Ten Years In And Still Kicking Ass

CURRENT AFFAIRS

$12.95

VOL. 10, ISSUE 3

JULY/AUG. 2025

PUNK
What it can do for you.

PRANKS
Why the British love them.

ANTI FASCIST THEATRE
The best plays to annoy a Nazi with.

JAY-Z
What he means, why he's here.

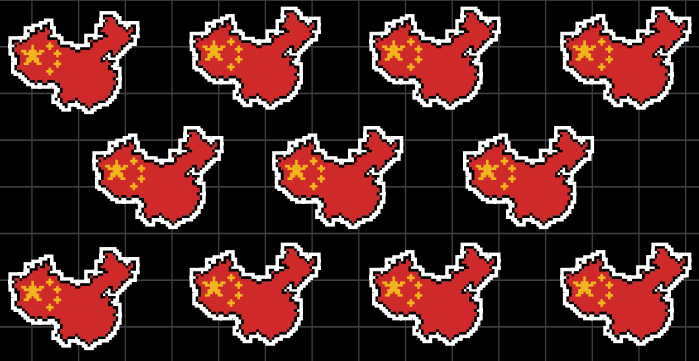
0 74470 29626 3 11>

PUSH TO START

OUR CHINA POLICY:

Current Affairs has been asked if it supports the "One China" policy. We do not. In fact, our magazine has officially endorsed the more obscure, but in some ways more interesting, "Many China" policy.

YOU CAN NEVER HAVE TOO MANY CHINAS!



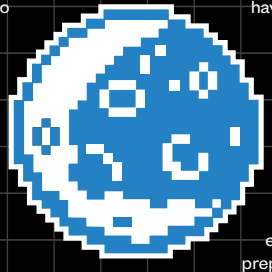
"The Cool S" stands for SOCIALISM

THANK YOU TO OUR APPLICANTS

Current Affairs recently put out a job listing for an Associate Editor and was entirely overwhelmed with applicants. We're so gratified that so many people would like to come and work with us! It was extremely difficult to make up our minds given how many incredibly well-qualified, enthusiastic, and talented people applied. If we did not hire you as an Associate Editor, please do not take this as a reflection on either your own capabilities or on *Current Affairs*' appreciation of you. We hope you will consider applying to us in the future and remember: we are always looking for pitches from freelance writers!

Help us fund our MOON BUREAU

Readers who have been playing close attention to political and economic news are aware that things are, well, not going amazingly right now. Some prominent commentators have talked about, or are in the process of, fleeing the United States. We think this is both cowardly and futile. Cowardly, because the responsibility of the privileged is to stand and fight. Futile, because the catastrophes we face are global, and if things go south here in North America, well, nuclear wars tend not to respect international borders. But here at *Current Affairs* we do have an emergency apocalypse contingency plan: a special "satellite office" atop that most noble of satellites, The Moon. We have purchased several square miles of prime real estate in a crater deep within the Sea of Tranquility. (Real estate on the Moon is surprisingly affordable.) It is there we propose to erect our Moon Bureau, which will continue operations should the New Orleans headquarters be raided by the feds, tumble into the sea, or be engulfed in a fiery explosion. Of course, we dearly hope none of these extreme eventualities will come, but you can never be too prepared, which is why we have concluded that the only rational option is to build an enormous spare headquarters on the Moon. We are currently soliciting donations from readers to fund the project. Please get in touch if you would be interested in contributing. Donors will receive full access to all *Current Affairs* moon facilities, and large donors get a sleeping-tube with their name on it.



Transubstantiated Magazine

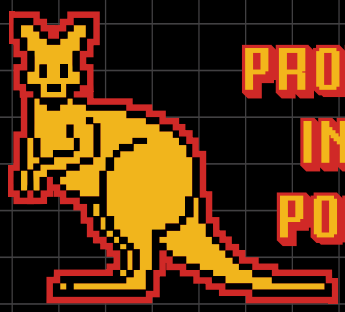
We have said it before: do not eat the magazine. BUT if you do, know that it transforms into the Body Of The Editor. If you don't want to try that, or incorporate it into some depraved ritual, well, like we said before, do not eat the magazine.

T-PAINE

In his 1776 essay "The Magazine in America," published in the inaugural issue of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, the periodical he edited while writing *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine made the case that "a magazine, when properly conducted, is the nursery of genius." He wrote that:

> *There is nothing which obtains so general an influence over the manners and moral of a people as the Press; from that, as from a fountain, the streams of vice or virtue are poured forth over a country: And of all publications, none are more calculated to improve or infect than a periodical one.*

To anyone who disagreed with this sentiment, T-Paine was known to say, "Fuck 'em." We could not agree more. A magazine improves and infects the morality of the country to an extraordinary degree. Nothing could be more salubrious for the general public's welfare. Why do you think we're in this business? But while we say in every issue that magazines matter and you should buy many of them, we did not realize that we could appeal to the authority of no less than the Only Good Founding Father, Thomas Paine. If Paine said it, it's hard to argue that it isn't true, and he did say it, so you need to listen.



Proudly in the Pocket of Big Kangaroo

Wilderness Region of Magazine

Be careful before wading in here. There are reportedly many mysterious and menacing beasts within. Do not say we did not warn you. Because we *did*.

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) is published bi-monthly for $59.99/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 300 LAFAYETTE STREET, SUITE 210, NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 Periodicals Postage PAID at NEW ORLEANS, LA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Current Affairs, 300 Lafayette St., Suite 210, New Orleans, LA 70130 PRINTED IN PENNSYLVANIA BY Sheridan Press.

Everyone Loves Animal Facts!!

Subscribers to the *Current Affairs* News Briefing know that if there is one thing this magazine loves, it's an animal fact. We can't resist them. The thing is, animals are just so damned interesting. So we print as many animal facts as we can, and not the boring kind. (E.g., "DID YOU KNOW? There are more than 100 different kinds of animal!") No, only primo quality top-shelf stuff gets printed round here. So here are some very good to excellent animal facts for you to surprise friends and family by whipping out at the dinner table.

1. The world's most expensive cheese is made from the milk of an extremely rare breed of Serbian donkey.
2. Many bugs shed their exoskeletons, but the gum leaf skeletonizer caterpillar is the only one that keeps its old head casings, stacks them up, and wears them as a stylish hat.
3. Binturongs, more commonly known as "bearcats," smell like popcorn. It's because of a chemical in their urine, but scientists don't know exactly why.
4. There is a species of amphibian known as the "horror frog," which is hairy and breaks its own bones to use as a sharp weapon against predators.
5. Wombats have butts of steel. When predators enter their burrows, the wombat will use its strong, bony behind to smash the interloper's head against the ceiling.

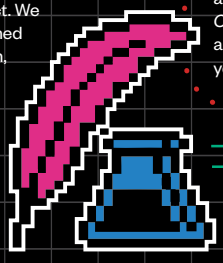
Ten Years

Can You Believe It

This year marks, if you can believe it, the ten year anniversary of the founding of this magazine, widely acknowledged to be a monumental—nay, pivotal—event in the history of humankind, up there with the Wright Brothers flight and the testing of the atomic bomb. Like a nuclear weapon, this magazine is capable of inflicting utter devastation on anything it chooses to attack. Unlike a nuclear weapon, we do so bloodlessly and with good humor. We have sustained ourselves these ten years thanks to a devoted community of readers who share our passions and eccentricities. (That's you!) Thank you for bearing with us, and we hope to bring you along for the next ten years as well. Who knows what we shall accomplish together across this next decade? The times are pregnant with threats and despair, but together—together!—we can work something out. Have faith!

A Special Message for Karen in Missouri

The editor in chief recently ran into a woman named Karen [not her real name] in a local New Orleans coffee shop. Karen said she was from Missouri. When she found out what the editor did for a living, in a furtive whisper she said "You know, I like Noam Chomsky." You see, as the only leftist in a Republican-leaning town, Karen is used to keeping her beliefs fairly quiet, to avoid creating ruckus. (Although we are of course endorsers of righteous ruckus in all of its forms—or rather, in most of its forms.) Karen was delighted to find in New Orleans a community of like-minded folks, who see the right-wing authoritarian nightmare for what it is and are determined to resist it. But now she is back in Missouri, probably suffering once more under the weight of repressive reactionary public opinion. So we are sending her a little message here to tell her to hold strong. *Current Affairs* is with you even when everyone around you sounds like a damned fool. We know you're right! Keep up your confidence.

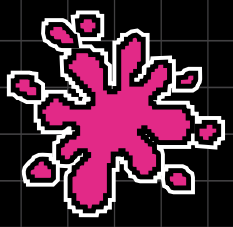


Poem: The Girl Who Bought This Issue

She went to the shop for a new magazine
The shopkeeper said, "Girl, what do you mean?"
"You've got *Glamour* and *Vogue* and all of my wares
But you didn't pick up the new *Current Affairs*!
I see that you're brainy, I see that you're kind
So buy the new issue, if you don't mind
It's got puzzles and jokes and it suits you so well
It'll tell you which people are going to Hell
If you don't buy a copy you'll seem so uncool
You can take it to work and then take it to school
And wherever you go they'll give you such stares
And say 'There goes the girl who loves *Current Affairs*'"

THESE GLASSES
do not give you X-ray vision

THIS STAR
will not glow in the dark



THIS SPLOT
is not a scratch-and-sniff

THIS CAT
cannot meow lovingly at you

We are just ink and paper, nothing more. We cannot make your dreams come true. But know that we always care about you.

Not A Single Word Of This Magazine Is Written By A Machine

That's the *Current Affairs* promise. Although by the end of it, you might wish that we'd just let the computer write it.

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REFORM
PUNISH
WORK FASTER

THE SICK WORLD OF PRISON TYCOON GAMES

BY **STEPHEN PRAGER**

When I was growing up, one of my favorite video games was *RollerCoaster Tycoon*. There is something about children that makes us want to build, and there is little that satisfies that impulse better than this PC game, created by the independent Scottish programmer Chris Sawyer. The premise is incredibly simple. You are the architect and proprietor of an amusement park, and it's your job to build rides and attractions that bring guests to your park to spend their money. There are little goals and tasks you are meant to complete to earn money, expand your park, and unlock new worlds.

But the real joy of the game is the endless ability to experiment and customize every little detail, pushing the boundaries of physics, time, and human decency. Others, far more creative (or sadistic) than I, used the game to build coasters that move so slowly they take trillions of years to finish, or that launch their patrons into a lake, or that run over their park's mascots. But I was admittedly a bit of a rule-following square at the age of nine. So I mainly derived joy from watching the world I made fill up with faceless little pixel people and letting the number on the "Excitement" meter tell me they were having a good time riding my rides.

I don't play many video games as an adult, and I hadn't thought about *RollerCoaster Tycoon* in years. But I was suddenly reminded of it a few weeks ago. I was half-listening to some YouTube video or another while folding laundry. As is the case roughly every two or three minutes for those of us who are too cheap to pay for premium, an ad disrupted my daze, for another video game. It instantly reminded me of *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, or any of the other management simulation titles like *SimCity* that have gained similar acclaim. It was full of faceless little guys zipping around a sprawling, isometric complex created and controlled by the player. YouTube is littered with ads for scammy, low-effort mobile games, so much so that I have learned to tune them out. But this game was very, very different from any I'd seen before.

"Every prison facility is yours to design," a chipper announcer said. "From interrogation rooms to solitary confinement. You make the rules!" In the ad, you see a cartoon cop strapping one prisoner to an electric chair and hurling another into a filthy solitary confinement cell. Cut to a scene of pixelated mayhem: cops whaling on prisoners left and right with their batons, while the announcer tells you to "crush riots" and "keep 24/7 surveillance on felons." Or, he says, "Take a different approach: Let inmates work themselves to the bone while you cash in on their labor!"

The game was called *Lands of Jail*. I had never heard of it, but soon learned it was quite popular. It has over 4 million downloads on Android and is among the top ten most popular "strategy" games on the Google Play store, with around 27,000 downloads per day. The game has been around since September 2024, but the vast majority of its downloads have come since March of 2025.

That the game took off in the fledgling months of the second Trump administration does not feel like a coincidence. Its marketing copy sounds like it could be a press release from the current Department of Homeland Security:

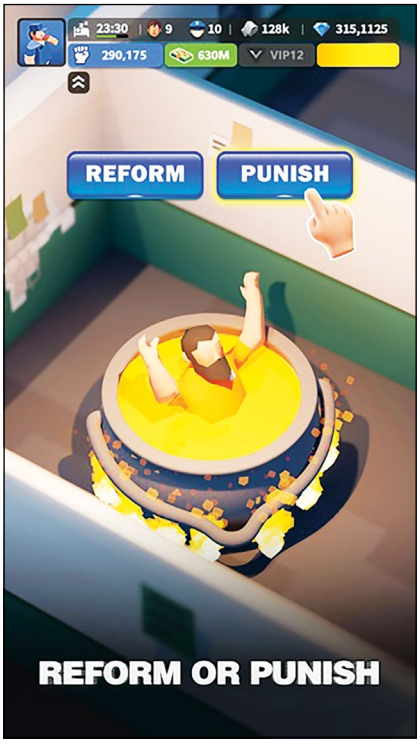
> *In a world plagued by rampant crime and deepening social divisions, you're dispatched to the Isle of the Banished—where criminals are banished far from civilization—and face the challenge of turning chaos into order. Roll up your sleeves—it's time to prove you're the Warden who can take charge!*

Your goal isn't just to "turn chaos into order," though. It's also to "turn a profit." Like in *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, your goal is to expand endlessly, and as the first graphic on the download page says, "build your prison empire." *Lands of Jail* is a game about owning a private prison. If its advertisements are any guide, it is also a game about being a sadistic authoritarian who inflicts misery on captives for fun and profit.

Prison is a hellish experience in the United States, but especially so if you are one of the more than 90,000 people in private facilities. The companies that run these hellholes, like CoreCivic and the GEO Group, have every incentive to spend as little money maintaining their facilities as possible. Private prisoners have less access to healthcare and are more likely to die while incarcerated. And prison staff, who are underpaid to save money, are more likely to subject their prisoners to physical abuse and less able to prevent assaults by other inmates. All the while, the companies that profit from these prisons aggressively lobby for more punitive laws and "lockup quotas" that force more people into the system.

I was morbidly fascinated enough to seek out more about *Lands of Jail*. Despite the game's popularity, there is very little information to be found online about its developer, Singapore Just Game Technology. The Google Play Store lists *Lands of Jail* as the company's only title, though it has some others available for download outside the United States.

In many ways, *Lands of Jail* is thoroughly unremarkable. It resembles the typical microtransaction-laden "gacha" game that is advertised incessantly online. The makers of these games dedicate the bulk of their attention not toward making a quality product that garners a loyal following, but toward getting as many people through the door as possible. The games themselves are dirt cheap to make, so by luring just a few "whales"—people willing to sink endless amounts of real money into accumulating in-game currency and items—they can become wildly lucrative. The Facebook page for *Lands of Jail* boasts that it "actually shows you the gameplay in the ads," a clarification made necessary because so many mobile game ads just straight-up lie to viewers about what the game will contain when you download it. Often, these ads show fun, addictive puzzles or action sequences that don't actually occur in-game. So, how does *Lands of Jail* entice you to download it? Well, its ads also lie to you about what it contains. But instead of enticing you with fun puzzles, it entices you with the promise of getting to indulge your most depraved power fantasies.



"Lands of Jail" game play video

The game's Facebook page contains many other ads, and they go to even more disturbing places than the first one I saw on YouTube. In one, filled almost entirely with AI-generated imagery that does not actually appear in the game, you are shown an underwater prison at the bottom of a 10,000-meter deep abyss, "home to the world's most dangerous criminals," where "as the warden, you call all the shots," controlling every aspect of their lives. "Make them grind, while you sit back and watch," it says, cutting to a fat executive reclining next to a giant treasure chest full of coins. The ad does warn you not to "push them too hard," lest your prisoners "get unsatisfied" and start a riot. But the solution it gives you is not to stop abusing them. Instead, the voiceover urges you to "lock them in dark water dungeons" or "toss them to the sharks." A promotional image on the official page shows you cooking a prisoner in a giant cauldron, overlaid with a pair of buttons that read "Reform" and "Punish."

Another ad shows the player (narrated by a truly insufferable Morty Smith AI soundalike) repeatedly punishing prisoners for complaining about their conditions. It encourages you to make them all share a bed because "prison isn't a luxury hotel." When they complain about the lack of gym equipment, it encourages you to "Turn the workout room into a factory! Work is their new workout routine!" When they complain about the food, you're told to "give them the runs" and then charge them to use the bathroom. Torturing your prisoners is not just a means toward acquiring riches. It is part of the game's appeal.

The digitized torment goes on and on. Another ad, screenshotted by a horrified user on Reddit, shows a bawling female prisoner standing in a bathtub while a prison guard prepares to electrocute her. Another, which has since been removed from Facebook, depicts the player as a prison guard (Labeled "Level 15") sexually assaulting a prisoner (labeled "Level 4"). I am not exaggerating at all. You grab him from behind while he's at the urinal and say "ohh baby" while pink hearts come out of your eyes. Then you slap him on the butt. Then you blame it on another prisoner, leading him to get beaten up. Then you grab him and drown him in the toilet for fun. (You can do this, it seems, because he is only a "Level 1.")

If there's any silver lining to *Lands of Jail*, it's that most of these more visceral

"Lands of Jail" promotional video

horrors don't appear in the game itself. You still beat up plenty of prisoners and put down plenty of riots, which are really the only things motivating you to treat your prisoners well at all. But it's not nearly as graphic as the marketing suggests. What's more striking are the moments of banality. There is really no difference between playing *Lands of Jail* and playing *Farmville*, except that in *Lands of Jail*, your livestock are human beings.

In the early stages of the game, you are guided by your buxom blonde "Secretary," who constantly shows up to wink at you and blow you kisses while dispensing advice about how to maximize your prison's efficiency. Adding to the overall male power fantasy of the game, she takes on the role of a doting female assistant, addressing you always as "Warden" and lauding you for your "generosity" when you do something like build showers for your prisoners or let them go outside. She's also there to let you know when it's time to turn the screws to keep the profits flowing. "Money is tight," she says, "we'll need to crank up work intensity to get through this rough patch!" Once you set up a kitchen, she excitedly tells you, "We're now equipped to imprison more prisoners!"

Even if you aren't actually drowning and groping prisoners in-game, the fact that the creators felt compelled to *pretend* you do in order to sell their product might be even more disturbing. While some surely felt a churn in their stomach upon learning that this game existed, millions of people got a glimpse of this carnival of computer-generated horrors and thought, "Where do I sign up?" That's a worrying sign at a time when the current government's goals for prisons—including Donald Trump's ludicrous plan to reopen Alcatraz—seem as if they could have come right out of one of these advertisements.

Private prison simulators have been around for decades. And just as *Lands of Jail* reflects the AI-sloppified authoritarian ethos of the Trump era, previous attempts to gamify the carceral system have reflected their political climates. In 2005, near the height of the War on Terror and near the tail end of America's private prison construction boom, Valusoft—a notorious purveyor of bargain bin shovelware—attempted to skim off the success of *RollerCoaster Tycoon* with a game of its own, called *Prison Tycoon*.

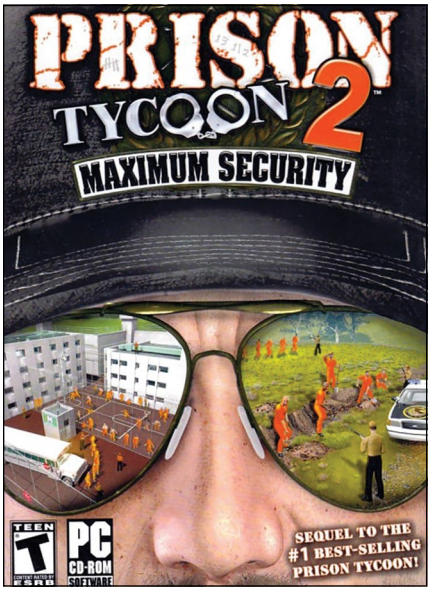
The game was panned by critics, less for its objectionable premise than for its janky graphics and useless gameplay features. But some pointed out that the game incentivized cruelty: "To make money in prison tycoon," one blogger wrote in 2008, "all you need to do is create a dormitory with enough beds for all your prisoners and let them wallow in their misery with nothing to do. You'll reap huge profits and have very little expenses with no penalties for all the starved, limping convicts staggering around your hellhole."

