should be a crime.

Mitigation programs in general only preserve some remnant of a highly complex ecosystem, in the form of the animals saved—the connectivity and all of the richness built up over thousands of years

LEFT: Manatees gather in the warm water next to a coal power plant near Tampa.
PAGE 61: A wooded area near Naples is destroyed to make way for a new road.
PAGE 60: A gopher tortoise tries to go someplace.

is lost forever. Worse, legacy licenses to outright kill gopher tortoises have no end date, meaning some companies still can legally chop up live tortoises to build their subdivisions.

In other kinds of habitat, many of these developments will be built by filling in wetlands. The most rudimentary provisions will be made for flooding and erosion control, and the same cycle as for single family homes on large lots will repeat. Even land set aside as environmental easement to mitigate development will likely be on the chopping block. Inadequate stormwater ponds that do little to filter out pollution will be put in as mocking mirrors of the karst features and natural water bodies bulldozed over. Often, migratory waterfowl return to these bodies of water and use them even though the food value is now low and the toxins in the water higher. A valuable resource has been rendered a parody of its former self.

DeSantis has created an Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection to address the climate crisis—but, if Republican imagination of the past is any indication, that will mean the monies for these protection projects will be diverted to unrelated pet projects or even given to the very developers who have caused the coastal problems, much as oil companies now try to greenwash their image.

More importantly, what use is a resiliency agency that doesn't address the threat posed by runaway development in the interior of the state? It is widely accepted now that cutting down mangroves is foolhardy, however many decades it took for that lesson to be learned. But what we're doing in other parts of Florida is exactly the same as cutting down mangroves. Combatting increasing heat and enacting flood and erosion control can be matters of life and death. When you remove mature live oak trees and mature pine trees that help mitigate these issues you are creating a future disaster that was partially avoidable, even factoring in climate crisis.

HOW WE GOT HERE

FLORIDA FACES SO MANY ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES: manatee die-off, Florida panther habitat fragmentation, phosphate mining runoff polluting bays, PFAS water contamination, red tide and algae blooms accelerated and accentuated by pollution, and more. The story of how we got here includes concerted, planned actions by elites—including developers and parasitic politicians—but gross incompetence and stupidity as well.

You can point to the handing over of federal wetlands permitting to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), ceded by the feds during the Trump era, in conjunction with the state legislature passing weakened urban canopy protections and other laws aimed at curbing the ability of local government to stop bad ideas and worse development. Environmental mitigation programs have reached an all-time low as well, with environmentalists having to fight off a proposed bill to allow destruction of sea grasses in return for planting them elsewhere, even as manatees die in the thousands due to lack of food like sea grass.

The latest atrocity to potentially be inflicted upon Florida is a “pre-emption” bill, likely to be signed into law by DeSantis, that would allow businesses to sue city and county governments if a local ordinance costs a business more than 15 percent of its profits. Republicans clearly mean for this law to give developers and other anti-environment entities—

who already have an obscene arsenal of weapons at their disposal—yet another advantage.

Recently, too, the penalty for speaking out has become frightening: you can be sued by a company if you urge a county commission to reject a mining project and incur a fine of millions for impugning a company's reputation. And when the people of Florida fund land preservation programs through passing Amendment 1 in 2014, for example, lawmakers divert millions of dollars to such noted environmental causes as “an insurance fund to protect state environmental and agricultural [agencies] from federal civil rights act violations.”

What allowed much of this to happen was the elimination of the state's growth management department, the Florida Department of Community Affairs, in 2011. Republican governor Rick Scott essentially abolished the department in favor of a Department of Economic Opportunity that has over the years been partially run by and advised by the very developers who have a stake in the cheapest possible ways to destroy a place.

Now we have “opportunity zones” around the toll roads that are simply excuses to carve up rural Florida for business interests—and entities like the North Florida Economic Development Partnership, which even works “nature” into their slogan—“Business Growth is in Our Nature”—and cloaks the signs and symbols of destruction and pollution in symbolic leaves and green colors. Nothing says sustainability like framing a photograph of a fossil fuel-emitting logging truck with a swath of green.

Under former governor Rick Scott and now DeSantis—who pays lip service to the wildlife corridor while undermining it with most of his policies—the stacking of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) with political appointees emboldened to make terrible decisions has become almost laughable. Last year, for example, Florida's top wildlife official wanted to fill in a South Florida lagoon full of manatees to make a profit in real estate.