Prison games during the Obama era similarly reflected the times. In the wake of scandals like "Kids for Cash," in which a private juvenile prison in Pennsylvania paid off judges to issue maximum sentences to thousands of children in order to increase occupancy, the simulators that emerged attempted to reflect a newfound sobriety about the horror our society had created. The big game from this period is *Prison Architect*, which came out in 2015. Unlike *Tycoon*, which was filled with meaningless stats with no bearing on gameplay, *Architect* is exceptionally meticulous, with everything from the weather outside to the width of the halls to the leniency of the parole board affecting the experience. The developers at the British company Introversion Software expressed a desire to create a "proper exploration of the prison system," according to a profile in *The New Yorker*.

To its credit, the game is somewhat more sympathetic in its portrayal of the prisoners who pass through its system. It shows some of the ways incarceration exacerbates their hardships, displaying, for example, how traumatic experiences in prison increase recidivism and lead to other maladies like alcoholism and drug use. However, it suffers from the same lack of imagination that plagued the Obama era at large. Aside from the fact that its mere existence assumes the perpetuation of the private prison system (which, I suppose, is a necessity if you want to graft the *Tycoon* format onto the prison system at all), the game totally sidesteps the obvious realities of racial disparities in the criminal justice system—an inexcusable shortcoming at a time when America was reading books like Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and reeling from the shootings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. And as Yussef Cole pointed out in *Vice*, the only form of resistance the game portrays for prisoners is to mindlessly riot, when

actual prisoners at the time were doing things like going on well-planned strikes to protest for fair wages.

In the meantime, Valusoft would continue to squeeze out *Prison Tycoon* games. For years after their first release, they'd continue pushing players to build squalid torture fortresses to extract maximum profits from their inmates. However, after the events of 2020 made the ugly realities of our criminal punishment system unavoidable, it became clear that a redesign was necessary. The goal of 2021's *Prison Tycoon: Under New Management* is still, above all, to turn a profit. But the title suggests a *mea culpa* for the franchise's earlier installments, which incentivized maximum cruelty and deprivation.



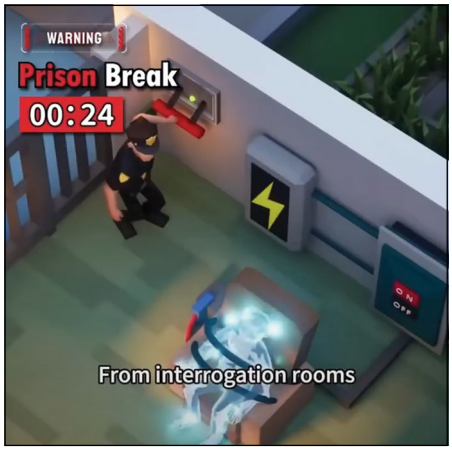
PC game cover of "Prison Tycoon 2"

Instead, this new game's marketing emphasized rehabilitation. Players were rewarded not just for filling as many cells as possible, but for successfully rehabilitating and reintegrating their prisoners into society by giving them therapy, letting them paint and tend to plants, visit with loved ones, and even play in a zero gravity machine. But this presents the opposite problem. In the game, mentally ill prisoners came away from these treatments reformed immediately, which, while a nice thing to imagine, paints for the undiscerning gamer a much rosier picture both of the ease of recovery for those suffering from mental illness and the conditions prisoners are actually subject to. In the America of 2021, there were still lots of private prisons, but companies like the GEO Group started using phrases like "continuum of care" and putting smiling inmates and service dogs on their brochures. Likewise, in *Tycoon*, you were still making money by endlessly expanding your human terrarium, but at least now you were encouraged to reform your prisoners by letting them make flower arrangements rather than beating them with sticks all day. You got to imagine that the people in charge of these systems of punishment and control were *benevolent*.

The arrival of the second Trump administration has been a bonanza for the private prison industry. CoreCivic and the GEO Group are some of Donald Trump's top corporate backers, and their loyalty has paid dividends, as they have reaped massive new contracts to warehouse the undocumented immigrants snatched up by ICE as part of Trump's "mass deportation" crusade. When the Laken Riley Act—which requires federal law enforcement to detain immigrants arrested for offenses as minor as shoplifting—passed in January, CoreCivic CEO Damon Hininger squealed on an investor call that it was "truly one of the most exciting periods in my career with the company."

Lands of Jail is barely a "game" in any real sense. But in a truer sense, it is the quintessential game of 2025—the year that artificial intelligence, scam culture, and fascism converged into one three-headed hydra. It's quite telling that it was not even the only private prison management-based mobile game to debut this year. The pop-up ad-filled *Prison Empire Tycoon* has also garnered millions of downloads, though its ad campaign is not nearly as horrifying as *Lands of Jail*. It at least encourages you to "meet the inmate basic needs" and "help the society." (Yes, those typos are part of the game's description.)

Watching the ads for *Lands of Jail*, in which buzz-cut prisoners—"the world's most dangerous criminals"—are marched down a dimly lit hallway, it was impossible not to think of the spectacle coming out of Salvadoran dictator Nayib Bukele's CECOT prison, where the Trump administration has shipped totally innocent people—dubbed the "worst of the worst"—to endure ceaseless torture. Seeing *Lands of Jail* advertising the crying woman being electrocuted, I couldn't help but think of the official White House account tweeting out an artificially generated cartoon of a crying woman being handcuffed by ICE guards. The panorama of cartoon cops beating on silent, faceless "felons" made me think of Andry Hernández Romero, the very real Venezuelan makeup artist who was hauled off to El Salvador by ICE in March without even being charged with a crime. He was filmed praying and crying for his mother as very real prison guards beat him senseless.



"Lands of Jail" game play video

This sort of humanity is not portrayed anywhere in *Lands of Jail*. But that erasure is not an aberration. It's inherent to the format of the management simulator, in which the way to thrive and expand is to treat the humans who interact with the system you control as numbers on a ledger—as indistinguishable and replaceable as ants. It is one thing to look at human beings this way when they are zipping around your amusement park and you're testing how much you can get away with charging them for cotton candy. It's another thing when you are deciding whether or not they get to shower or go outside or how much slave labor you're going to make them do today. The fact that these two decisions are treated essentially the same way in these games is, in one sense, appalling. But it is also basically a correct portrayal of life under a system that commodifies everything. The games reflect that reality back at us. ⚜

THE Charming Singing BIRD CLOCK

BRING THE SOOTHING SQUAWKS OF NATURE INTO YOUR HOME OR OFFICE

IN OUR TIME, it can be harder and harder to experience the majesty of nature, thanks to the regrettable mass decimation of global bird populations. Fortunately capitalism has produced a solution, ***THE SINGING BIRD CLOCK***, so that you need not have to wonder what it would sound like if there were any birds left in your neighborhood!

FEATURES INCLUDE:

- REALISTIC DEPICTIONS OF 12 DIFFERENT BIRDS
- 1 MINUTE OF CHIRPING ON THE HOUR, EVERY HOUR
- REACHES 153 DECIBELS (COMPARABLE TO A JET ENGINE)
- CONTINUES NIGHT AND DAY!
- SOLAR POWERED SO IT NEVER RUNS DOWN

AS SEEN ON TV

THE GAY DOCTOR WHO FOUGHT NAZIS

BY **ANDREW GOODING-CALL**

Once upon a time in Berlin, there lived a fat, gay, Jewish nerd named Magnus Hirschfeld. He was a medical doctor who had a revelation early in his career: gay men were killing themselves, and he could stop it. First, he devoted himself to getting a draconian anti-gay law repealed. Then he started providing affirming mental health therapy to LGBTQ people. But he didn't stop there. Magnus Hirschfeld could not see an injustice and leave it to fester. He started giving talks to other doctors worldwide about how OK it was to be queer. Then he started treating transgender people. He opened his own research institute in Berlin, where he brought in surgeons to conduct some of the world's first gender-affirming surgeries, and suddenly, Berlin began to bloom as one of the queerest cities in the world. One man, now almost forgotten by history, empowered an entire LGBTQ community, and not just in Germany. Hirschfeld's mission was to show the world that queerness was normal, beautiful, important, good. He hated racism and gave hormones to trans people. He told parents that their queer kids were OK and gave classes on how to navigate the world as an LGBTQ person. He gave talks about birth control and kinks as the LGBTQ sexual research center that he founded became a community center, and a queer cultural and medical museum too. Nazis tried to kill him twice, and they burned his life's work to the ground in 1933. Hitler once called him "the most dangerous Jew in Germany." In other words, he was the hardest rock star you've never heard of.

The name Magnus Hirschfeld may ring no bells with many modern queer folks. In fact, his legacy of research and advocacy—the core of who he was—is essentially gone. It was a nascent moment cultured by one person and bulldozed by a state which knew well that sexual freedom went hand in hand with freedom of thought and even antiracism. Now that the Nazis are back—and make no mistake, the people currently in power in the U.S. government have the same worldview as the literal Nazis of the 1930s, when it comes to human sexuality—we need to buckle down and study this man's life. Because when Magnus Hirschfeld fought Nazis, he almost won. He almost had the scientific, social, and legal world convinced that LGBTQ people were normal and deserving of acceptance. He couldn't fight using force, so his weapons of choice were research, compassion, love, education, advocacy, coalition-building, community, and kindness. This may sound—gasp, recoil—liberal. It was. But it was enough to scare the people who controlled an entire military structure and the government. See what I mean when I say he almost made it? When something scares Nazis, we need to dig into that and make it bigger, broader, badder. What Hirschfeld was doing was working, but he was only one person, and one person can fall. When that happens, the game is over. This time, we can't afford to lose.

Now there are two books about Hirschfeld, both published by W.W. Norton. *The Intermediaries* by Brandy Schillace details a broad view of a world slowly going mad. Daniel Brook's *The Einstein of Sex* is more personal, but no less devastating. They're both worth reading—in fact, the discerning *Current Affairs* reader will drop the rest of their to-read list and begin them immediately upon completing this article, and my advice is to read them together. They are two intersecting views of a time, a place, and a person that have an extremely important message for those of us not yet living in a masculinist dictatorship.

Going into both books, it's helpful to know what "masculinism" is. Don't worry: you already know. It's a philosophy that holds that men are superior to women, that qualities like physical strength and aggression are manly, and that manliness is the ultimate good. We call it toxic masculinity these days. Nazis were masculinists. They were big on female fertility and submission, male physical fitness, male domination—the whole sweaty bro vibe. But there were gay masculinists in Weimar Germany too. They felt that they were, in fact, the manliest, since nothing could be more manly than love for the ultimate form, which was man. They were initially excited about the ascendency of masculinism when Hitler took over, only to experience an extremely abrupt turn soon thereafter when they

realized that the Nazis were not, in fact, their friends. Hirschfeld actually tried to coalition with a few of the gay masculinists during the Weimar years, but the world-view of these chauvinists was completely incompatible with Hirschfeld's philosophy of tolerance, and the partnership rapidly fell apart. More on the gay masculinists later.

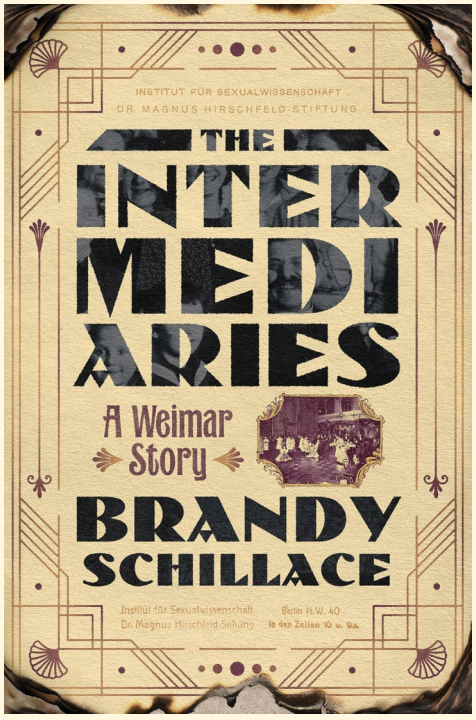
It's helpful to read Brandy Schillace's *The Intermediaries* first. There were a lot of unpleasant names for LGBTQ people in Hirschfeld's day. Generally, they implied that variations in sexual orientation and identity were some kind of aberration, a health problem or psychiatric disease. Hirschfeld did not vibe with this. He created his own word, "intermediaries," to describe people who existed between the stark masculine and feminine categories that were then available in Germany. That Schillace chose this word as the title of her book is appropriate, since this work focuses as much on the people around Hirschfeld than on the good doctor himself. *The Intermediaries* provides a wide view, a sweeping historic snapshot of a world about to go wrong even as it tips inexorably over a cliff. Magnus and his *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*, which both books translate as "Institute for Sexual Science," was the research and social hub he founded and ran. It seems small next to the looming doom of the Nazi takeover. But Magnus, too, was larger than life, a Prometheus whose fall capsized Berlin's world-shifting queer culture. For a more focused and detailed view of him, read Daniel Brook's intimate profile of Magnus's life and loves, *The Einstein of Sex*.

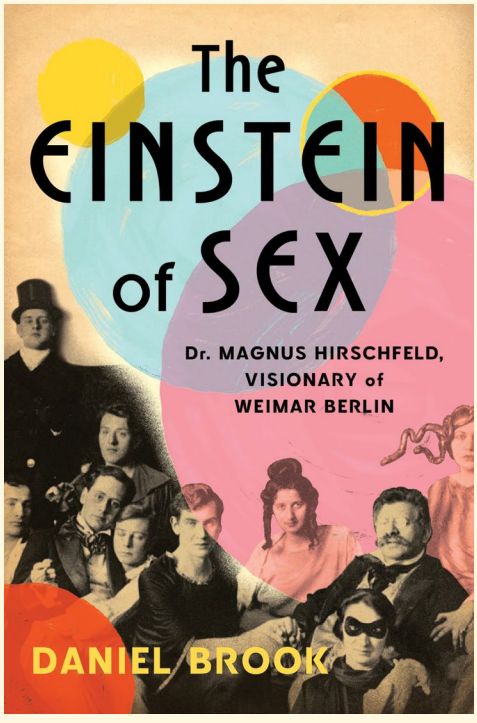
Schillace does impressive justice to the historical events running up to the part we all know—the Nazis. Her comprehensive analysis and examination of the hyper-masculine military culture in Germany prior to 1933 is illuminating in many ways. For one thing, it's easy to see how Kaiser Wilhelm's rule, essentially itself a dictatorship where soldiers wore helmets with erect penis-like spikes, led to the Nazi dictatorship, where men like Hitler and Göring repressed everyone else's sexual freedom so their cartoonishly masculine power fantasy could reign supreme. Both broad and profound, Brook shows that even as sexism and racism accumulated influence worldwide, Hirschfeld came to what was then a stunning conclusion: it's impossible to understand human sexuality without realizing that the whole idea of racial purity is a joke.

As he delved into international sex education, traveling the globe to speak and advocate on behalf of LGBTQ people, Hirschfeld had the unusual (for the time) opportunity to meet and talk with people from dozens of "races." He observed interracial love and attraction, and saw that there were no unusual health problems in people of mixed racial heritage. If that sounds obvious, it's not. Brook notes that many people during the mid-20th century still believed that interracial relationships produced unhealthy babies. But Hirschfeld, aside from being an educated and worldly person, was also a sex expert, and people—especially, as it turned out, the Nazis—were very much interested in how people of different races beget at the time. Hirschfeld's answer to that question was not, generally speaking, what the German majority wanted to hear. Once, in a crowd of German Jews and non-Jews, he observed that there were more blonde Jews than there were blonde Gentiles. If people from different races were sex-compatible without hereditary consequences, then their love, like queer love, must be healthy, normal, and natural. Hirschfeld, by the way, is the man who appears to have coined the term *anti-racism* in 1938. No wonder the Nazis feared him.

Hirschfeld and history meet in the movie he helped make to champion the legalization of gay sex, *Anders Als Die Andern*, aka *Different From The Others*. Hirschfeld felt that the wildly popular and modern motion picture format could bring his message to a wide array of people in an efficient manner—and he was right. Viewers went for the drama and titillation and left with new sympathy for gay men whose love was then explicitly illegal. Hirschfeld's ultimate aim was to change the law, and in fact, the film's final shot is of a hand crossing out Paragraph 175, the law that illegalized homosexual acts between men. That said, the film accomplished much more. Both books reference it extensively as a watershed moment for the world's rising premiere sexologist.

It's also worth watching even now, 106 years after its debut. It was about a violinist (played by silent film star Conrad Veidt) falling in love with his student and being brought up on charges for it, and is available on the Internet Archive today. Film restorationists at UCLA did an amazing job with the roughly 50 percent of the film that survived the Nazis' attempt to crush it, but be patient with it. You'll have to do a lot more title card reading than we're used to these days. In addition to the academic community, we have to thank the people of Europe for the survival of this movie: they were so excited about watching Hirschfeld explain that gay sex is normal that it played in some theaters for nearly a year. Without that enthusiasm, *Anders* would have been





lost, like so much else that Hirschfeld did. But note that early flicker of tolerance. Note that the tide that had started to turn. Because of the Institute for Sexual Science, Hirschfeld's research and community hub, and its leader's unstoppable personality, people in Germany were starting to relax about queer folks. Because they saw them in a movie. Because their doctors started listening to Hirschfeld the Queer Folks Expert, also a doctor. Because as queer folks came out, everyone started to realize that These People Really Are Harmless.

What does that sound like to you? Does that sound familiar? It should. In the U.S., marriage equality is now ten years old and having a gay kid is hardly remarkable. Most cities hold Pride events. It's easy to write off the Southern Baptists who are keen to end same-sex marriage, the deranged Heritage Institute plan to end LGBTQ legal existence in this country, the fact that being queer has only been even a bit OK for a little while—not to mention the firestorm still raging about transgender athletes. Here's one lesson from Hirschfeld's life: do not be seduced by the fact that they let you have a parade.

Reading Schillace's book often feels like a slog, but in the sense that the reader feels the struggle of its heroes to push through the headwind of a repressed and repressive society. We share the effort and exhaustion of every inch gained, the internal doubts, the conflict. She highlights the fractures within the gay rights wing of the movement with skill and intensity befitting an uncomfortable truth: there were gay men who were completely on board with Nazi ideologies, most notably Hitler's early ally Ernst Röhm, who co-founded the Nazis' original goon squad, the Sturmabteilung. But he wasn't the only one. Schillace discusses how Adolf Brand, publisher of the world's first gay journal, *Der Eigene*, complained that people had stopped reading his magazines and started following Nazis. *Der Eigene*, which boasted about 1,500 subscribers at its peak, openly espoused eugenics and other far-right ideologies. They had so much contempt for women that it's hard not to characterize their feelings as hate. And then there was Röhm! Was it any wonder that some gay men were seduced by the idea of sunrise on a new Sparta?

In hindsight, it seems inconceivable that gay masculinists didn't understand that the Nazis were always going to betray them—*they were Nazis*. But the historical context that Schillace provides illuminates what gay men thought they were before Hirschfeld, and to a certain extent still thought they were even as Hirschfeld desperately tried to redefine *queer* to be even a little more egalitarian. Some male homosexuals in both the Kaiser's Germany and the Weimar era, led by Brand, felt not only that love between men was a choice, but that it was *the* choice. No sex could be manlier than sex with a man.

Brook focuses more on Hirschfeld himself than on the troubling cracks in the queer rights movement. While this makes *The Einstein of Sex* a faster, buzzier, more entertaining read, *The Intermediaries* presents patterns that might surprise even the left-est left-wing readers. After all, who could have guessed that gay men would be seduced by privilege even when the purveyors of that privilege were literal Nazis? But another gay German from our own era, Peter Thiel, might well see himself in the mirror of history. This proudly gay man almost single-handedly elevated JD Vance to the vice presidency. As a result, we might very, very well have a 48th president who has stated that people identify as transgender to get a better crack at admission to top universities, characterizing trans existence itself as a kind of fraud. Thiel supports the Republican party whose leader began his legal war on transgender identity on his very first day in office, signing an executive order specifying that exactly two immutable genders will be recognized by the U.S. federal government. Within its first year, the Trump administration has even shut down funding for an LGBTQ youth suicide prevention hotline that was actively saving queer lives. It is hard to interpret this as anything other than complicity with death, or at very best a complete lack of interest in the continued survival of a minority. Does it mean that this administration actively wants queer people to die? Possibly not—they may simply not care. But either way, they are enabling queer suffering and death. For all his wealth and acumen, Thiel is a fool to place his faith in these ghouls, and so is any LGBTQ person who trusts the Republican party. Magnus Hirschfeld could tell them so.