In addition to all of this, which feels like enough, the FDEP has been weakened both in how it handles violations of already watered-down regulations, and in the permits it hands out. Recently, in both North and South Florida, environmentalists had to fend off exploratory oil wells from out-of-state companies—in extremely vital and biodiverse areas, with huge impacts for drinking water and general quality of life.

New legislation also takes aim at independent environmental analysis that is by nature nonpartisan: one bill passed by the legislature restricts who can serve as a county soil and water supervisor. Those appointed help property owners maintain the integrity of the natural resources. According to Leon County's appointee, Shelby Green, the change would “restrict who is allowed to sit in these seats and decide the future of our natural, but also political environment. If the bills as written pass, it will severely limit oversight, accountability, and citizen input [affecting] who can be a public servant.”

Worse, special interests appear to have gotten traction at the national level, with internal documents showing that U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service wants to downlist the endangered status of both the panther and the Key deer—which would again mean fewer problems for rampant, unsustainable development. There are only about 200 Florida panthers remaining.

As one rural resident on the toll roads Facebook group put it, describing Florida's current crop of lawmakers, “We are nothing to them,

yet we elected them to hold their office. Our beautiful lands and wild-life mean nothing to them. Yet the plans they make to better themselves in their political world are what mean everything to them.”

Even the Florida Waterkeepers feel this increased drumbeat of destruction. In their 2020 report, they write that their ecological and clean water mission was “deeply challenged ... when our water resources were threatened and compromised by harmful rule changes and rollbacks, intended to fast-track development and support industry interests..”

Beyond Florida, this pattern now creeps into and poisons the Southeast—including parts of mindbogglingly biodiverse Alabama. Echoes of these same processes infiltrate supposed “green” energy initiatives, such as the destruction of Southeastern forest to send fuel to biomass plants and efforts by utility companies to try to nix personal solar in favor of industrial solar farms that, not properly regulated, often destroy habitat in a way similar to the worst kinds of development.

Florida Democratic gubernatorial candidate Nikki Fried recently created controversy by comparing DeSantis’ consolidation of power with the rise of Hitler. The specificity of the example elides key differences, but it is not *too* extreme to recognize that DeSantis in Florida is at least beginning to resemble an autocrat consolidating power, including the keeping of an enemies list. Even with Florida being subject to federal jurisdiction, most experts see a dilution of fair and democratic processes in the state that is likely to worsen as the opposition is weakened.

“Just recently a governmental body invoiced FLCGA nearly \$500 for basic public information that should have been easily retrievable,” says Bob Norman, Florida Center for Government Accountability’s journalism director. “We’ve seen this kind of abusive practice on a sporadic basis for decades, but now it’s become pretty much an expected part of the newsgathering process. Far too many state and local agencies have made sport of making so-called government-in-the-sunshine as onerous and expensive and time-consuming as possible.”

An oligarchy, with its system of favoritism toward certain elites and special interests, is often stacked against environmental causes in ways different from a decaying representative democracy. An oligarchy functioning within a representative democracy may actually give developers more tools of suppression if the worst aspects of both systems merge, as they have in Florida.

NOWHERE IS SAFE

FOR A LONG TIME, I DIDN’T BELIEVE THIS KIND OF destruction could come to Tallahassee in such a rapacious way. No toll road will go through Tallahassee and for much of the time I’ve lived here, since 1992, most people have chosen to live alongside trees and wildlife. Live oaks were celebrated as something to cherish and preserve and take care of, for future generations; nature was part of the allure of the city.

The hazards of development in North Florida include how hilly places like Tallahassee are, with steep ravines and constant flooding and erosion issues. Ecosystems include high pine grasslands, flatwoods, scrub, hardwood hammocks, and upland glades and caves, in addition to an abundance of lakes and wetlands. The enforcement code allowed for a robust urban canopy and other safeguards that protected canopy roads and our water quality. This plan took into account our unique biosphere, migrating birds, and general quality of life.