And we need Hirschfeld to do exactly that. Brook paints a beautiful picture of the social, educational and—yes—sexual community that flourished under the power of Hirschfeld's personality and expertise. Not only did his Institute for Sexual Science treat LGBTQ people, but it functioned as a tourist attraction and a social hub. It was not uncommon for Hirschfeld to prescribe a trip to a gay bar for new patients, and people who Hirschfeld treated often became staff and friends. Travelers who stopped into the Institute to view the sex toys and photos of genitalia on permanent display there often continued their tour by frequenting a lesbian or trans-friendly nightclub whose proprietors and customers were familiar with Hirschfeld. By promoting Berlin as a sexually tolerant place, Brook shows, Hirschfeld's institute empowered LGBTQ people financially and socially. Queer life was a must-see in Berlin, and once seen, it was impossible to escape the fact that queer life was not just normal, but fun. Hirschfeld himself was highly recognizable in the community, sometimes attending drag events as the dowdy but charming Tante Magnesia. The ISS—and Hirschfeld—were validating, promoting, and encouraging a whole new Berlin.

Reading Brook's account provokes a longing for those Weimar years, if only to see the sudden blossoming of a queer city—to witness a parent marching their gay child to the known sexologist for affirming therapy, or a transgender man finally marrying his longtime girlfriend. What a dizzying time this must have been! Even as Hirschfeld struggled against the laws that technically made gay sex a punishable crime, the whirlwind of social progress alone makes Brook's account riveting. Although you know how it is going to end, you hope against hope that this time, upon this very reading of this singular story, you'll break into the universe where, against all odds, Hirschfeld won. What would that look like? Would it look like where we live now?

Both books make one thing clear: we are definitely not living in Hirschfeld's paradise. We are living in a parallel to Weimar Germany that is already far too similar for comfort. The rising tide of acceptance for LGBTQ people is not unprecedented and not linear. It can, and did once, collapse back into ignorance and hatred. LGBTQ people are a remarkably useful scapegoat in a hypermasculine, racist society because they defy the idea that anybody is purely one thing. We happen to live in just such a society now, and *The Intermediaries* in particular underlines this.

Weimar Germany was a theoretically progressive government

that struggled with a persistent far-right movement. That movement gained power by degrees until it wolfed down the whole state in a moment of economic and social weakness. Its culture glorified manliness, manhood, male superiority and heroism, male intellect, male power. It reacted violently to the idea that anybody else could possibly stand equal. The shrieking vitriol of the masculinists is a template for today's anti-DEI screeds. There's alleged human trafficker and proud misogynist Andrew Tate, of course, and while his rhetoric is undeniably extreme, it's easy to underestimate how much reach he's had. *The Guardian* reported in 2023 that Tate videos had been viewed 11.6 billion times on TikTok. This is the same person who has made such classic masculinist declarations as "I'm not saying [women are] property. I am saying they are given to the man and belong to the man." Unbelievably, Alina Habba, an acting U.S. attorney for the District of New Jersey and counselor to Donald Trump himself, is "a huge fan." Other political figures like Ron DeSantis—he who reportedly adds lifts to his shoes because he can't handle the unmasculine state of being short—declare that "the Left tells us DEI stands for 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.' But as practiced, it more closely represents 'Discrimination, Exclusion, and Indoctrination.'" And more mainstream cultural figures like Joe Rogan have also been emboldened by an increasingly toxic atmosphere. "Over time these fucking cunts, these corrupt shitheads have done an amazing job of trying to chip away at [the Founding Fathers' checks and balances for preventing the rise of tyranny]," Rogan said on his podcast in March 2023, "And convince people that 'freedom is not important, what's important is equity and inclusiveness and diversity.'" The Joe Rogan Experience had 14.5 million followers on Spotify in March of 2024. According to *Newsweek*, its listenership is 71 percent male. For Rogan, DeSantis, and people like them, noxious gender politics and contempt for equality as a concept go hand-in-hand.

The biggest apparent difference between toxic masculinity in Weimar Germany and the U.S. right now is that the U.S. doesn't yet endure the level of financial duress that Germany experienced after World War I; never underestimate the moral compromises that ordinary people will make when the money goes away. It's arguable that American culture also has more sophisticated pseudo-intellectual language for defense of racism and homophobia, apparent in the fact that the acronym that is short for "diversity, equity, and inclusion" is rapidly becoming a slur. But frankly, we already live in a fragile kind of democracy when Florida state representative Webster Barnaby can refer to his transgender constituents as "demons and imps" and promptly get re-elected. Nationwide same-sex marriage legality is ten years old this year, but there has never been more anti-transgender legislation in progress.

In other words, queer progressives of the United States may also be building a city on a tightwire. So what do we do about it?

When Magnus fell, everyone fell. In 1933, soon after the rise of the Nazi Party to national control of Germany, Brownshirts ransacked his Berlin Institute for Sexual Science and burned most of its contents. Hirschfeld himself was out of the country at the time, having been urged to take a world tour by friends who knew that the highly visible Jewish doctor would be a target for the incoming administration. Indeed, the Nazis who built a bonfire out of his life's work sought Hirschfeld during the raid, and when they couldn't find him, they tried to burn a bronze bust of the prominent sexologist. Ironically, the metal sculpture did not burn. After the ghoulishly joyous burning of the vast majority of LGBTQ medical, social, and psychological research that existed at the time, the Nazi rank and file came through the ISS and looted what was left.

This catastrophe cut out the heart of the nascent LGBTQ acceptance movement and set it back at least 50 years. Hirschfeld had been an internationally known researcher, and his work was informing doctors worldwide. He had literally been changing the world. Without the ISS and without him—he died soon after in France, likely due to complications from diabetes, which his absent partner Karl Geise had previously helped control—that sea change didn't have the force it needed to sustain itself. Needless to say, the destruction of Hirschfeld's legacy completely routed Berlin's queer community. Many of the medical and therapeutic professionals who had worked with Hirschfeld at the Institute ended up committing suicide, Schillace reports in the devastating and sudden conclusion of *The Intermediaries*. This, too, was a tragedy. These were Hirschfeld's intellectual heirs, and without them, his experience and wisdom was also lost. The abrupt end of the ISS is all the more shocking after the intricate house of cards and meticulous historical detail Schillace spends the whole book building up. In one flash of fire and hate, it all comes down in ash.

Brook focuses more on Hirschfeld's death as an exile in France, bereft of his life's work and separated from a place in time to which he could never return. Brook, more so than Schillace, emphasizes that Hirschfeld's research, therapeutic support, and encouragement made Weimar Berlin the open queer Mecca that it was, made the entire medical world sit up and pay attention to the legitimacy of the queer experience. Hirschfeld had been a globally-renowned expert. Without him, the queer rights movement withered on the vine.

So let's learn something from the tragic end of this man and the way he and his work were so immediately and completely forgotten. Let's learn something from these two remarkable, necessary books.

First: you are not safe. Just because you can get married, change your name, change your gender identifier, and be queer on the job does not mean that it can't all go away with a match and a can of gasoline.

Second: do not rely on the brilliant among us to be our salvation, our champions, our heralds and our heroes. Heroes fall. When a hero falls, the war is over. If it's your hero, you didn't win.

It is time for every single one of us to be a Hirschfeld. Every one of us needs to be a hero, distributed instead of singular, impossible to pin down because there are so damn many and we're so damn loud. We need to rail against anti-trans laws, even when they're not going to affect our little slice of queerdom. Hirschfeld would assure you that one day they will. We need to open our eyes to sexual repression, anti-feminism, and racism as conjoined evils—and rise against them all simultaneously, understanding that there is no rescue from one without rescue from all.

Because once upon a time in Germany, one fat, gay, Jewish nerd led the charge against an enemy he couldn't defeat. He did it with love and compassion even as his opponent defined itself by the very opposite. He probably knew he couldn't win, but he did it anyway. Read these books. Remember him. Study what he did. When we make it past our Weimar era, let's go to Hirschfeld's paradise instead of Hitler's hell. ⚜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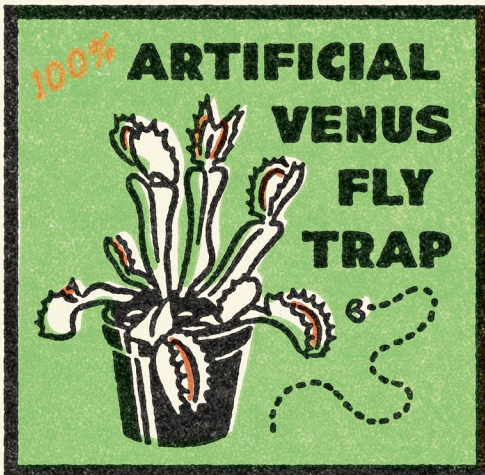

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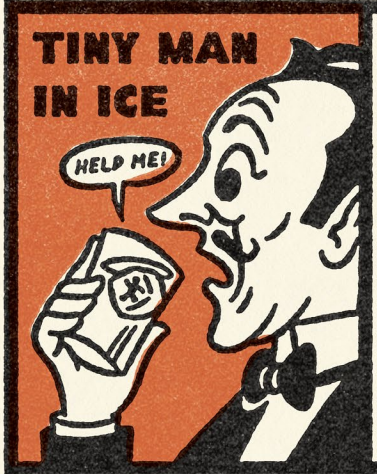

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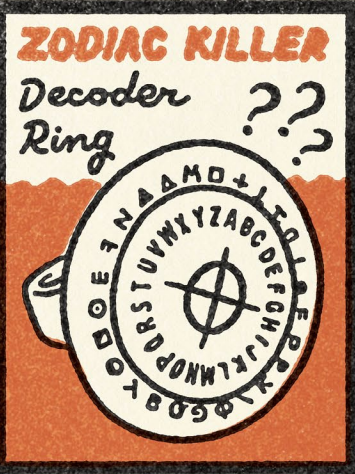

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MORE THAN A MENTOR

BY **CIARA MOLONEY**

Richard Burton's legacy is one of contradictions. He is both a towering figure of twentieth-century popular culture and a bright, brief candle whose peers made indelible marks on the twenty-first, too. He managed to achieve success as both a classical stage actor and marquee-name movie star at a time when slippage between those worlds was at a minimum. He was nominated for an Oscar seven times, but never won. His relationship with Elizabeth Taylor—with whom he co-starred in many films and stage productions, most famously *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966)—is remembered as an epic love story despite their twice divorcing. He described himself as a socialist, or indeed a communist, but moved to Switzerland to avoid paying taxes, wryly commenting, "I believe that everyone should pay them—except actors." Famously an alcoholic, he claimed to drink to stave off the deadness of being offstage. Sometimes his alcoholism was functional; other times he was reportedly so drunk while filming *The Klansman* (1974) that he had to shoot all his scenes sitting or lying down. By his forties, he had become frail and weak. By fifty-eight, he was dead.

Mr. Burton is not about any of this.

Based on Burton's early life and released earlier this year to little notice, the biopic *Mr. Burton* is a bit like a pointillist painting. At a distance, it makes one picture, but up close, the dots of color disaggregate, unsettling our assumptions about the whole.

Mr. Burton's shape initially seems recognizable and familiar: an origin story biopic, this time about Richard Burton, in the key of gentle inspirational drama about a boy's life transforming thanks to the guiding hand of a mentor—P.H. Burton, the English teacher whose surname Richard would take. It's a life-affirming tale of success against the odds, yet fated to be. The film works on that level, and in some ways guides us to watch it like that. The tender tone is set by an opening quote from Burton's twice-wife Elizabeth Taylor: "Without Philip Burton there never would have been a Richard Burton. That great rolling voice that cracked like wild Atlantic waves would never have been heard outside the valley."

But on closer inspection, *Mr. Burton* is replete with knots of tension just beneath its smooth, soft surface. It carries inside its heart an anxious hesitancy regarding class, sexuality, and national identity, and about the very relationship it chronicles.

It's a film that dug its claws into me, despite having the outward appearance of being thoroughly clawless.

The film opens in 1942, when the future Richard Burton is still Richie Jenkins, played by relatively unknown English actor Harry Lawtey—in what would be a star-making performance if anybody was paying attention. Richie is a seventeen-year-old schoolboy in a small mining town in Wales, and his future prospects include getting shipped to the front in a year, perhaps to be killed, and/or spending the next few decades coughing up coal dust. His mother is long dead, his father is a hopeless drunk, and he lives with his doting sister, her husband and children, perpetually struggling to make ends meet.

Lawtey never plays Richie as an innate talent simply waiting to be discovered; though ethereally beautiful in a certain light, he is unexceptional in most every respect. When asked to memorize the prologue to *Henry V* in his high school English class, you half-expect him to suddenly become *Richard Burton, acclaimed*

Toby Jones as Philip Burton and Harry Lawtey as Richard Burton

Shakespearean actor in one fell swoop. Instead, he rattles it off at speed and a little out of breath, the only emotion in his voice the slight joy of getting it right. Lawtey—over six foot tall to Burton's maybe-five-ten—habitually hunches and slouches, as if he hasn't yet learned how to exist inside his body, unsure how to take up that much space. He mumbles and gawks and never seems wise, or anything else, beyond his years. When Richie's brother-in-law demands he drop out of school and contribute financially to the household, securing him a job in the haberdashery section of a local department store, it seems no grander a tragedy than that of your average high school dropout.

The 17-year-old's English teacher—the titular Mr. Burton, played by consummate character actor Toby Jones—sees it differently. He recognizes a glimpse of greatness in Richie, something which the audience only knows because we know the future. It's not clear how Burton sees it: what Richie is, or the vast potential of what Richie can be. Maybe he merely *wanted* to see something in Richie and took one hell of a lucky guess. P.H. Burton is a devoted theatre lover, who despite his former career as a marginal figure in the West End scene, is now little more than a failed actor and playwright whose only successful creative outlet is occasional radio plays on regional BBC broadcasts. What he sees in Richie doesn't seem to be based on much more than his enjoyment of the class-assigned Shakespeare reading. But on evidence that slim, the teacher turns both of their lives upside-down.

P.H. Burton starts a local dramatics society—he invites Richie to participate, and, indeed, may have only formed the society in order to do so. He gives Richie major parts in their productions, of course, and encourages him to return to education, eventually speaking to the school board on his behalf to have him reinstated. When Richie expresses his desire to be an actor, P.H. devotes his time to personal one-on-one lessons. Richie is, it's important to note, not even *good at acting*: he is, initially, only slightly better than the other kids in the drama group who can barely learn their lines or, like, convey an emotion. P.H. admittedly tells Richie he has little to no hope of becoming a professional actor, but works doggedly with him all the same. He has a nice face, P.H.'s landlady Ma Smith (Lesley Manville) decides, and a voice you can work on.

After a while, Richie moves in, with P.H. renting the room next to his at Ma's place: though ostensibly a boarding house, it is in truth a shared home, with P.H. having lived there full-time for a decade and no other lodgers ever seen or mentioned. Richie's sister hopes with heartbreaking earnestness that P.H. will allow her brother an opportunity for a better kind of life, and her husband is happy to have one less mouth to feed. Eventually, P.H. proposes adopting Richie—a formality, he says, to avoid awkward questions about his living arrangements when he applies for a scholarship to Oxford, using P.H.'s connections. On one hand, it's a story of profound generosity. But generosity that profound is hard to accept at face value—prompting you to wonder if it's generosity at all. In *The Blind Side*, a superficially similar story of a poor kid (future NFL player Michael Oher) adopted by kindly benefactors (Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy), the world Oher came from is depicted as worse in every conceivable way, with the merest possibility of the Tuohys being self-interested only raised briefly just so the film can preemptively dismiss it, framing this concern as the domain of nefarious actors who want manipulate Oher. (In reality, the Tuohys put Oher in a conservatorship and made hundreds of thousands off his back.) *The Blind Side* encourages the viewer to reject their own nagging doubts; *Mr. Burton* makes the viewer live with the juxtaposition of conflicting ways to understand the story it's telling. "Nobody to my knowledge, by the way, has quite gotten to the bottom of Burton's relationship with his teacher and mentor at Port Talbot Secondary School, congenital bachelor Philip Burton," Roger Lewis writes in his 2023 biography *Erotic Vagrancy: Everything About Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor*. While *Mr. Burton* plays fast and loose with some of the facts, it functions as a meditation on the nature of this *thing* between them: making us sit with the ambiguity, at least for a while.

A large part of the film sees P.H. acting as the real-life Henry Higgins opposite Richie's Eliza Doolittle. If Lawtey's performance begins as a gangly, awkward teenager, by the end—his broad shoulders held back, a tuxedo hugging his frame—I was convinced that he would be an excellent James Bond. He gives a subtle physical performance that parallels the more obvious transformation in how he speaks. As an actor, the Richard Burton we know spoke with an BBC-newsreader English accent, but this was an affectation, having grown up in a poor, working-class, Welsh-speaking home. In P.H.'s acting lessons, Richie learning to project his voice or control his breath are part of the same lessons as, simply put, anglicising his speech. Though Americans tend to think of Britain as a single coherent entity, the Celtic fringe nations of the UK—Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man and, depending on the time period, Ireland or Northern Ireland—occupy a fraught and fluctuating status as simultaneous colonized and colonizer. They participate in and benefit from an overseas British imperialism that is dominated internally by the imperial core of England, whose language, culture and traditions are treated as the British default. Wales has mostly had less of a nationalist streak than Scotland or Ireland, but *Mr. Burton* emphatically portrays Richie as Welsh first and foremost. His first language is Welsh, the speaking of which once saw children at school marked out with a "Welsh Not" token put around their neck at school, and often beaten. His English is the product of millennia of Welsh history, from the length of his vowel sounds to his melodic intonation.

But being an actor is inextricable from removing markers

of his class and nationality from his voice. An actor must speak "properly," which means sounding upper-class and English. Richie's brother-in-law tells him that changing his voice is an insult to his family, his people, where he comes from. "Don't tell me where I come from," Richie snaps in Welsh, which his brother-in-law can't speak. They each have a point: changing his accent cuts both ways. P.H. is giving this working-class Welsh boy the tools to succeed, but those tools erase the outward signs of who he is. Burton's generation of British and Irish actors was full of working-class people from out-of-the-way places who spoke in accents not their own—Burton's fellow hellraisers Peter O'Toole and Richard Harris, for two. All these decades later, the range of accents that are accepted in public life may have increased, but there is a dearth of actors and musicians from working-class backgrounds, as the evisceration of youth services and public arts funding has made creative professions the domain of the mega-posh. As I watch Richie learn to speak "properly," I am at once saddened by the overt discrimination that would make such a thing necessary and wistful for a time when class barriers to the stage and screen were that superficial and surmountable. It is, like so much in *Mr. Burton*, a double-edged sword.

pajamas, while Richie tells P.H. how grateful he is to him. Even describing these moments feels like calling too much attention to them: the film's approach is feather-light, just putting you ever so slightly off-balance. There is an intimacy between them that your brain rushes to categorize, mostly unsuccessfully.

The adoption seems like the promise of a happy ending. But all those whispers are still ringing in Richie's ears—his biological father echoes those rumours when he signs the papers, calling Richie a homophobic slur—and so Richie goes to get blind drunk, his head full of things better left unsaid, then he stumbles home and blurts them all out. "Good old P.H., eh? You clothed me, you fed me, all out of the goodness of his heart," he says, detached, before rising to his feet and shouting, "It's the worst kept secret in fucking Port Talbot! Do you think I don't know what it is that you want?" P.H.'s response is an odd non-denial—he doesn't address what Richie is accusing him of, not really, even if it feels like the natural upshot of his pleas that he's done so much for Richie, to help him. They don't hash it out: Richie runs away. Sleeps with his girlfriend like he's trying to prove something. Goes to auditions, goes to Oxford. He's Richard Burton now, a more forceful reminder of the past than his father's name would have been.

GENEROSITY THAT PROFOUND IS HARD TO ACCEPT AT FACE VALUE—PROMPTING YOU TO WONDER IF IT'S GENEROSITY AT ALL.

P.H.'s taking a particular interest in Richie prompts rumor and speculation, especially once they begin living together. People who Richie doesn't even know whisper when they see him: "Moved in with that teacher. You can guess what he's after." There's nothing in those murmurs resembling true concern for Richie as a potential victim, just homophobic bile targeting both of them at once. But the whispers are so constant that you can't ignore them. Richie's girlfriend questions why he isn't more handsy, and when he replies that he's a gentleman, she clarifies: "You do want to, though, don't you?"

"Of course I bloody want to," Richie tells her, "Why on earth would you think I don't?" She bats the question away—"I dunno, it's nothing"—but the answer is obvious. As they speak, he's wearing P.H.'s socks.

You want to dismiss it out of hand: outsiders misunderstanding a relationship that we get to see the inside of. Yet there is this frisson of erotic tension—or a tension that *appears* erotic, maybe—between them. When P.H. first proposes Richie moving in with him, he's delicately removing the false beard Richie wore as Higgins in *Pygmalion*—in case you hadn't gotten it—their faces close together, speaking in hushed tones, and when Richie's girlfriend approaches, she backs away as P.H. glances up at her. When the student and teacher live together, neither seem perturbed by Richie leaving his bedroom door open while wearing just a towel slung around his hips. In another scene, Richie and P.H. sit in dim light next to each other on P.H.'s bed, both in

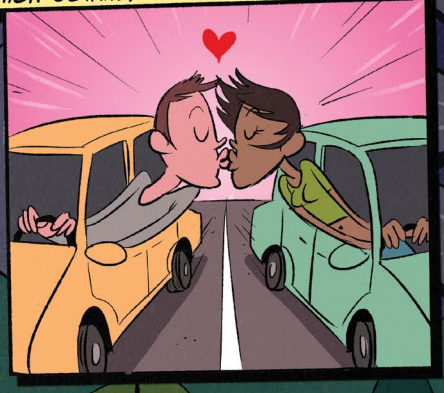
The film invents an eight-year estrangement that, while fictional, mimics something of the real Richard Burton's complicated feelings about his namesake, his sexuality, and his masculinity. ("Most actors are latent homosexuals and we cover it with drink," Burton said in 1975, "I was a homosexual once but not for long. But I tried it. It didn't work, so I gave it up.") All this time has passed, and Richard is about to open as Hal in *Henry IV Part 1* and *Part 2* in Stratford-upon-Avon: habitually drunk, voice finished transforming, somehow still subject to casual anti-Welsh jibes, and still not off-book days before the premiere. When he's too sloshed to be able to remember the morning after, he calls home. Asks P.H. to come. It would be easy for the film to play their reunion as a soppy epilogue. But that tension and ambiguity remain. The interpolation of *Henry IV* prompts us to wonder if Richard turns his back on his weird old man, like Hal did to Falstaff. Somebody refers to P.H. as Richard's acting coach, and he says, "he's not my acting coach," but he doesn't fill in the blank with another title.

After spending so much of its runtime wondering what exactly it is that Richie and P.H. are to each other, it is only in the film's final moments that *Mr. Burton* offers an answer, the story's disparate dots cohering into an overarching image. P.H. compliments Richard's performance, struggling to articulate how moved he was, when Richie pulls him into his arms. "Can a man not hug his own bloody father?" he says. Ah, yes. That is the word, isn't it? ⚜

CAR Town

IN CAR TOWN...

TRUE LOVE'S FIRST KISS HAPPENS AT HIGH-OCTANE, BREAKNECK SPEEDS



IN CAR TOWN...

CHILDREN ARE SNUGLY PARKED TO BED AT NIGHT

IN CAR TOWN...

HOT AND COLD RUNNING GASOLINE IS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT

IN CAR TOWN...

THE RADICAL PEDESTRIAN RESISTANCE MOVEMENT SLASHES TIRES & KEYS DOORS

IN CAR TOWN...

THE DEATH PENALTY IS CARRIED OUT VIA DRIVING SQUAD

IN CAR TOWN...

THE SUPREME COURT RULED THAT YOUR BODY IS NOT YOUR BODY; YOUR CAR IS YOUR BODY

WRITING: SHAWN VULLIEZ (@WRONG_SHON)
ART: MATT BEAUDOIN (@SCRUB_LOVER)

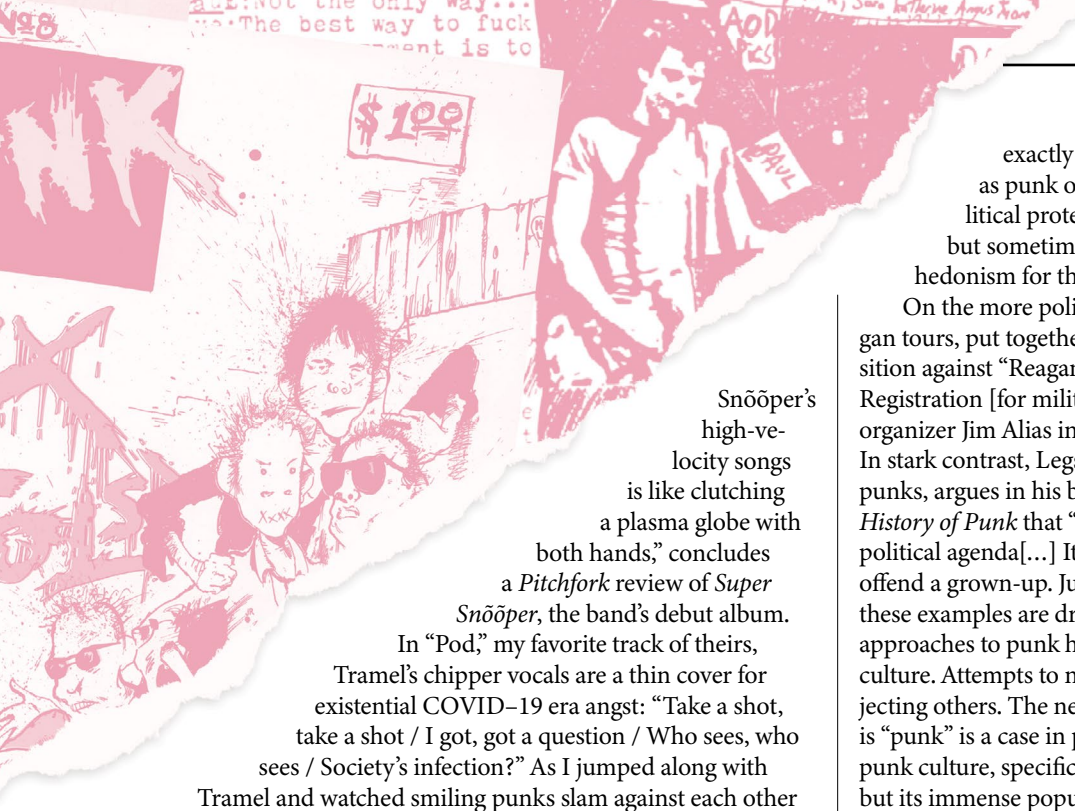
LAND OF THE FREE, HOME OF THE PUNKS

BY GRANT WONG

IT'S July 26, 2024, and I'm at Elsewhere, a former warehouse turned music venue in Brooklyn, New York. My friend Beleth and I have come to see Snõõper, a punk band from Nashville. We've been friends since middle school, but have followed diverging paths. Beleth's a true punk, a self-taught guitarist, bassist, and illustrator who puts up with barista work at our local Starbucks for the sake of devoting their life to their creative talents. As a transgender artist who found acceptance, community, and inspiration in Brooklyn's queer punk scene, Beleth's a natural fit for the culture. In contrast, I'm a strait-laced graduate student at the University of South Carolina, where I study twentieth century American popular culture. I'm researching the history of punk in New York City for my Ph.D. dissertation, and while I'm not afraid to profess my love for punk—its history of leftism and exhilarating music drew me to the culture—at this point I only knew about it secondhand, from the scholarship I was reading. So I reconnected with Beleth and asked her to take me to see Snõõper, who I'd read about in *Creem*, a publication that proclaims itself "America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine."

"Elsewhere is kind of bougie; you could go to a basement show for free," Beleth told me. "You don't need to be so concerned about being 'punk' or not. That's not the point." "I don't think a pit's going to form. The venue's not that kind of place." On this last point, Beleth was dead wrong. Taking the stage, Snõõper bombarded us with a wall of fuzzy, delightfully deafening guitar noise as frontwoman Blair Tramel began hopping in excitement, blurting the opening to "Company Car": "I've got the keys to the company car / I've got my own so it's kind of bizarre!" "Holy shit!" cried Beleth as we felt a mass of humanity swirl around and separate us. Guitarists Connor Cummins and Ian Teeple threw out riff after riff as drummer Cam Sarrett kept the beat racing at a breakneck pace. In a perfect visual metaphor for punk itself, bassist Happy Haugen stepped out onto the supportive hands of audience members, who held him up as he fingered chords: an awesome individual, supported by people dedicated to a collective culture and the creativity it fosters.

Creativity abounds in Snõõper. The band's quirks, like their matching tracksuits and use of large papier-mâché puppets—most notably their nine-foot tall green mosquito mascot—are so uniquely *them*. "[U]npredictable riffs and voltaic singing that strike just the right balance of delightful and detached[…] The total effect of



Snõõper's high-velocity songs is like clutching a plasma globe with both hands," concludes a *Pitchfork* review of *Snõõper*, the band's debut album. In "Pod," my favorite track of theirs, Tramel's chipper vocals are a thin cover for existential COVID–19 era angst: "Take a shot, take a shot / I got, got a question / Who sees, who sees / Society's infection?" As I jumped along with Tramel and watched smiling punks slam against each other in an honest-to-goodness mosh pit, it was impossible not to love everything about the experience.

As an older member of Generation Z born in 1999, my coming-of-age has been defined by the COVID–19 pandemic and two Donald Trump presidencies. (This sucks. I would not recommend it.) More recently, I've watched in horror as generative AI programs threaten to displace people from their jobs and do our thinking for us. In times like these, punk is both an affirmation and an intellectual reckoning. There's a comfort in knowing that previous generations have also been disgusted with the state of the world, and a hope that we might learn from their successes and failures. By studying punk, I learn about a rich tradition of oppositional thinkers who, discontent with embracing the cookie-cutter lives and ideas sanctioned by mainstream society, constructed an alternative culture they could call their own.

Since January of this year, I've been volunteering at ABC No Rio, a collectively run arts organization on New York City's Lower East Side that hosts punk shows and fosters the culture. There, I've become part of a community of like-minded people who are righteously angry with the world and want to change it for the better. I archive zines—self-produced, small-circulation publications characterized by their irreverence and personality—in ABC No Rio's Zine Library to help preserve this culture and make it accessible. Now, in presenting you with the history of punk in the United States, in all its perils and possibilities, I hope the culture can inspire you just as much as it's inspired me.

WHAT iS PUNK?

What exactly is "punk," a concept that punks—by which I mean anyone actively engaged with punk culture—have hotly debated since its very inception? In a word, punk is rebellion. It's a sensibility that prizes skepticism of, and revolt against, any form of authority and anything that might constitute a status quo. What exactly this "status quo" is depends on who you ask, as punk opposition has historically ranged from political protest—most often leftist, particularly anarchist, but sometimes right-wing too—to contrarianism and hedonism for their own sake.

On the more politically coherent side, the Rock Against Reagan tours, put together by punks in the early 1980s, voiced opposition against "Reagan, Radiation, Racism, the Right, Repression, Registration [for military service], and Recession," as described by organizer Jim Alias in the Spring 1982 issue of his zine *I Wanna*. In stark contrast, Legs McNeil, one of the very first self-identified punks, argues in his book *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* that "the great thing about punk was that it had no political agenda[…] It was also about doing anything that's gonna offend a grown-up. Just being as offensive as possible." While these examples are drawn from different periods, these divergent approaches to punk have long coexisted and clashed within the culture. Attempts to narrow the definition of punk hinge on rejecting others. The never-ending debate over whether Green Day is "punk" is a case in point: the band undoubtedly emerged from punk culture, specifically from California's vibrant Bay Area scene, but its immense popularity and openness to commercial success cast its cultural credentials into doubt. (It's hard to be truly "punk" if you're also collaborating with 7-Eleven to sell branded "Punk Bunny" Slurpees, as Green Day did this year.)

Whatever comes to mind when you think of the word "punk," whether it be blisteringly fast rock and roll, leather jackets, or sweaty mosh pits, it's all part of a larger culture dedicated to the expression and embrace of dissent. Musically, punk takes the form of punk rock and its subgenre of hardcore, which both center around a loud, fast, and aggressive sound often described as stripped-down rock and roll. Vocals are often shouted, snarled, or sneered, backed by distorted electric guitars that punctuate songs with power chords and catchy riffs. Basses and drums typically stick to nimble and punchy rhythms to structure the music and maintain its sheer speed, especially for hardcore songs, which can surpass 300 beats per minute. Physically, punk manifested in local scenes. Across the United States' suburbs and cities, punks formed communities, started bands, and booked shows in any venue they could find. Visually and textually, punk found tangible form in zines. Taken together, this is the stuff punk culture is made of, designed not just for consumption but also to encourage others to try their hand at it.

To be punk is to create. This truism is embodied by the culture's embrace of the do-it-yourself, or D.I.Y. ethic: a conviction that individuals should think and express themselves freely by creating their own culture on their own terms. Just like punk, the D.I.Y. ethic is a contested and multifaceted idea, intuited rather than spelled out. For instance, Ian MacKaye, frontman of influential punk bands Minor Threat and Fugazi, defines punk and the D.I.Y. ethic in terms of their freedom of expression, which in his view can only be realized when uninfluenced by a profit motive. As he says in an interview with *Huck* magazine in 2020, "My definition of punk is the free space. It's an area in which new ideas can be presented without having to go through the filtration or perversion of profiteering. So, if we're not worried about selling things, then we can actually think." However, interpretations of D.I.Y. highly vary. For some punks, adhering to this ethic where music is concerned might involve only signing with independent

record labels or entirely rejecting the idea that art is something to be profited from. But more generally, the D.I.Y. ethic is embodied in the desire and will to create things, rejecting traditions, rules, and conventions in doing so. The closest thing it has to a thesis statement is in the first issue of *Sideburns*, a British zine released in 1977. The reader, presented with diagrams of guitar chords, is told: "This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band."

THE 1970S: THE BIRTH OF PUNK

Punk began in New York City in the mid-1970s as a ragtag group of artists and misfits gathered around CBGB, a music club on the Lower East Side, and created their own culture. Inspired by hard rock acts like the Stooges, MC5, and the New York Dolls, these artists pioneered a stripped-down style of rock and roll in defiance of progressive rock (a genre that privileged technical skill in its characteristic guitar solos) and the dance-oriented rhythms of disco. They also took inspiration from the city's queer underground and Andy Warhol-led art crowd, as their social circles overlapped. Rock critics like Lester Bangs and Dave Marsh of *Creem* used the word "punk"—up to this point a derogatory word for a disorderly youngster or prison slang for a victim of anal rape—to describe this new sound and cultural sensibility. Cartoonist John Holmstrom deepened this connection by founding *Punk* magazine with Legs McNeil and Ged Dunn, Jr. in 1975, narrowing a loose collection of cultural features into a category that people could identify with, debate, and innovate upon. In defining "punk rock" in the zine's third issue in 1976, Holmstrom outlined the greater sensibility of the culture: "any kid can pick up a guitar and become a rock 'n' roll star, despite or because of his lack of ability, talent, intelligence, limitations, and/or potential and usually does so out of frustration, hostility, a lot of nerve, and a need for ego fulfillment."

Punk did not emerge in a vacuum. It was born from a combination of historical conditions and artistic drive. As an oppositional culture, it originated from a profound sense of discontent bred by the economic recession of 1973–1975 and the stultifying conformity of working- and middle-class life in America during the Nixon and Ford administrations. For instance, in the autobiographical song "Piss Factory," Patti Smith laments the drudgery of working a low-wage, nine-to-five job: "It's the monotony that's got to me / Every afternoon like the last one / Every afternoon like a re-run." By the end of the song, Smith's narrator, like herself, resolves to escape to New York, where they can live their life anew. Richard Hell's anthemic "Blank Generation" picked up where "Piss Factory" left off, as its lyrics wrestled with the liberation and disorientation of defining one's existence on one's own terms: "I belong to the blank generation, and / I can take it or leave it each time."

This ethos of self-reinvention—the seed of what would become known as the D.I.Y. ethic—empowered this first cohort of self-identified punks to live life as they saw fit, for better and for worse. On one hand, the culture's contrarianism facilitated innovative forms of self-expression, manifested in its music and zines. While most American punks in the 1970s did not espouse a well-defined political agenda, their cultural experimentation affirmed to themselves and future generations that it was important to question and defy societal standards.

On the other hand, early punks' love of provoking mainstream society could descend into rank bigotry. At its crudest, this took the form of American punk culture's flirtation with Nazi symbols, which was usually satirical. Bands like the Dead Boys wore swastikas for shock value rather than any actual alignment with fascism, and the lyrics of songs like the Dictators' "Master Race Rock"—which range from "We're the members of the master race / Got no tact, and we got no taste" to a shouted "Don't forget to wipe your ass!"—are best described as juvenile sneering. But this was far from self-evident, especially to outside observers.

Homophobia and racism were far more tangible, as some punks used their outrageousness as cover for genuine hatred and prejudice. In one infamous incident at CBGB in 1976, Dictators frontman Handsome Dick Manitoba heckled a performance by transgender artist Jayne County with homophobic slurs and staggered towards her, drunk.[1] County responded by bashing Manitoba with her microphone stand in self-defense, sending him to the hospital. (In fairness, many scenesters sided with County, while *Punk* magazine cast its lot with Manitoba.) Casual racism plagued the 1970s New York scene as well, as evidenced by "The White Noise Supremacists," an article published by rock critic Lester Bangs in *The Village Voice* in April 1979. Having hosted a party for the *Punk* magazine staff and "members of several of the hottest CBGB's bands," he recounts that "when I[…] put on soul records so everybody could dance—I began to hear this:

1 Jayne County came out as a transgender woman in 1979. As such, my description of her here is somewhat ahistorical; up to this point she had self-identified as a transvestite and performed under the stage name Wayne County. In any case, County's embrace of gender non-conformity and drag certainly made her culturally and visibly genderqueer to her audiences.

'What're you playing all that n—r disco shit for, Lester?' 'That's not n—r disco shit,' I snarled, 'that's Otis Redding, you assholes!' But they didn't want to hear about it."

The New York scene inspired punk's emergence in Britain, where artists like the Sex Pistols and the Clash brought the culture mainstream media attention. This mid-1970s iteration of punk, often referred to as its "first wave," ended towards the close of the decade. The Sex Pistols famously broke up in 1978 at the end of their first and only tour of the United States, leading record labels and the mainstream media to dismiss punk as a passing fad. As promoter Danny Fields recounts in *Please Kill Me*, "[w]hen the Sex Pistols broke up in San Francisco, it showed everyone that this punk thing wasn't viable. That they were meant to self-destruct and so what's the point in investing in any of them?" While acts like the Ramones secured modest record deals, punk rock was a hard sell and was overshadowed by the success of new wave, a catch-all pop-oriented genre influenced by punk. However, the culture did not disappear. Rather, these sea changes cleared the way for a new generation to out-punk their elders.