The urban-rural divide in our excellent comprehensive plan codified the value of the natural world: “*The current Rural category is intended to maintain and promote agriculture, silviculture, and natural resource-based activities, to preserve natural systems and ecosystem functions, and to protect the scenic vistas and pastoral development patterns that typify Leon County’s rural areas.*”

But local government and special interests like the Chamber of Commerce appear to have decided that we are no longer to live alongside nature; instead, the particular wildness of nature in North Florida is something to wage war against. The mindset of an alien occupation is apparent in so many ways, including through Blueprint, the intergovernmental agency that spends our tax dollars on large-scale projects and infrastructure. Every plan that includes parks or landscaping looks like something out of a sanitized view of the world from the 1950s. More importantly, it flenses most aspects of North Florida in favor of the generic.

Much like governor Rick Scott’s dismantling of developer oversight in 2011, one of our economic growth agencies made changes in 2017 so that large-scale industrial projects like a recent Amazon warehouse could be approved with little public interference, while



WARNING SIGNS

OF THE SYSTEMIC COLLAPSE OF ENVIRONMENTAL SAFEGUARDS



All over the world, a war on the biosphere, and thus human quality of life, is on the uptick. General warning signs of intense ecocide imminent if not already underway include:

ABOLISH OVERSIGHT AGENCIES OR RENDER THEM TOOTHLESS	FIND WAYS TO MOVE NATIONAL CONTROL OF LAND CONSERVATION TO THE STATE LEVEL	RESTRICT ACCESS TO PUBLIC RECORDS ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES BY BEING NONRESPONSIVE
STOCK ANY ADJACENT RELEVANT AGENCIES WITH IDEOLOGUES LOYAL TO IDEAS OF UNLIMITED, UNREGULATED GROWTH	WEAKEN EXISTING STATE ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO ENACT STRICTER PROVISIONS	WHEN YOU DO RESPOND, PROVIDE INCOMPLETE INFORMATION, OR MAKE IT EXPENSIVE.
SIMILARLY, STACK RELEVANT WATER QUALITY AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARDS WITH CRONIES	USE BUDDING OLIGARCHIC TENDENCIES IN WAYS THAT REWARD THE SPECIAL INTERESTS THAT SUPPORT YOU	CREATE PROPAGANDA TO SUPPORT THE IDEA THAT RECKLESS DEVELOPMENT IS ACTUALLY LOGICAL PROGRESS AND THOSE WHO OPPOSE IT ARE EXTREMISTS
USE THE LAW TO INTIMIDATE ACTIVISTS FIGHTING BAD PROJECTS	DON'T ENFORCE ENVIRONMENTAL RULES OR REMAINING LAWS, OR DO SO HALF-HEARTEDLY	YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT

various city departments that used to do real oversight of economic development and the environmental consequences now recommend approving just about every development project brought before them.

The pace of development in Tallahassee has accelerated so much, along with much of the rest of Florida the past few years, that even our local property appraiser wrote an alarmed editorial in the local paper. One of the biggest clearcutting developers, the Ghazvini family, now operates with impunity, despite having earned the rare distinction of receiving the largest fine ever doled out by one of Florida's Water Management Districts for flooding an adjacent neighborhood to the point where people couldn't leave their homes for days.

Not content with their existing influence, the Ghazvinis now bankroll Grow Tallahassee, a developer PAC created to interfere in local elections. During COVID, these same developers worked with local government to deliver Welaunee, the largest annexation for non-affordable housing of environmentally sensitive land in Tallahassee's history, holding a "public hearing" via Zoom, while not allowing a single member of the public to be heard.

The paper of record, the *Tallahassee Democrat*, has unfortunately become part of the problem. The *Democrat* also lacks a dedicated environmental reporter and rarely makes the link between quality of life and the quality of our environment. Stories about developers and new development are more or less press releases from the developers themselves, letting us know vital information like that one developer, Hadi Boulos, "cries" when he clearcuts properties, mourning the trees. (The paper ran no story when the same developer tried to hike the price of new houses by thousands of dollars after homeowners had already signed contracts.)

The very economic development agency the newspaper reports on spends thousands of dollars on advertisements. When called out about the paper's publication of sponsored articles by developers, the news director, James L. Rosica, had the audacity to say that these puff pieces "help support the vital journalism we provide every day."

The pro-developer propaganda manifests in other ways, too. Mayor Dailey touts as his accomplishment our supposed 55-percent urban canopy, even though he has voted for all of the development that has significantly lowered that percentage. Even a quick Google map search will reveal 200-acre clearcutting scars that make a mockery of his claim.