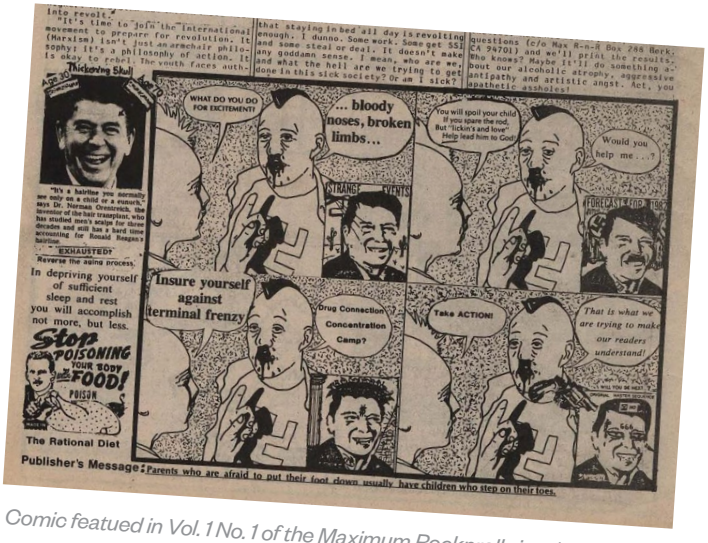
THE 1980S: PUNK GOES HARDCORE

Punk emerged anew in the late 1970s and early 1980s as younger people—teenagers, rather than the mostly twenty-somethings who populated the first wave—led the culture's transition into "hardcore" punk. This iteration of the culture saw the music become faster, louder, and more aggressive, its makeshift sensibility formalized into the D.I.Y. ethic as a core value of the culture, and its politics become more coherent and outspoken. Whereas the first generation of punks in the U.S. were anti-status quo but not very politically motivated, the hardcore punks of the 1980s were resolute in their opposition to Ronald Reagan, who was practically the antichrist to them for his Cold War-mongering, economic deregulation, and slashing of welfare programs. And the hardcore punks were far more direct and blunt about the targets of their critique. Take, for instance, Reagan Youth, a New York hardcore band whose members named their group to satirically equate the president's young supporters with the Hitler Youth of Nazi Germany. In the band's namesake track, frontman Dave Insurgent sneers from the perspective of an imagined Reaganite: "We are the sons of Reagan… Heil! / We are the godforsaken… Heil! / The right is our religion / We'll watch television / Tons of fun and brainwashed slime." The likes of Reagan Youth were one of many hardcore bands that rose in revolt against the president, supported by grassroots scenes around the country that displaced New York as punk's new cultural centers.

This "punk rock world," as historian Kevin Mattson describes it in *We're Not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and the Real Culture War of 1980s America*, was led by bands like Minor Threat, Bad Brains (Washington, D.C.), Black Flag (Los Angeles), and Dead Kennedys (San Francisco), who, if not necessarily united in a formal political agenda, helped give voice to those angry with American injustice and energized punk culture as it expanded nationally and internationally. Bad Brains are particularly notable for being an all-Black punk band, a rarity in the culture, and for being one of hardcore's most influential originators; some punks consider them to have created the subgenre.

Zines like Tim Yohannan's *Maximum Rocknroll*, which he founded in San Francisco to promote punk and leftism as two sides of the same coin, understood politics and culture as inseparable. As Yohannan, a 1960s hippie-turned-punk, argued in the zine's first issue in 1982, "[i]f punk is to be a threat, different from society, then any so-called punk who flirts with racism and sexism, proudly displays ignorance, resorts to physical violence and is afraid of knowledge or political action, is not a threat at all, but has gone over to the enemy[…] It is the ideas behind the music, the dress, the 'zines that are important, not the leather-clad bands and haircuts." Many similarly understood that punk could challenge conservatism, capitalism, and war through direct action and artistic dissent. As part of the previously mentioned Rock Against Reagan tours, punks protested the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, staging "die-ins" criticizing nuclear war and chanting a slogan—"No war, no KKK, no fascist U.S.A.!"—that originated from a punk song: "Born to Die," by MDC (Austin and San Francisco). The same slogan is still in rotation at protest marches today, with "no Trump" swapped in for "no war." Punks in Washington, D.C. founded the activist collective Positive Force in 1985, which held benefit concerts for progressive causes, delivered meals to low-income elderly people, and organized "creative protests[...] done either alone or within other actions."

As Dead Kennedys frontman Jello Biafra declared in the 1981 song "Nazi Punks Fuck Off," "Punk ain't no religious cult / Punk means thinking for yourself!" Within punk communities, "thinking for yourself" often meant making, reading, and responding to zines. For an underground culture with scant coverage in the mainstream media, zines were vital. Constituting punk's rich print culture, zines, because of their D.I.Y. nature and disconnect from considerations of profit, could be as irreverent and free-thinking as the misfits who made them (not unlike *Current Affairs*). Typically Xeroxed and stapled by hand, zines were distributed through the mail, at shows, and at whatever record stores would stock them; they were often sold for a few dollars or less, traded for other zines, or given away for free.



Comic featued in Vol. 1 No. 1 of the Maximum Rocknroll zine, 1982

Let's look inside a few. *Maximum Rocknroll* (1982–2019), the most prominent punk zine in the 1980s, crammed as much tiny typewritten text into its cheap newsprint as its margins would allow, even as the monthly exceeded 100 pages by the end of the decade. Its (in)famous letter sections and editorials were punk's public forums, hosting contentious discussions over what punk was, if punk was "dead," and how one could best be a punk. Its scene reports, which related the goings-on of local scenes, underscore zines' practical function as punk's newspapers of record. Assembled by a large team of self-identified volunteer "shitworkers," MRR was what D.I.Y. looked like when scaled up.

Bullshit Monthly (1984–1991), the brainchild of Mike Bullshit, a mainstay of New York's hardcore scene, was a far humbler publication. Bullshit started his zine at the age of 16 while attending hardcore matinees at CBGB, where he sold handwritten, Xeroxed copies for 50 cents apiece. Packed to the gills with local punk news, band interviews, reader-submitted art, and stray ramblings, *Bullshit Monthly* was a typical scene zine: an irreverent work inseparable from the personality of its author. It also doubled as a personal manifesto. As a gay man in a predominantly heterosexual culture, Bullshit added a byline to later issues: "Proud to be gay owned and operated." Later, the 1990s zine *I (Heart) Amy Carter* (1992–1994), created by Tammy Rae Carland during her graduate studies at the University of California, Irvine was also a labor of love. Named for President Jimmy Carter's daughter Amy Carter, whom Carland had a girlhood crush on, the zine exuded rawness and vulnerability. As Carland stressed on the back of each issue, it was "a fanzine for the weak of heart. It's about having butterflies in your belly and biceps in your brain. It's about girl love + girl power + girl sex + and girl friends[…] It's part *National Enquirer* part Dear Diary and part whatever the fuck I feel like." Within its pages, Carland gushes over her love for queer punk bands and the riot grrrl movement (more on this later) and reflects upon her experiences as a lesbian, a feminist, and someone born into poverty. The zine, like countless other D.I.Y. efforts, prominently featured cut-and-pasted visuals and text from mainstream media publications, repurposed into artful collage. As the late writer Toni Morrison once said, "if there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." Replace "book" with "zine" and you've found the driving force of every zinester who's ever lived.

Constructing a culture of rebellion was not without its challenges. As punk has historically existed as a largely white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual culture, this demographic skew has tended to narrow the scope of its politics and culture. This is not to say that punks of color, women, working-class people, and queer folks haven't occupied central roles in the culture—they did, and are featured in this history—but to emphasize that identity and class-based concerns could often go unheard or ignored by those who could not relate to or understand them. This is to say nothing of actual violence, which could be difficult to keep in check within a culture whose dancing (beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s) involved physically slamming against others in a mosh pit. (Though pits were typically peaceful, if rough around the edges, it's all too easy for bad-faith actors to be violent within them.)

Punk's existence as an oppositional, defiant culture could also attract actual—not satirical—right-wing skinheads and neo-Nazis, generally outside agitators who plagued the national scene until mostly being kicked out of it by the early 1990s. These troublemakers worsened a growing trend of exclusionary violence in hardcore, which plagued scenes across the country. For instance, the New York hardcore scene—centered around CBGB—became dangerous as fights broke out in mosh pits and city streets. As Mike Bullshit recalled in 2012 on his personal blog: "[s]omeone would just get picked out and beaten the fuck up. I saw a horrifying 'fag bash' incident across the street. Just fucking bloody, and I was scared shitless." When CBGB paused its hardcore matinees due to shows getting out of control, Bullshit started a new scene at ABC No Rio, a squatter tenement building home to an arts collective on New York's Lower East Side. Beginning in December 1989, Bullshit booked shows at the new venue with a firm policy prohibiting sexist, racist, or homophobic bands from performing.

Bullshit Monthly courtesy of Mike BS (mikeslobs.blogspot.com)

Punk's status as an underground culture and its commitment to the D.I.Y. ethic were double-edged swords, both the culture's best virtues and most difficult challenges. While punk has long been recognized by musicians, scholars, and music writers alike for its openness to amateurs, it could be impossible to find for people not already in the know. In the 1980s, if you didn't already know a punk or have access to zines, you could have missed the culture entirely. The culture's accessibility and sustainability were also tested by punks' dedication to the D.I.Y. ethic, which afforded artists near-complete artistic autonomy for the price of burning out from fatigue. Most hardcore punks renounced the prospect of commercial success, though the loud and aggressive nature of their music meant they weren't very marketable to begin with—for a time, anyway. In any case, their dedication to punk was a higher

calling. For instance, hardcore tours, as recounted in memoirs like Henry Rollins' *Get in the Van* and the 1984 documentary *Another State of Mind*, were often self-run, with artists booking and performing in makeshift venues in between crashing with fellow punks. There was very little money to be made this way, and tours were more likely to leave bands with deficits than profits. The commitment to D.I.Y. led punks to take on large amounts of work with little to no financial support, which was stressful for everyone involved and contributed to the culture's volatility. Bands and zines, difficult for anyone to maintain for long, often ended up like the music they covered: loud, fast, and short.

The 1990s: Punk Goes Mainstream

In the 1990s and 2000s, punk faced further growing pains as the music broke into the mainstream and evolved into new genres. Two bands in particular—Nirvana (Seattle) and Green Day (Berkeley)—signed to major labels and brought punk unprecedented commercial success and attention. Hits like "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "American Idiot" introduced listeners to punk's sound and confrontational lyrics while also signaling the new musical directions the culture was going. Both songs made it onto the Billboard Top 100, with the former peaking at No. 6. Nirvana's fusion of punk with metal influences helped birth grunge and alternative rock, while Green Day's sound contributed to pop-punk, a subgenre that saw punk and hardcore move in a more pop-influenced, melodic direction.

This commercial explosion, detailed in journalist Dan Ozzi's book *Sellout: The Major Label Feeding Frenzy That Swept Punk, Emo, and Hardcore*, was an existential crisis for the culture. Many punks, especially anti-capitalist ones and those particularly committed to the ideals of D.I.Y., viewed this influx of money and mainstream media attention as the antithesis of everything the culture stood for. At the same time, it's undeniable that this newfound popularity massively expanded the culture's reach, especially for youngsters who didn't have access to local scenes. Kurt Cobain, frontman of Nirvana, was at the center of all this. Devastated by depression and substance abuse, Cobain's disillusionment with the trappings of fame was one of the factors that led him to take his own life. As he lamented in his suicide note: "All the warnings from the punk rock 101 courses over the years, since my first introduction to the, shall we say, ethics involved with independence and the embracement of your community has proven to be very true[…] it's better to burn out than to fade away." The gains punk culture made with its commercialization came with immense costs.

The 1990s also saw identity-based movements emerge from within punk that challenged the culture's white male heterosexual disposition. Riot grrrl, a feminist movement, emerged out of the Olympia, Washington scene to empower girls and women by encouraging them to start bands, make zines, and politically organize. Bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Sleater-Kinney (Olympia), alongside zines including Kathleen Hanna's *Bikini Kill*, Tobi Vail's *Jigsaw*, and Tammy Rae Carland's *I (Heart) Amy Carter* spread word of the movement's message of female empowerment and reclamation of punk. As Hanna argues in the first issue of *riot grrrl*, a zine she co-founded with Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman, and Jen Smith (later of Bratmobile) in 1991, this new form of punk aimed to "Recognize empathy and vulnerability as positive forms of strength. Resist the internalization of capitalism[…] Don't allow the world to make you into a bitter abusive asshole." Homocore, later known as queercore, emerged in tandem with riot grrrl, lending queer punks greater visibility and championing their place within the culture and the world at large. As Matt Wobensmith outlined the aims of his Outpunk record label in his zine of the same name in its first 1992 issue: "(a) To provide images, role models, information, support, and strength to isolated queer kids who need it. (b) To give queer kids the tools to cope with and/or change their environments. (c) To give queer kids options I never had!" As works like Mimi Thi Nguyen's Evolution of a Race Riot zine and James Spooner's 2003 documentary *Afro-Punk* attest, the struggle for a more inclusive punk culture continues.

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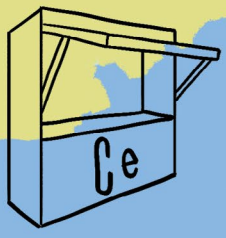
As the world remains a profoundly fucked up place, punk culture and its history compel us to confront and reflect upon its ills by getting involved in communities that empower and sustain us. Ever since the culture's inception, punks and outside observers have repeatedly asked, "is punk dead?" My answer is a definitive no: it will live on as long as we continue to believe in the value and power of making culture on our own terms, and always question the status quo. The spirit of punk will only die if we allow it to, and we cannot let that happen. So please, dear reader, do yourself a favor by doing something for yourself today. Write something. Draw a doodle. Paint a picture. Make music. Volunteer. Get involved in political organizing. Seek out your local scene and find out what it's all about. These individual acts cannot break the chains that capitalism binds us with on their own, but they're a start. And last—but not least—be a punk. Hey! Ho! Let's go!

All images were used with permissions from: John Holmstrom (Punk), Tammy Rae Carland (I [Heart] Amy Carter), Mike BS (Bullshit Monthly) and Razorcake.org (Razorcake)

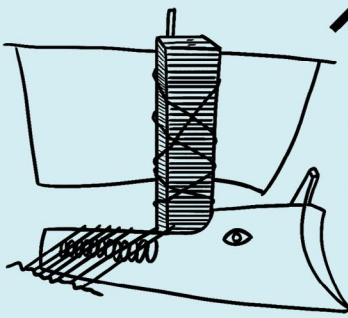
Written by Devin Schiff
Illustrated by Libby McGuire

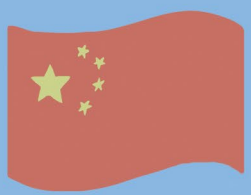
U.S. INCREASINGLY TRYING TO PAY $760B DEBT TO CHINA IN SOYBEANS



TIM COOK BARTERS FOR CERIUM AT RARE EARTH METALS ROADSIDE STAND

SHIPPING CONTAINER LASHED TO MAST TO RESIST SIRENS' ENCHANTING SONG





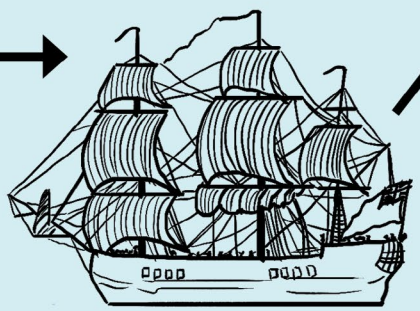
CHINA PLOTTING AMERICA'S DOWNFALL BY SENDING FOOD AND CLOTHING

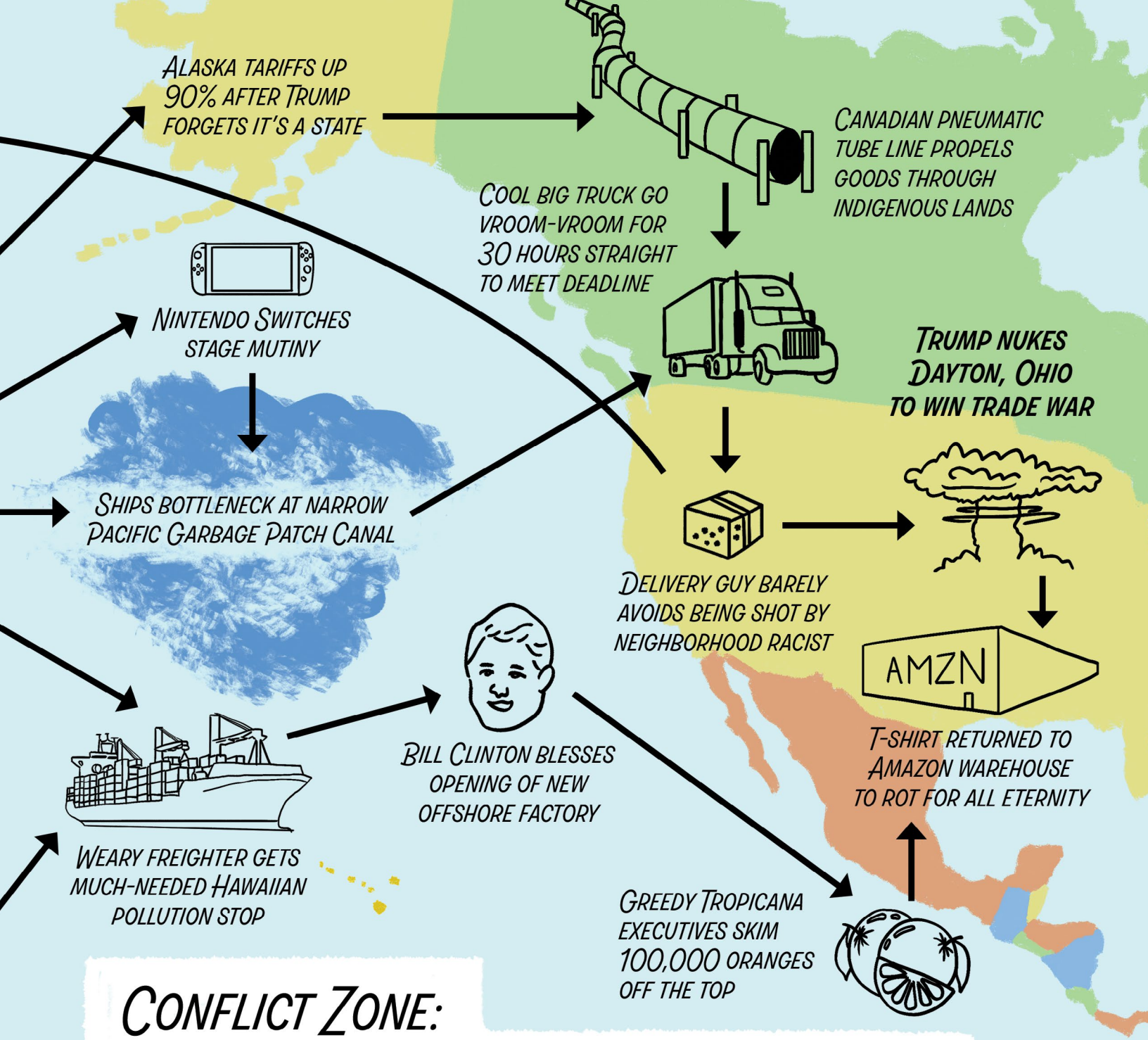
SHIP NEARLY SCUTTLED IN THE SHRIMP SWAMP

VIETNAMESE TODDLER FINISHES STITCHING NIKES

TIKTOK INFLUENCER OPENLY SELLING NEW GUINEANS

RUN-IN WITH OLD BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY SHIP STILL FIGHTING 1840S OPIUM WAR





Conflict Zone:

The Supply Chain

The tariff standoff between China and Trump is the classic conflict of unstoppable force vs. ~~immovable movable immovable movable~~ immovable object (unknown whether Trump chickens out again as of this writing). Tariffs are just one of the potential choke points for the global supply chain, where even the threat of upheaval has major consequences for the U.S. economy—and beyond. In short, the global supply chain is a consummate **Conflict Zone**. Here's how it works:


HO HO
NO CHEESE GROMIT. LOOK AT ALL THIS CRUELTY ON RSPCA FARMS
HA HA
GALLERY
HEE HEE
TEE-HEE
HISTORIC BOROUGH OF POO
NOT MY KING
I CRASHED THE ECONOMY
HAHA
HOHO
LUKE McGARRY

The Great British Political Prank

BY **ALEX SKOPIC**

Poole, England seldom makes the news. It's one of those unremarkable mid-sized cities along Britain's southern coastline, like Eastbourne or Bognor Regis, with a population of around 151,000 people and a lot of seafood restaurants. But last year, everyone in Poole woke up to find their hometown transformed. In the dead of night on August 10, 2024, someone defaced dozens of signs around the city, erasing the last two letters in the word "Poole" so they instead read "Poo." Highway signs greeted visitors to the "Historic Borough of Poo." A large mural of a sailboat said "Welcome to Poo Harbour." Other signs marked the locations of the "Poo Rail Station," the "Poo Museum," the "Sainsbury's Poo" grocery store, and even the "St. James' Poo" church. Even tiny "Borough of Poole" engravings on fence posts didn't escape being revised with a black marker. The culprits were thorough, hard-working, and utterly committed to their juvenile toilet joke.