Meanwhile, the messaging of our chief forester about our urban canopy has devolved over time from a focus on mature trees to a focus on planting saplings, even though these saplings cannot possibly substitute for the mature tree cover that birds and other wildlife need. Our tourist brochure touts Tallahassee's importance to migratory birds, yet we have almost certainly doomed some migratory birds to localized die-offs. When they reach our area, they find there isn't enough food, because so many trees have been cut down and so much habitat destroyed.

Our land management ordinance has been watered down. Our tree ordinance has been watered down. Our burn ordinance has been watered down. Our fertilizer ordinance has been watered down. This year, the city and county plan to annex another 750 acres of rural, undeveloped land for more high density, clearcut sprawl.

WHERE IS THE FUTURE?

THE FLORIDA WILDLIFE CORRIDOR WILL FAIL—IF NOT because of toll roads then the built-in failure of the legislation, the back door for developers that allows them to treat corridor-acquired lands as mitigation for destruction elsewhere.

But some failures are still successes. The Florida Wildlife Corridor can still deliver into protection many hundreds of thousands of acres of land.

The toll roads may be built, but the resistance, and the number of residents retaining eminent domain lawyers, may delay it. Before it is extended more northerly still, conservation groups may secure enough land in North Florida to curtail the damage, to cauterize the wound and bandage it. There is also hope in efforts like the OUTSIDE conference, which preaches a kinder, gentler kind of terraforming for Florida.

We have an immediate and urgent need for affordable housing that no amount of urban sprawl can provide and every day in my house on the edge of a ravine, I see the wasted opportunity. Instead of half-acre lots with houses built along the top of the ravine, we could have had the vision and imagination for high density, affordable housing, while still leaving the trough of woodlands below intact. This is perhaps the most terrible truth about all of this maximized destruction: it wasn't necessary. It wasn't necessary, given even moderately good and sane urban planning.

The hard choices, about the environment and about housing, are not really hard—the hard part is that it's impossible to get most politicians in Florida to roll up their sleeves and do the work necessary to make the right decisions. And how much more impossible is that task when it seems like decision-makers loathe the place in which they live, caring about power but not the fate of whole communities? Or, worse, believe the destruction they cause *is* the hard, the correct choice?

Foundational ideas buried in settler colonialist mindset—which previously brought us the slaughter of Indigenous people in the service of "Manifest Destiny"—are still hardwired into our society. These ideas help support the destruction. Trump wanted to "drain the swamp," and Elon Musk now wants to do it again to build more of his Space X near Cape Canaveral, using language that suggests swamps are lifeless and therefore useful for space rocket launches.

As capitalism continues to consume the world's resources at a rapacious rate, it perversely requires of us a false utility and "pragmatism" in our observations of human predation of the nonhuman world. We are expected to see as *positive* entire species being exterminated from the earth to create untenable, unplanned, unaffordable development, or even just another Walmart or a parking lot. Capitalism has made the burden of explaining the intrinsic worth of anything very difficult. No gust of wind through mature pine trees, no quiet moment with bird song could ever mean a thing in a society where price equals value.

When I was born, in 1968, the world had 50 percent more terrestrial wildlife than now. I was born into a world still alive and I will die in one near death—by our own hand. Someday, the animals may have no place to go, and neither will we. Because one thing I know is that developers and the special interests that back them don't stop—it's never enough, it's never enough, it's never enough.

Currently, in Florida, where we still have so much to preserve and so much to fight for, we live simultaneously with a vision of the future that may be purgatory, heaven, or hell.

Which will we choose, ultimately, and what will be chosen for us? ♣

the **DEVIOUS** **SCHEMES** for kids play kit

NOW
AVAILABLE
ON THE
BLACK
MARKET!



OVER 150 FELONIES!

BUILD YOUR OWN MALWARE TO STEAL PERSONAL DATA FOR PROFIT

HOTWIRE YOUR NEIGHBOR'S CAR COMMIT TREASON

TEST A SMALL MISSILE IN VIOLATION OF INTERNATIONAL TREATIES **NO FUN HERE**

The Illustrators



Cover illustration by:
JEFF JORDAN
<https://jeffjordanart.com/>