Except, as it turns out, it wasn't so juvenile. A few days after they, well, Pooed in the Poole, the people responsible came forward—and they had something serious on their minds. Speaking to the *Somerset Live* news website, local residents Joe Foale-Groves and Gagandeep Jhuti explained that they'd painted and plastered over all those signs as an act of protest, in order to fight pollution and environmental injustice.

You see, a private company called Wessex Water operates the sewers in and around Poole, and it has a foul reputation. The firm used to be the Wessex Water Authority, a public utility—but it was privatized in 1989, at the tail end of Margaret Thatcher's crusade to demolish public services generally. Soon after it became a for-profit enterprise, the pollution began to flow. In 1998, the *Independent* reported that the firm "discharged 1 million gallons of raw sewage into a Dorset marina," but was fined only £5,500. In 1999, Wessex was ranked as the fourth worst polluter in Britain by the government Environment Agency. And in 2023, an investigation by the Liberal Democratic party found that it was responsible for more than 41,000 individual sewage spills across the U.K. in a single year, with human feces getting into people's bathing water on more than 12,000 occasions. Meanwhile, the CEO of Wessex Water made a salary of £982,000—roughly 1.3 million U.S. dollars.

On their website, Foale-Groaves and Jhuti complain that "our once sparkling water is more brown than blue these days," describing Poole as "Wessex Water's largest toilet." They're right about that. In 2022, several swimmers complained to the BBC that they'd gotten ear infections, "stomach upsets," and other illnesses after encountering sewage-clogged waters near Poole. But the company's representatives were callous and dismissive, telling local councilors that people simply shouldn't "go swimming with your mouth open." Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government wasn't much help, either; when it fined several sewage companies for illegal dumping in August 2024, Wessex Water wasn't on the list. So the two activists took matters into their own hands—and it worked, because the "Borough of Poo" made headlines in the *Daily Mail*, the largest tabloid in Britain. You literally can't buy that kind of publicity, especially if you're just two guys with a point to make about water quality.

THIS WAS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF SOMETHING WE might call the Great British Political Prank. It's a phenomenon peculiar to the British Isles, in which perfectly ordinary people pull off all kinds of absurd public stunts to make a political point, often making a mockery of elected leaders and well-heeled private executives in the process. These days it's popular to make fun of the British, and the history of their empire is certainly a grim one. But the Great British Political Prank is a marvelous thing, and the rest of the world could stand to adopt it too.

For another example, consider the mysterious individual known only as "Wanksy." Inspired by the famous graffiti artist Banksy, Wanksy is a construction worker from Manchester, and he's a crusader for public safety. It seems the Mancunian local government, like a lot of municipalities around the world, can be slow about fixing potholes, which is dangerous for everyone. In an interview, Wanksy says he knows people who've been hospitalized because of this dereliction of duty. So when he spots a pothole, he gets out a can of spray paint and draws a "giant comedy penis" around it. The local bureaucrats might not care whether their citizens wreck their bicycles or sprain their necks, but the cartoon phalluses are *obscenity*, which has to be stopped immediately. So the potholes get filled in "within 48 hours." Wanksy remains at large.

The Great British Political Prank is effective at the local level, but it can also reach the highest authorities of the land. Charles Windsor, sometimes referred to as "King Charles," found that out when he got Wallaced last year. In the wake of his very expensive coronation ceremony, the "King" had used a few hundred thousand pounds of everyone else's money to commission a portrait of himself by artist Jonathan Yeo. The result was a masterpiece, but possibly not in the way he intended: it showed Charles in a field of bright, glaring red, as if emerging from a cloud of blood shed by the British Empire across the centuries. It only took protesters a few months to *improve* the painting, gluing the head of Wallace from the claymation *Wallace & Gromit* films over Charles's. They added a speech bubble, too: "No cheese, Gromit. Look at all this cruelty on RSPCA farms!"

What were they talking about? Well, like with the "Borough of Poo," there was a serious political point behind the silliness. "RSPCA" stands for "Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals," and it's the biggest animal-rights group in Britain. As the "Royal" name suggests, Charles Windsor is its biggest public sponsor. The Society runs a scheme called "Assured," which gives an "Assured" stamp to eggs, milk, and other groceries that are supposedly produced in a "humane" way, with animals getting "more living space" and "responsible antibiotic usage." (It's a bit like the green frog stamp on goods certified by the Rainforest Alliance, which you also shouldn't trust.) But when an activist group called Animal Rising launched an investigation, sending scouts to 50 of the farms covered by the Assured program, they found serious violations of the cruelty standards at 45 of them. They even rescued a pig named Charlie, who had a large abscess and was being kept in a filthy pen without medical care. But it's hard to get people to read a PDF of your report about animal welfare. So the activists Wallaced the King, and the BBC ran national headlines about it, making millions of people aware of the issue who otherwise wouldn't have been. The tactic completely worked.

Windsor is a popular target, as anyone who parades around in a velvet robe calling themselves "King" deserves to be.[1] There's also Chuck the T. Rex, a giant wood-and-cloth dinosaur puppet wearing a crown who's deployed at a lot of royal events. Chuck turned up at Westminster Abbey for a Commonwealth Day service this March, but he gets around; among other places, he's also been spotted at Trafalgar Square for Republic Day, and at a Pride festival in Reading. He's the largest member of the anti-monarchy group Republic, and everywhere he goes, he's accompanied by human protesters carrying signs that say "NOT MY KING" and "DOWN WITH THE CROWN." The symbology has a couple of levels, because "Tyrannosaurus" literally means "Tyrant Lizard" in Latin, and Chuck is a fossil who shouldn't still be around—just like monarchy itself.

You've got to imagine that when Charles sees the big reptilian galoot from his balcony or limo, it might give him pause. In any

1 Note: If you like to parade around in a velvet robe as a private citizen, that is different, and we won't judge you.

case, it's memorable for the British public, for whom the approval rate of monarchy as a concept has never been lower at 54 percent. Along with prominent anti-monarchists like the late Christopher Hitchens, Chuck the T. Rex has a vital part to play in driving that number down.

For some Britons, though, the Great British Political Prank is a lot more quick-and-dirty. They just hold insulting signs behind politicians they dislike, usually ones from the Conservative Party. The YouTuber Niko Omilana did this to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak last year: when Sunak conceded his landslide defeat at the hands of the Labour Party, Omilana snuck up behind him at the podium and held a big piece of paper with a capital "L" for "loser" behind his head, adding insult to injury. (Don't feel too bad for Rishi, though. With an estimated net worth of £651 million, he'll be just fine, unlike the millions of people who fell into poverty and had to use food banks during his time in power.) Sunak's predecessor, Liz Truss, got this treatment in an even grander and more humiliating form. When she took the stage for a speech in Suffolk last year, somebody dropped a gigantic banner with the words "I CRASHED THE ECONOMY" and a photo of a head of lettuce wearing googly eyes—a reference to the fact that her tenure as Prime Minister, just 49 days, didn't last long enough for anyone's lettuce to expire. Truss went ballistic, raging about "far-left activists" and insisting, in the tones of a censorious headmaster, that "what happened last night was not funny." But it was, and her wounded indignation only made it funnier.

This gets to the heart of why stunts and pranks like this work. They puncture the pomposity of political leaders, elected or hereditary, who think they're grand and important. Or as Matt Forde, a British political podcaster, puts it:

> *It's the pomposity of the Brits that makes this funnier[...] Parliament and all its traditions and all its arcane language and its grand setting. There's an element of the class system. These are people who genuinely believe they're better than us, and it turns out they're fucking idiots.*

Politics, especially right-wing politics, is all about image. To be successful, a politician has to craft an image of themselves as extraordinarily capable and charismatic—an almost superhuman figure, in whom voters can place their trust. Right-wing leaders have to endlessly project toughness and authority. That's why El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele calls himself "the world's coolest dictator" and shows off his horrifying CECOT prison camp. It's why Donald Trump posts Photoshopped memes of himself as a muscular boxer. It's why Hitler banned jokes about himself as a form of treason, and why Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and Spike Jones's "Der Fuhrer's Face" helped people see through his schtick and gain the courage to defeat him. Humor works that way today, too. When someone nails the Great Strong Leader with a puerile prank, the image comes crashing down. If Rishi Sunak can't stop a YouTuber from holding an L behind his head, how could he possibly *lead* anyone? If the emperor has been nude the whole time, why should anyone obey him?

In this way, political silliness is a compelling alternative to political violence. Apart from the moral and ethical issues involved, the problem with political violence is that it doesn't *work* very well. Assassinated potentates and corporate executives just get replaced with others similar to themselves, and the machinery of power keeps moving. Worse, political violence generates sympathy for its targets, especially when it fails. The best thing that happened to Donald Trump in the 2024 election was when Thomas Crooks tried to shoot him, but only clipped his ear. It gave Trump an iconic photo and let him talk about being "saved by God to make America great again" for months. (Apparently God wasn't so fond of the Trump supporter behind him, who died.) The same was true for Jair Bolsonaro when someone stabbed him in 2018—it only enhanced his image as a tough guy, and gave him an excuse to crack down on the Left when he eventually gained power.

But consider some alternate history: what if, instead of a rifle, Thomas Crooks had smuggled some audio equipment into that arena in Butler and doctored Trump's microphone so loud fart sounds came out when he spoke? What if, instead of a knife, Bolsonaro got hit with sneezing powder or a rubber chicken? Instead of right-wing martyrdom, they'd be in the position Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak are now: global laughingstocks.

The British really are in the lead here, but there are signs of life across the Atlantic, too. Here in the States, we have Matt Buck, the American hero who followed a neo-Nazi rally with a tuba and played obnoxious honking music, making the Nazis look ridiculous instead of threatening. We also have perennial protest candidate Vermin Supreme, who likes to dump glitter on homophobic politicians and yell "HE'S TURNING GAY!" But there are a lot of odious politicians here, and since they insist on treating everyone with contempt, they ought to be treated as the jokes they are. Nobody has yet zapped Donald Trump or JD Vance with a joy buzzer, or gotten them to read a message from "Seymour Butts" on camera. But any day now, someone could. Remember: *there's no metal detector on Earth that can spot a whoopie cushion.*


BROOKLYN
WELCOME TO....
MARCY
HOUSES

ELEGY FOR JAY-Z

BY **YANNICK GIOVANNI MARSHALL**

Jay-Z was ours. Our poet, our scribe and griot of the thrown-away places. The warehouses and containment camps where colonial society has stored the undesirables—euphemistically called the projects, the slum and the ghetto, the colonized sector, the hood. One who made it out. Spectacularly so. Not only that, he recorded his, and vicariously our, inner dialogue, transforming our get-out-of-this-neighborhood plots scribbled nightly on twin beds and kitchen tables into epic.

We who come from the corners of the world where clothes are hung out on clotheslines, and are not considered unsightly—or where, despite pressing your lips into as genuine-looking a smile as you can muster, you still walk home in the rain, soggy résumé in hand, knowing you lost them as soon as you entered the interview room—we who do not have office break rooms and golf courses to loiter in, and so settle for stoops and street lamps—we reached out for Jay-Z. We did not look up to the back-of-the-cereal-box Black History Month figures we were offered and told to be inspired by and content with, so that we too could aspire to be inoffensive. To become the Black bootstrap-pullers who "didn't let the past hold us back," and shooed away all the fuss about anti-Blackness and structural racism almost to the point of holocaust denial. Black forgive-niks ever-forgiving, ever shoe-shining the "American Dream" and ready to hurl their success at any Black person starved and punished into delirium who confesses they are having a difficult time. We were not blasting audiobooks of the life and times of George Washington Carver in our Walkmans. It was Jay-Z's *Life and Times* we listened to. And Nas, and Biggie, and Pac. And Lauryn. We decided upon our own mentors and heroes, and saved the boring selections of unproblematic "blacks" for our homework assignments—themselves soundtracked by the drug dealers' bars in our headphones.

Jay-Z spoke cinema. One that ran counter to the forever-mugshot of '90s-00s news discourse, which presented underclass Black neighborhoods as crime-infested wastelands of near-people who had no culture but crime and dependence on government handouts. In the news, American discourse laundered the minstrel show, making respectable both depictions of the sentimental and dopey slave crooning for mama, as well as the criminal "black" only robbing, loitering, replicating, and threatening the otherwise idyllic plantation homes. Jay-Z, instead, painted a picture of us in our vitality. His albums showcased a multi-hued Blackness of individual lives set against the dismal and treacherous, but nevertheless picturesque, surroundings of our informal imprisonment.

Self-appointed ghetto spokesman, and deservedly so, he presented Marcy Housing Projects in Brooklyn where the "news cameras never come[…] where the grams were slung, niggas vanish every summer / Where the blue vans would come / We throw the work in the can and run," and where there are "chicks wishing they ain't have to strip to pay tuition." He smuggled our self-authored hood narratives in hit singles. He humanized, and so revolted against American caricature. Grabbing the mantle from Richard Wright and James Baldwin, he defends the Black poor's humanity, rebuking the media on "Renegade":

> *I give you the news with a twist, it's just his ghetto point of view*
> *The renegade, you been afraid, I penetrate pop culture*
> *Bring 'em a lot closer to the block where they pop toasters*
> *And they live with they moms[…]*
>
> *How you rate music that thugs with nothin' relate to it?*
> *I help them see they way through it, not you.*

We loiterers and job-resistant were in his verses depicted, finally, in our own likeness. Where we could be proud, even if angered, that we were warehoused in places like "Marcy Houses, where the boys die by the thousand / back when Pam was on Martin[…] when Slick Rick made Mona Lisa[…] fat laces in your shoe, I'm talking bustin' off the roof." He busted through all of the new Blackface papier-mâché, all the narratives about "uneducated street thugs and welfare queens," "pet-eaters and AIDS carriers," and our homes and cousins were there beneath, and the corner store, and fat laces and rooftops, rec room DJs and buildings. "I started in lobbies,

now parley with Saudis / I'm a Sufi to goofies, I can probably speak Farsi." Colonial racism preaches from every podium it can find that the lobby-dwellers, the single mothers in salons, the crack dealers and smokers are single-cell, uncomplex and so disposable, nuisance organisms. He was in our ears reminding us that the devil is a liar.

Of course, we had other griots. Those of use who were curious about Black liberation at least as much as we imbibed Black sub-working-class poetry had the understated pan-Africanism of Jay-Z's New York City rival, Gordon Parks with a pen, Nas: "I'd open every cell in Attica, send them to Africa." Lauryn Hill would encourage you: "Sweet prince of the ghetto, your kisses taste like Amaretto." Queen Latifah would defend you, Sister Souljah and Dead Prez would arm you, Mos Def and Talib Kweli would articulate the colonial border-transgressing community we all felt ourselves to be in under the Pan-African rebel flag of the Red, Black and Green.

In fact, it is difficult to find a serious Hip-Hop artist in the '90s that did not consciously set out to provide a counternarrative to the colonial depiction of Blackness standard in American society—whatever the angle. Oscar Micheaux, James Baldwin, and Ntozake Shange weren't dead or inaccessible. They lived on in translation, were committed to memory and recited leaning on the hoods of Acuras or while pointing to a du-rag on the wall above the convenience store clerk's head. Jay-Z was but one—often a reluctant one, certainly an underappreciated one— but one of our documentarians against white power.

The reason he is not often counted as one has nothing to do with the force and influence of his literature, but with a respectability politics even among we, the "Black conscious." The conscious being we, the self-appointed defenders of Black communities—perhaps less deservedly so. We who read Marcus Garvey and did spoken word with Ausar Auset references and flooded the African street festivals. We who, above all, were conscious of the fact that the United States, or Europe, or even post-apartheid South Africa did not contain the necessary ingredients to pull ourselves away from anti-Black governance, and so theorized and organized in defense of our communities against society. For many of us, the conscious, who "stayed woke"—who *stay* "woke" despite the racists now telling us not to—he was a drug dealer. Worse, he was a drug dealer for whom art often seemed almost an afterthought. This made him dirty.

CAN'T KNOCK THE HUSTLE

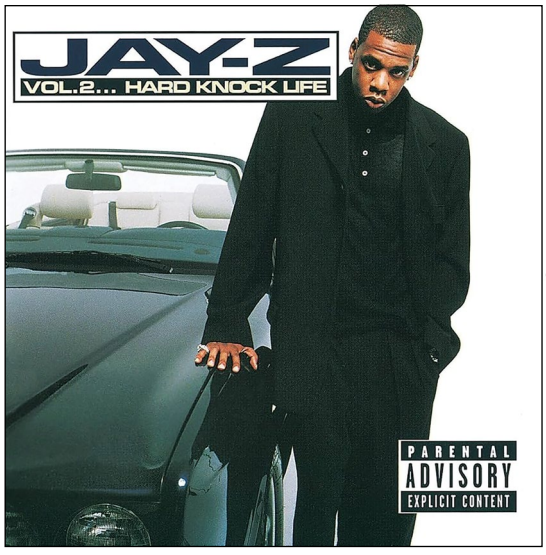
"Nine-to-five is how you survive, I ain't trying to survive, I'm tryna live it to the limit and love it a lot." —Jay-Z, "D'evils"

Jay-Z, quite literally, announced his arrival into popular consciousness via the declaration that he is that Black man on the corner dealing drugs. The "hustler" from the socially dead places of the slums and projects intrudes into the public eye with the first track on his first album, *Reasonable Doubt*: "Can't Knock The Hustle." The song is a conscious defense, and glamorization, of rejecting the strictures of a working-class life and choosing the more perilous, more condemned, high-risk, high-reward drug dealer's life: "Yo, y'all niggas lunching, punching the clock / My function is to make much and lay back munching."

It is this category of life that Frantz Fanon, theorist of settler-colonialist society, describes as the lumpenproletariat: peasants and descendants of peasants chased from the countryside into the town as their land is stolen and they are dispossessed. Ordered to get a job where there are no jobs, they become sex workers, street hawkers, numbers runners, scammers, artists, pimps, welfare and student-loan recipients and carjackers. Jay-Z represented a perspective from those who choose to make their ends meet, at least in part, through the illicit or "informal economy."

The full-time hustler is not, as the state and social services describe, "unemployed," but anti-job. Conscious that they do not want to subject themselves to the half-life of capitalist exploitation—or, worse, the quarter-life of racialized and gendered exploitation in the legacy of a colonial world, where they are told through emails what their foreparents were told by signpost: that they need not apply. If there is only one life to live, the hustler's philosophy is that it should not be spent in subservience. One should not condemn oneself to the purgatory of the working poor. Especially as having a job-while-Black is job insecurity. A job can be slapped out of your hands. It is where salaries are guaranteed to be unequal. Where your mannerisms and speech must be flat-ironed out, and Karens watch through the blinds of their cubicle for any false move, after you've made it past the Karens who snitch on those trespassing the color line that separates the "inner city" and arts districts, suburbs and gentrified neighborhoods. Then and now, jobs are not the rosy experiences depicted by the 3C-haired Black people in the TV commercials. They are probation. And the only way out is through meteoric rise through superhuman talent. "At my arraignment screaming / All us blacks got is sports and entertainment, until we even / Thieving, as long as I'm breathing / Can't knock the way a nigga eating, fuck you even." As hustler, Jay-Z violently rejects parental advice, the judgement of law and society, the capitalist machine reducing the worker to replaceable tendons and nerve-endings, and is proud of exerting vengeance, not a demand for change, against apartheid's inequality.

Whether pimp or numbers runner, fake bag seller or skin-



bleach selling hair braider, however, the shadow economy is not exempt from the predations and cycles of the society that birthed it. "You know in more than one way cocaine numbs the brain / All I did was think about how the funds once came," Jay-Z says on "You Must Love Me," reflecting on how the love of money so ruined his empathy it led him to sell his mother crack. By Jay-Z's own account, a successful escape from poverty and exploitation required inhumanity, be it shooting his own brother or failing to contact his lover for months doing business in small towns—to say nothing of aiding and abetting that colonial technique of quelling revolt through the distribution and management of intoxicants.

On one hand, colonies banned "natives" from consuming liquor when it undermined their production on settler farms in Kenya. On the other, they allowed liquor stores to flood the ghetto, performed MK-Ultra mind control experiments with LSD in American prisons, and ensured the rising Black nationalism of the '70s was hampered by heroin and crack a decade later. It is now easily said that the raised black fists of the '70s collapsed into addiction and weak will, and that revolutionaries like Huey Newton "died a crack addict" rather than were stealthily assassinated. As in police shootings of Black people, our movements are also framed for their own murder. In their confessional "Drug Dealer's Anonymous," fellow rapper Pusha T—also known for his association with cocaine—is able to stuff down his guilty conscience: "hush money balances all this drugs and violence." Money is an intoxicant, too.

The colonized's sector, or the "hood," is a place cursed by settler society, where apartments are squeezed tightly together and you can die from anything, anywhere. It is stomach rumblings, ulcers, poverty-induced anxieties, dead high school friends. Perhaps above all it is the feeling that one has been trapped on an island, caught on the outskirts of life, window shopping it. Watching people eating in cafes one would feel uncomfortable to enter, and in any case could not afford. A purgatory where one is never fully quenched on the opiate of the church's promise of a brighter day of heaven, or school's promise of a brighter day in adulthood, any more than the quietly insubordinate enslaved could trust in the slave master's promised emancipation after good behavior.

Jay-Z didn't represent what he would sometimes later portray, the pity-seeking "I had to sell drugs because I had no other choice." He did not embody the ghetto youth's predicament which he outlined in "No Hook":

"Stay out of trouble," Mama said, as Mama sighed.
Her fear, her youngest son'd be a victim of homicide.
But I gotta get you out of here, Mama, or I'ma die inside.
And either way, you lose me, Mama, so let loose of me.

On the contrary, he represented a decision. One taken after examining one's life. Choosing whether to punch clocks or risk it all in a place where it was likely to be killed or go to prison—the more intensely punitive hood. Jay-Z made the decision to get rich or die trying. A rational choice for many who recognize that the permanent stagnation of poverty is already conceding one's life.

The Black worker is not merely working-class. Anti-Blackness is working-class suffering multiplied. The Black worker is not just exploited, but has inherited the memory of legally sanctioned fourth-class citizenship—the apartheid lives of our colonized parents. Whether in the Jim Crow South or the informal Jim Crow North or the Jim Crow of colonial Latin America, Caribbean and Africa, millennials' parents were often workers who were banned and punished by unions, banned from upward social mobility, forced into domestic labor for people who called them "boy" and voted for their being bitten by dogs in the streets of Alabama, or flogged by white settlers and left to die tied to a post for not answering a question in Kenya Colony. None of us want to live lives mirroring our enslaved ancestors, an amputated existence, short and brutish, welded to capital and mocked by the slur-shouting mob.

Of course we dream of running. Of course, we reject the finger-wagging of conservative pundits like Tomi Lahren— "*your husband was a drug dealer*"—and the spitting crowd shouting *criminal*. Jay-Z is a runaway—which is why so many locked up in the slum celebrate him. The Black outlaw blends in with the fugitive slave, who knew full well the consequence of escape was likely re-enslavement or death, but ran anyway. It is this epic we kept in our headphones, not merely bars and beats. We nod our heads to the fugitive from the factory, and the call center and maid's quarters, enjoying tales of an illicit survival for which the consequence is likely prison or death. In Jay-Z this is not understated. "House nigga, don't fuck with me / I'm a field nigga, go shine cutlery / Go play the [slave] quarters, where the butlers be / I'ma play the corners, where the hustlers be." Hustling is not a sin or a crime, but a brave and even ethical rejection of the life of the servant-worker, who aids the society now developing new prototypes for white-only water fountains in the Oval Office.

What's more, Jay-Z was never caught. As he memorably puts it:

I ball so hard, motherfuckers want to fine me
But first niggas got to find me[...]

Ball so hard, I'm shocked too
I'm supposed to be locked up too
[If] you escaped what I escaped
You'd be in Paris getting fucked up too.

'NO STREET TOUGHS ALLOWED' // If white supremacist society dismisses the Black criminalized classes as violent refuse, then the colonized Black "conscious" are often in tow, echoing them, caricaturing the Black lumpen class as ignorant and hurting their own communities. Seemingly in preemptive self-defense against these narratives, Jay-Z is always explicitly reminding us that he is intelligent. "I don't know what you take me as, or understand the intelligence that Jay-Z has," he proclaims on "99 Problems." Street hustler and high school dropout, he must contend not only with the discourse of Black lesser intelligence, but also the related conservative strands in Black conscious thought. He is confident in his reply to racist society, as seen when he's pulled over by a cop, whose indignant voice he also narrates:

> [Officer] *Aren't you sharp as a tack, you some type of lawyer or somethin'? Somebody important or somethin'?*
>
> [Jay-Z] *I ain't passed the bar, but I know a lil' bit / Enough that you won't illegally search my shit.*

When he speaks to Black thought, however, his tone is more explanatory. "Hustlers and boosters embrace me and the music I be making / I dumb down for my audience and double my dollars[…] Truthfully I want to rhyme like Common Sense / But I did 5 mil, I ain't been rapping like Common since," he says in "Moment of Clarity." But even his explanation is dirty. This supposed trade-off of talent for profit is offensive to the intellectuals, and the self-appointed gatekeepers of so-called "real Hip Hop." Jay-Z betrays Black power for his money machine.

Jay-Z had uttered into the world a militant determination to break out of poverty's birdcage by any means necessary, even if those means create a trail of new poor in escape's wake: a slums theory where poverty is not an individuated experience of class oppression but a cellie knife fight. It is a politics of self-annihilation in order to secure temporary relief—as he dramatizes in the second verse of "The Streets."

> *It's a cold-cold world, but I blew my hand*
> *I drew first 'cause I knew that man*
> *I knew what he would do if I didn't draw first*
> *And I couldn't stand the thought of my momma steppin' foot inside a church*
> *All I try to do is try to get up out the dirt*
> *Guess he's tryin' to do the same, told me get up out his turf*
> *I wanted to talk to him, but that shit'd never work*
> *We was cut from the same cloth and what was under his shirt was his*
> *Momma's rent, his young brother's clothes*
> *My nephew's food, and with that I squoze, and with that I froze*
> *Now my life is frozen in time behind these iron poles*
> *And this story is told for young soldiers who never choose the life we chose*

From Jay-Z's first album, he admired the radical aspects of Hip-Hop and Black consciousness, even if he was never accepted into that particular country club. '90s and early 2000s Neo-soul and conscious rappers built a sonic architecture of Blackness the inverse of racist caricature: a Black aesthetic where D'Angelo would croon about the desirability of Brown sugar, Wu-Tang would build out a "Shaolin" Afro-futurism, The Roots made Pan-Africanism of Parisian Ethiopian–Black Philly love connections tangible. But while Common described life on the corner, Jay-Z was on it. His kind could be advocated for, but not invited in.

Jay-Z isn't part of the conscious rapper club because he is not merely from the slum but an assemblage of it. He remained too poor and too traumatized for the luxury of anti-poverty rap and time-wasting Black consciousness. In the telling skit "22 Twos" he and his crew make a tribute to Hip-Hop and A Tribe Called Quest's "Can I Kick It": "To all my brothers it ain't too late to come together / 'Cause too much Black and too much love, equal forever." Then the host of the event "smells some reefer" and begins the common Black conscious litany of complaints: "See, that's why our people don't have anything because we don't know how to go in places and act properly" and is interrupted with "Shut the fuck up!" by someone in Jay-Z's entourage.

As in his career, Jay-Z is pro-Black in principle—but when the street meets the conscious respectability, the streets win out.

THE PITFALLS OF BLACK EXCELLENCE

> *"I can't help the poor if I'm one of them."*
> — Jay-Z, "Moment of Clarity"

> *"A nice peace-fund ideas for people who look like we*
> *We're gon' start a society within society*
> *That's major, just like the Negro League…*
> *Generational wealth, that's the key…*

Legacy, legacy, legacy, legacy…
Black excellency…someday we'll all be free."
— Jay-Z, "Legacy"

Jay-Z was right about the vapidity of Black conscious respectability politics. But the tragedy is that, judging by his own life, those respectable Black conscious folks and the "good politics-having leftists" have a point: politics grounded in slum escape can become parasitical. If we were defending the drug dealer, especially against the Tomi Lahrens of the world—if we were willing even to overlook the strewn bodies and excavated lives his activities left in his wake, quoting "I didn't choose this life, this life chose me"—we have a harder time defending him now. In Jay-Z, Black lumpen politics have shown to deteriorate, and whatever field negro attributes the lumpen outlaw once posessed have led him straight back into the house.

I remember feeling that there was a momentous change when it was announced in 2004 that Jay-Z would become president of Def Jam. Before then, Jay-Z was street rich turned famous rapper rich. Even his association with Rocawear seemed like an extension of hustling and cultural capital. It got me too. Back then my most expensive piece of clothing was an oversized Rocawear shirt with the Tuskegee Airman print. It made me feel tuned in with modern, "urban" Blackness, counter-cultural, and stylish all at the same time. But it seemed a different beast altogether when Jay-Z assumed the captain's seat at the helm of Def Jam. Before he was using the machine; as president, he became it.

The inner workings of corporate power were as obscure to me then as they are now, but it came as no surprise that not long after this announcement, Jay-Z's status shifted. He was regarded less as a griot of the streets and more as a New York power player. Less Nas and more Trump. He was on the inside. And like every secretly bourgeoisie-aspiring, liberal non-white university student that promises to land a good job then "take the machine down from the inside," he was steam pressed into a suitable cog.

The 2000s saw Jay-Z turn from a man who hopped fences running from police to an informant. He sat down with the Commander-in-Chief and the originator of the *put-down-Black-protest-through-understanding* police tactic, Barack Obama, all the way from his 2008 campaign to the White House. He moved on to sit-downs and strawberry milkshakes with Warren Buffett. He obtained stakes in Uber, cognac and champagne brands, bought and remade the Tidal streaming service, and invested in art, real estate, etc.

Inevitably, the forces of capital led Jay-Z down to the basement with the white supremacists. He would brush shoulders with MAGA, the movement which did not launder drug money but American neo-Nazism, and ascended to the Presidency instead of the executive offices of a record label. Whatever distance he now attempts to hold from Ye's (formerly Kanye West's) MAGA hat closes over the deal-making table. To get where he needs to go, Jay-Z must work with MAGA's Democrat Eric Adams, mayor of New York City, who works hand-in-hand with the Trump administration, in order to ensure he can build his casino in Times Square. He must work with MAGA billionaire Jeff Yass to get an in with private school money. He must build a Black neighborhood market for Bitcoin and be silent as his protege Ye stands out on a ledge trying to woo Elon and Trump, offering as much free ventriloquizing of neo-Nazism as he can in hopes of a silver coin. That is, he must align himself with the task managers of the Trump administration even as he is still reluctant to openly side with white supremacy.

Jay-Z and Beyoncé at the 2022 Oscars

But every deal with the "D'evils" quite literally builds the devils' world. The truth is, even if he is able to give his daughter a million-dollar piece of artwork, Jay-Z must, at the same time, bequeath her a world where Black children will be called "n—er" in the streets and have their assaulters enriched by it. He might give his nephew property in DUMBO, but he is also a junior architect of the world in which it is once again normalized to use castration as punishment—in a society which disproportionately punishes Black people. How much will that artwork be worth after his business partners successfully ban all Black intellectual products as "improper ideology," and it becomes law that there is no such thing as Black art, and that all art that is not line dance or flattering to the Confederacy's Messiah is contraband?

Today, Jay-Z is on the colony's street corner, at the intersection of state and capital, now selling harder drugs, with people nodding out, strung out, huffing colonial hope in brown paper bags. He's serving them Bitcoin and the Brooklyn Nets. He is glad for the scraps off the trillionaire's table as the restored Confederate administration wheels in the hanging platforms in the background.

In the background of every attempt at Black excellence there stands an overseer. Black wealth accumulation does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in a white supremacist world order—at the pleasure of white power. Ask any freedman who set out with the same "community development through Black excellence" program and was forced to give up their land at the point of Jim Crow's gun. Ask the Black grocers Will Stewart, Tommie Moss, and Calvin McDowell of the People's Grocery in Memphis, where in 1892 a local white man decided he would no longer tolerate market competition from "blacks," brought in the police, and had them jailed. A lynch mob would break them out and shoot them to death in a railway yard days later. Ask Black Wall Street how the dreams of economic self-determination from within white supremacy panned out. How it felt when the bombs came from the sky. You can, for that matter, ask MOVE in Philadelphia too. Ask those still mourning the site of their foreclosed-upon homes, the redlined, those split open by freeways. Ask the homeowners who lose half

their property's value when they come out of the closet as Black. This is not a country. It is a colonial society. As a seeker of racial justice here, you are no better off than the greyhounds they race around the track. You will never catch the mechanical rabbit.

But maybe this time is different. Maybe "race relations" have progressed. Maybe anti-wokeness is not at all the reincarnation of anti-integration, which in turn is not the reincarnation of anti-abolitionism. Maybe the mobs shouting at us in those red hats do not sound familiar; and maybe Elon Musk did not really *Sieg Heil*, he was just waving. Still, you must admit it is curious that they've brought back the gas chambers in prisons in the South. Plan your picnic. Maybe the society reinstating white-only refugee programs and chasing Haitian migrants with lassos and blood libel will wish you *bon appétit*. No. There is no society of the colonized within colonial society. No tolerance for Black excellence in an anti-Black state. It is fatal not to learn this lesson. "I bought some artwork for one million / Two years later, that shit worth two million / Few years later, that shit worth eight million / I can't wait to give this shit to my children," Jay-Z raps on "The Story of O.J." After the Holocaust in Europe, Jewish family heirlooms were piled in trays.

A billion dollars is not an army. Especially not for a Black man in the United States. It is a pact made, that as long as you continue to do your enemies' bidding, your lifestyle will be honored. But it is a pact made with a con artist. When you have been squeezed of all your usefulness, they will point you to a wall and empty your pockets. You succeed only as long as you are useful to them. As long as you promise to stand in front of "the blacks" and stop opposing the police, and you remain a mascot for Trump supporters' private school ventures, or give the mayor his walk-out music, you will be humored. But you will never be free. You can never speak out of turn. The fine line you think you are deftly walking is your leg shackle.

You cannot invest your way to freedom. Nor can you "give back" your way to freedom. Nor donate to whatever shiny new American progressive product is out there stump-speeching under the slogan "this time we really mean it!" your way to freedom. If you excuse your dealings with American neo-Nazism as "just business," instead of investing in resources for those who take an uncompromising stand against genocide, one morning the apartheid police will ram through your pretty mansion door. In a colony, if you are Black you are never an entrepreneur. You are always hired, to be fired at will. You are not a business man, you are a business, man. Do you think your daughter and your daughter's daughter will be able to keep that Basquait in a lynch mob society? The society that is preparing to turn the water cannon onto the National Museum of African American History and Culture for sheltering Harriet Tubman's songs in the attic. The society that is publicly billy-clubbing Harvard for showing some opposition to Jim Crow while berating African heads of state with Dylann Roof's talking points? This society, this society you've helped usher in, will not let your "seed" keep that Basquiat any more than the seeds of wealthy Reconstruction-era Black southerners were allowed to keep their land. You cannot invest in anti-Black society. You can build nothing here except your hanging tree. You are a Black man investing in the white supremacist settler-colonial society. There has been no worse investment made in human history.

Black capitalism, Black self-sufficiency through building generational wealth now remixed as Black excellence, is built on a delusion about the political situation. It believes in the neutrality of racists and the racist state. It presumes that the same people who were content to let you live in state-sponsored squalor—and benefited from it—will allow you to achieve your dreams unmolested. As if the men who were content to keep the rats gnawing at your sister's nail in 1970s Marcy, or 1920s Chicago, are opposed to them biting you now. It imagines itself to be a novel idea—as if there have not been a thousand other Booker T. Washingtons, who also miss the overseer in the background and believe that all that exists is their determination and grit, that the only limitations are the ones you invent for yourself. But you are not Scarlett O'Hara looking out to the promise of sunrise over the Civil War-ravaged Twelve Oaks plantation estate, determined to rebuild it by the strength of her own two hands. You are a sharecropper doing too well—surrounded by the Klan.

It is not just that whatever you build in prison will be stamped out by the guards. Or that no legacy is possible in a society that has an addiction to stealing Black land and redistributing the spoils of a lynching among the racists. It is that Black wealth accumulation facilitates Black dispossession. Of course capitalism facilitates class dispossession on a mass scale, and so the building of the Brooklyn Nets stadium drove up rents and gentrification in Brooklyn—quite literally facilitating Black dispossession. But that moral chiding is not always convincing to people who have been forced into multiple "it's them or me" situations. The trauma of prolonged exposure to colonized sector conditions can damage one's ethical code. Jay-Z is trying to rejigger W.E.B. Du Bois' "Talented Tenth" plan to train the "best" ten percent into becoming an educated, relatively wealthy, Black elite who would eventually uplift the entire "race." "Generational wealth, that's the key / My parents ain't have shit, so that shift started with me[…] I remember, like, listening to Wu-Tang / And they was like 'your seed marry his seed, marry my seed' / That's how we keep Carter money all in the family." But Du Bois placed this idea in the trash as soon as he realized the Black bourgeoisie or Black wealthy families do not commit class suicide, working to abolish the privilege they enjoy. Nor do they even generally take up any leadership beyond paternalistic preaching, shallow "encouragement," and scholarships designed to invite one poor individual up from slum life. They are not vanguards of the dispossessed. They clink glasses with the dispossessors, and seek not revolution but a greasy existence as a perfectly contented house pet. Du Bois left them alone and became a communist and a Pan-Africanist.

Black capitalism is in cahoots with that political force that is trying to bring back the time when you could take Black people "down to Mud Creek and hang them up with a damned rope," as a Republican county commissioner in Oklahoma said he would like to in 2023. Black Excellence, for all its independence, happens to be the bedfellow of that movement that thinks Civil Rights Law is too uppity, has re-established federal executions, and sees an Auschwitz in El Salvador and an Austria in Greenland. No amount of Basquiat collections can stave off the world being (re)built, where every free Black person is assumed criminal, and the only place for a Black man or Black history is with hat in hand. You've said we've moved past kneeling protest, as you inked the deal with Roc Nation and the NFL. The Black uprising has never "protested" from the supplicant position. Have you? Before we lost him to colonial delusions and rooster-walking in Klan robes and swastika chains, your protege Ye said it best: "And for that paper, look how low we'll stoop, even if you in a Benz you still a nigga in a coupe."

SAVE JAY-Z // I have lost count of what wave of Nazism this current moment is, but whatever it is, the global Black uprising has had enough of it. And there are no more people willing to stomach another Chief Waruhiu or Chief Justice Thomas. Nor is this generation echoing that old Black conscious proverb, "we need to be patient with the people." Not when the gas chambers are back and the president's men are advocating for the freeing of Derek Chauvin. Everyone has picked a side, or their side is assumed. The people in Marcy have lost their patience, as have the people in Mozambique. Black Minnesotans burned a police station. Black Burkina Faso kicked out the French army. Immigrant and Black Los Angeles showed the Soweto Township raiding, MacArthur Park stalking anti-immigration brigade that LA can be taken back to 1992—or Watts 65.

There are not a lot of people on this side of the apartheid line trying to save Jay-Z. There are no elegies written; effigies will burn of him, like they are already burning of all the other bosses. There is a quietness in the plantation. Nobody is cheering when the master's favorite rapper is trotted out. I, personally, can think of no one who would agree with me that we might hold out a little while longer and save Jay-Z. In fact they would look at me with the same suspicion, and rightfully so. But there is a generation who had his posters on their wall, and for whom Jay-Z is not merely another predatory gentrifier and capitalist, but was once part of the soundtrack of their lives. But it's a cold world. Revolution is revolution. Everyone is expendable. The slums made Hov. We can make another Hov. In fact, I might have met one the other day. Tried to sell him on ghetto philosophy and the complex places the search for Black excellence and self-ownership comes from. I gave him your CD. He did not know what it was and waved it off. Asked me if you're the one who said, "I'm leaning on any nigga intervening with the sound of my freedom machinin'" ⚜

Yannick Giovanni Marshall is a political theorist and writer in exile from the U.S. Faculty in Contemporary Black Thought at CalArts (on leave). He is the author of The End of Supplication: The Invention of Prostrate Blackness as a Replacement for the Maroon (Bloomsbury, 2025). His essays and interviews have appeared in Al Jazeera, Black Perspectives, and Black Agenda Report. His work lives at yannickgiovannimarshall.net.

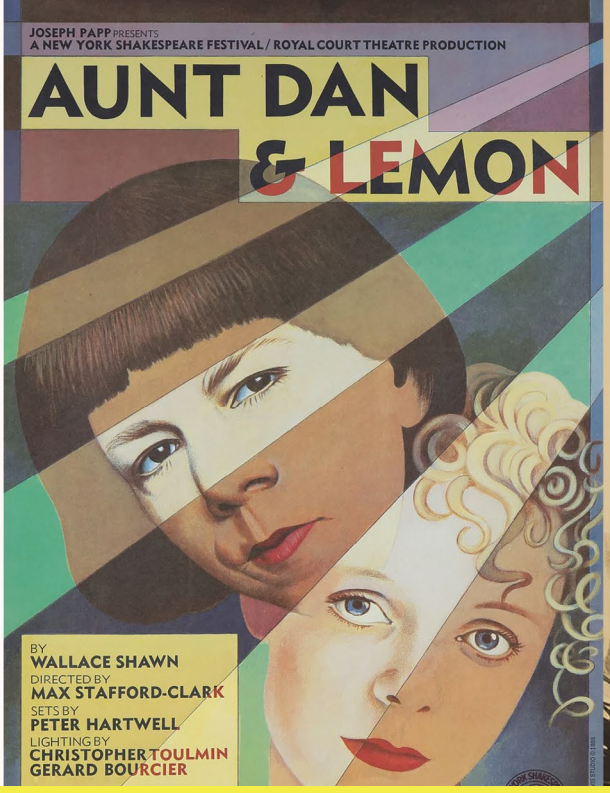
Thank you, Lily!

The staff of *Current Affairs* would like to express our thanks and appreciation to Lily Sánchez, who recently left her role as *Current Affairs* Managing Editor. *Current Affairs* would not be the magazine it is today were it not for Lily's incredibly dedicated work on the publication since 2021. The writers she has worked with can confirm that her diligent and thorough editing process has helped make so many pieces shine. Readers should check out Lily's own writing for the magazine as well, on topics ranging from healthcare to policing to bookstores. Much of what subscribers have enjoyed about the magazine over the last several years has been because of Lily's constant behind-the-scenes work. It will be very difficult to fill her shoes.

TRUMP'S ALCATRAZ

Current Affairs has obtained exclusive access to renderings for the Trump Administration's new, $14 billion planned renovation of the infamous Alcatraz Island.


VIP CRONIES CELL
YMCA
JEFFREY EPSTEIN MEMORIAL CELL
NO CAMERAS!
1947 D.J.T. (WUZ HERE!)
DEMOCRAT SELF-IMPRISONMENT
NICK SIROTICH



THE MAKING OF THE

Weeks before Luigi Mangione allegedly shot and killed healthcare CEO Brian Thompson in Midtown Manhattan, I found myself part of an angry mob clamoring for murder.

Our mob was confronting a fascist who stood on a stage ranting against racial minorities, women, queer people, the welfare state, free speech, environmentalists, unions, and more. We howled and booed and shouted, "Kill him!" We started the "We will rock you" stadium chant, stomping our feet and clapping our hands. We laughed gleefully at the prospect of his imminent demise. The fascist was lucky we didn't storm the stage and attack him.

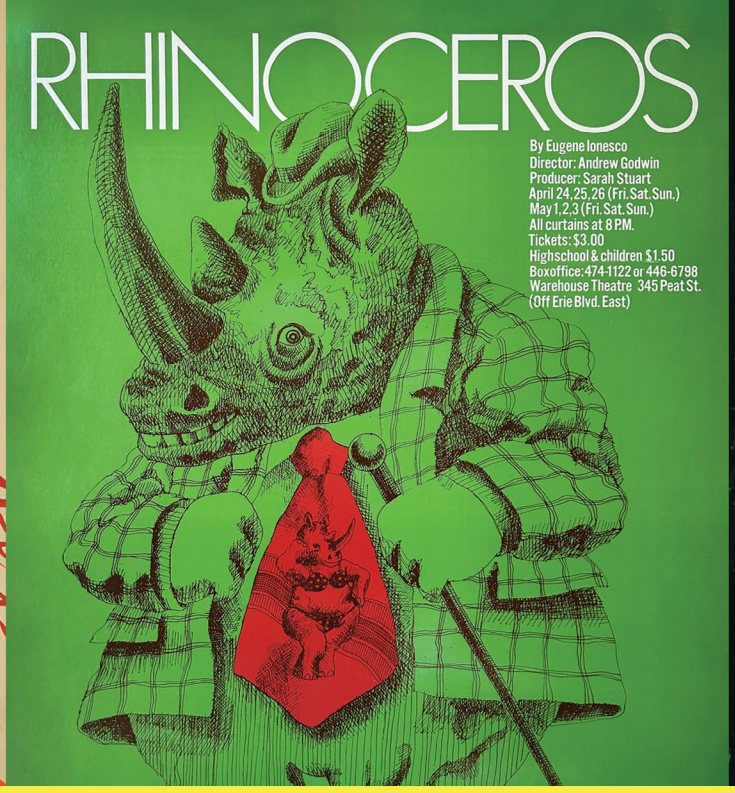
He was also lucky that our mob was the audience of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and that he was an actor in a play: *Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists* by Portuguese playwright Tiago Rodrigues. The play is about a Portuguese family that has gathered in their ancestral home to conduct the ritual murder of a fascist. It takes place in the near future, when a fascist, technocratic government has risen to power in Portugal. The family kidnaps a fascist politician, cooks a ritual meal, and discusses the ethics of assassination.

Throughout two uninterrupted hours of compelling debate, the kidnapped fascist is trussed up on stage. This empathetic and contemporary family, each member of which is witty and likeable, discusses political violence at length. Ultimately, they don't kill him; instead, they are themselves caught and slaughtered by the fascist police. The kidnapped fascist is freed. With the bodies of the anti-fascist family strewn across the stage, he regales the audience with a hateful diatribe that goes on and on and on.

When I saw the play, in that last hour the audience responded to his speech with speech of our own. Our shouts were wholly spontaneous, not solicited by the actor on stage or prompted by plants in the audience. It made me feel like I was at a carnival and I'd been lifted onto a parade float. It felt like the world had turned upside down. Together with hundreds of voices, I joyfully demanded (fictional) fascist blood. Then the play ended. The curtain fell. I stepped off the parade float and back into normal life. The carnival was over, but I was different.

When I interviewed playwright Tiago Rodrigues a few months later, he told me he had first conceived *Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists* in 2018, when a Portuguese judge, Neto de Moura, was systematically reducing the sentences of men who had assaulted women. In one instance, the judge gave a suspended sentence to a man who had kidnapped his ex-wife and beaten her with a nail-spiked baseball bat.

Rodrigues said, "I wanted to put this judge in a fiction[al] meeting with one of the great antifascists in Portugal, a woman that died when she was 26 in the [19]50s [and had] demand[ed] equal pay for those who worked the land." That antifascist was Catarina Eufémia, a farm worker and resistance fighter who was



ANTI-FASCIST THEATRE

BY **ANNIE LEVIN**

shot three times by the fascist police while carrying her infant son.

After a fascist-inspired far-right party gained 50 of the 200 seats in the Portuguese assembly in 2024, Rodrigues evolved this idea. Instead of Eufémia kidnapping the judge, her descendants would gather in the year 2028, during a wholescale return of Portuguese fascism, to kill a fascist in her honor. All the actors, male and female, would dress as Portuguese peasant women from the 1950s and they would all be called Catarina.

Seeing this play was one of the most extraordinary experiences I have ever had in the theatre. The spectator participation at the end, as in a political demonstration, brought together hundreds of strangers to act as one voice. The theatre became a space of communal expression. While no violence was committed and no unalterable decisions made, we experienced something transformative.

Rodrigues's play got me thinking about how live theatre can often be more helpful and cathartic than social media, opinion columns, or podcasts for processing global events and thinking seriously about politics. I thought about how political playwrights like Rodrigues aren't so different from left-wing organizers. They aim to transform a group of strangers from passive spectators into an alert, politicized body. They look at how to provoke people to perceive the world differently. Some even want to impassion and outrage spectators to the point where we want to join in the fight for a better world.

Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists reminded me of theatre's political power and the important role it can play parallel to left-wing movements. Anti-fascist theatre in particular has a long history of dramatizing the crimes of fascist governments and radicalizing audiences to oppose them. Anti-fascist playwrights have brought to light the mechanisms that allow fascist ideology to worm itself into the everyday thoughts of ordinary people. They have shown the many faces of fascism and of anti-fascist resistance, and done so through plays that stay with us long after we leave the theatre.

Here I will take us through a handful of plays from nearly a century of anti-fascist theatre, looking at the transformative stories that playwrights like Tiago Rodrigues have told to help light a path forward out of violence and darkness.

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN (1939) BERTOLT BRECHT

I couldn't write on anti-fascist theatre without first talking about the German playwright Bertolt Brecht and the techniques he invented for political theatre. Brecht is the author of the 1928 play *The Threepenny Opera*, from which originated the jazz standard, "The Ballad of Mack the Knife." Brecht's impact on modern theatre cannot be overstated. Even if you've never heard of Brecht, you've seen works influenced by him, whether they're the plays

"Catarina And The Beauty Of Killing Fascists" at the Tampere Theatre Festival 2024, Photo: Joseph Banderet, courtesy of the Tampereen Teatterikesä

of Tony Kushner or the films of Wes Anderson. In our interview, Tiago Rodrigues also cited Brecht as one of the dominant influences on *Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists*.

Brecht was a Marxist who tried to create a new kind of theatre for the exploration of left-wing themes. As essentially the father of anti-fascist theatre, right-wing governments were no fans of his. He fled Germany when the Nazis took power in 1933, eventually ending up in the U.S. after being hounded out of Europe. A little more than a decade later he was exiled back to East Germany from the U.S. by the House Un-American Activities Committee. As a playwright, Brecht had different priorities from the overwhelming majority of people who tell stories for a living. Brecht wasn't interested in representing the world; instead, he wanted to change it. Theatre for Brecht had a serious job to do in the fight against capitalism and fascism, and he didn't think traditional theatre was up to the task.

Brecht's priority wasn't entertaining audiences. He also didn't exactly want us identifying with his characters, losing ourselves in his stories, or even taking pleasure in his work. He thought these things distracted from the radicalizing purpose of socialist theatre. For Brecht, traditional dramatic theatre—that is, almost everything under the umbrella of Western theatre, from *Hamlet* to *Hamilton*—didn't have the right kind of juice to change the world.

Departing from dramatic theatre, Brecht introduced the epic theatre—that is, a particular kind of political theatre, not one of grand scope or scale. In Brecht's 1936 essay "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?" he writes from the perspective of two different theatre spectators, one watching traditional dramatic theatre and the other watching epic theatre.

> *The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too - Just like me - It's only natural - It'll never change - The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable - That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world - I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.*
>
> *The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it - That's not the way - That's extraordinary, hardly believable — It's got to stop—The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary—That's great art: nothing obvious in it —I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.*

In dramatic theatre we expect to be immersed in a story, and to care deeply about what happens to the characters. Epic theatre turns these expectations upside down. In epic theatre the world of the story seems off and what the characters do and say makes us uncomfortable. Where in a conventional drama the victims of cruelty are often the good guys and we celebrate when they triumph over their abusers, in *Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists* the victim of kidnapping and attempted murder is the bad guy, the fascist. When he is freed he torments the audience with his vile right-wing ideology. We do not rejoice with him. We do not empathize with him. We want him dead.

Most people who see this show probably believe that murder is wrong. The play shows them pacifism rewarded with slaughter

"Mother Courage and Her Children," 1960, Photographer: Hannes Schneider

and fascism triumphant because anti-fascists refuse to pull the trigger. By the end, we demand murder. As spectators of epic theatre, our expectations are subverted, and our values and beliefs about the world deliberately challenged. The subject of political violence is ripped out of its usual casings and presented as something unfamiliar, a new object to be approached differently.

While Rodrigues's play didn't change my mind about political violence, I'll never think about it in the same way ever again. Brecht helped create these defamiliarizing techniques in the 1930s in plays like *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939). This is a historical play set in the 17th century during the Thirty Years' War—an extraordinarily bloody war whose death toll was not exceeded in any war in Central Europe until World War I. Brecht's play is about Anna Fierling, known as Mother Courage, a woman who follows the Swedish Army with her three children, making her living by supplying the soldiers with necessities. Mother Courage successively loses one child after another to the meat grinder of war, each death more gruesome than the last. Even while her children are kidnapped, murdered, tortured, and raped, she never exits the battlefield, but continues selling her wares and dragging her cart full of goods after the army.

Despite the tragic plot, Brecht does not pull on our heart strings. Each scene is set up as a business transaction. The dialogue is dry, abstract, and darkly funny, and the play is interspersed with comic songs. Introducing herself as she sells her wares to a company of soldiers, Mother Courage sings out her unvarnished truth as a war profiteer:

Captains, how can you make them face it—
Marching to death without a brew?
Courage has rum with which to lace it
And boil their souls and bodies through.
Their musket primed, their stomach hollow—
Captains, your men don't look so well.
So feed them up and let them follow
While you command them into hell.

Mother Courage is a stock character, the brassy businesswoman who boasts of how well she handles her affairs. Her business instincts, however, fail her over and over and she is unable to either turn a profit or protect her children. This small business tyrant instead deludes herself into believing she can use the war machine to her advantage. She loses everything but still plods on after profit. Having lost her children and her goods at the end of the play, Mother Courage is now able to pull her empty cart all by herself. The play ends with a menacing note of optimism. "Be all right," Mother Courage says as she pulls her cart, "not much inside it. Got to get back in business again." Mother Courage is another victim of abuse here, but we are not asked to empathize with her. Instead, we wince in horror.

If you're interested in subtlety and empathetic engagement with different points of view, Brecht probably isn't the playwright for you. He drives his point home in scene after scene with the patient incessance of a military drummer. *Mother Courage and Her Children* doesn't have ambiguous political themes: Becht declares that there is no honor or romance in war and that it creates corpses and ghouls, not heroes. While aspects of *Mother Courage* can be engaging, it isn't exactly pleasant to watch. That was Brecht's intention. His plays can be a struggle to get through and for Brecht, the struggle was the point.

RHINOCEROS **(1959) | EUGÈNE IONESCO**

Romanian playwright Eugène Ionesco, author of the anti-fascist play *Rhinoceros*, was deeply impacted by Brecht's theatrical techniques (although he also rebelled against them). *Rhinoceros* is about a small town in France where all the inhabitants are literally transforming into rhinoceroses. The play sounds like it could be a funny, action-packed caper, and while it's certainly comedic, there's not a lot of action. The characters mostly stand around discussing banalities. Did they see one rhinoceros or two? Was it an Asian or African rhinoceros? Did they see a rhinoceros at all? Are there grounds for divorce if your husband turns into a rhinoceros? The overwhelming majority of characters are blasé about the rhinoceroses and do not respond like sane people to this earth-shattering event.

In an interview in *Le Monde* in 1965, Ionesco explained that the play was a metaphor for the rise of Nazism among his peers as a student in Romania. In the 1930s he would get together with a group of educated young people to discuss the rise of fascism. Over time, one person after another succumbed to its allure.

> *From time to time, one of the group would come out and say 'I don't agree at all with them, to be sure, but on certain points, I must admit, for example the Jews ...' And that kind of comment was a symptom. Three weeks later, that person would become a Nazi. He was caught in a mechanism, he accepted everything, he became a Rhinoceros.*

A central theme in *Rhinoceros* is the way that fascist ideology worms its way into susceptible minds and sets up a framework for justifying the unjustifiable. It corrupts normal, sane, human responses to atrocities. The citizens of the town suffering from "rhinoceritis" first deny the evidence of their eyes, then normalize what is happening, and finally start believing, as they make their metamorphosis, that the transformation is not only normal but good.

The characters in *Rhinoceros*, being so divorced from reality, put me in mind of some of the media responses to Trump's election. Sure, the government has been taken over by people who think Haitian immigrants want to eat your dog, but did Walmart get too woke? Did an inferior electorate fail Kamala Harris? Shouldn't we all be thinking about what the cool fascists are wearing to the MAGA ball? Our media figures are busy bickering over exactly what kind of rhinoceroses they've seen, and not focusing on the horrifying transformation itself, let alone working out how to stop it. Ionesco is known as one of the creators of the Theatre of the Absurd. His examination of fascism in *Rhinoceros* looks at human ridiculousness and illogic. He helps show us how the gradual creep of fascism develops into mass societal psychosis.

AUNT DAN AND LEMON (1985) & *THE DESIGNATED MOURNER* (1997) | WALLACE SHAWN

Contemporary writer and actor Wallace Shawn is another playwright whose plays examine the methods by which fascism implants itself in our minds. Shawn's *Aunt Dan and Lemon* is a portrait of two fascist women that does an extraordinary job of showing how fascist doctrine wriggles past conventional morality. It looks at how easily the horrors of fascism are justified by banal truisms.

Aunt Dan is a nasty right-winger with a romantic, parasocial relationship with Henry Kissinger: one of the genocidaires responsible for the deaths of millions in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (and that's naming just one period of this war criminal's decades-long career). Aunt Dan is obsessed with defending Kissinger. She argues that we can denounce the horrors of genocide all we want, but we wouldn't know how we'd behave in the hot seat of leadership. She says,

> *How dare they attack him for killing peasants? What decisions did they make today? What did they have to decide, the little journalists?...Cowards! If anyone brought them a decision that involved human life, where people would die whatever they decided, they would run just as far as their little legs would carry them.*

Aunt Dan sounds like JD Vance defending the Trump administration against online criticism. Where in a traditional play we are often asked to empathize with the victims of cruelty, here *Aunt Dan and Lemon* asks us to empathize with the victimizer. The play is discomfiting because it subverts our expectations and intimately displays fascist logic, showing us how easy it is to follow conventional wisdom straight to hell. Asking us to agree with the logic of genocide, we squirm in horror.

Shawn's *The Designated Mourner* is set in an invented modern country that is responding to a left-wing guerilla movement by violently oppressing all dissent. Its protagonist, Jack, is an unhappy and obscure college professor who is indifferent to politics and sounds sometimes like a *New York Times* op-ed columnist, a Maureen Dowd or Michelle Goldberg, opining acidly against the left. He spends much of his time resenting his father-in-law, Howard, a renowned leftist poet. With irony, Jack says:

> *How should I begin to tell you about this remarkable man, who responded so sensitively to the most obscure verses and also to the cries of the miserable and the downtrodden, sometimes virtually at the same instant, without ever leaving the breakfast table?*

As the government becomes increasingly genocidal, Jack withdraws from life and from his family. Eventually, his wife is imprisoned by the government and his father-in-law assassinated. One of the final scenes is of Jack watching his wife being executed on television. Jack, having never stood up for a cause, who abandoned his father-in-law's left-wing literary circle, is left alone by the government. He is the only member of his old world, the world of writers and poetry readers, to have survived. The play delivers an interesting message to the apolitical: sure, you might survive as the whole world is dismantled around you, but then you've got to go on living alone in the ruins.

ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN (1975) ERIC BENTLEY

Eric Bentley was a playwright, professor, and translator of Brecht. He knew Brecht personally and played a hand in popularizing epic theatre techniques in America. As a professor at Columbia, he was active in the student protest movement against the war in Vietnam. He was also fiercely critical of the university's treatment of student protesters. His 1975 play, *Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been*, looks at the fascistic tendencies of the American government during the Red Scare of the 1940s and '50s. Bentley's play is a docudrama: the text comes directly from the transcripts of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the congressional committee created to investigate citizens suspected of being communists. For dialogue, the play uses transcripts of committee interrogations of show business people who were accused of Communist Party membership. These include testimony by playwrights Arthur Miller and Lillian Hellman; screenwriter Dalton Trumbo; director Elia Kazan; choreographer Jerome Robbins; and singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson.

Creating a compelling dramatic work from these transcripts, Bentley shows that sometimes the most radical act you can make as a dramatist is just to reveal the evidence of what happened during a time of political oppression. The transcripts speak for themselves. Here we see who collaborated with the government

(Kazan and Robbins), who kept the moral high ground (Hellman), who prevaricated (Miller), and who stood steadfast in defiance (Robeson).

The most exciting transcript is Paul Robeson's jaw-droppingly eloquent testimony. It reads like the operatic battle cry of a Left under siege. Asked why he sent his son to study in the Soviet Union when he was himself so celebrated in America, he says, "My father was a slave, and I have cousins who are share-croppers. I do not see success in terms of myself." Robeson does not trust America to educate his child and give him a good life because he knows his own privileges are predicated on extreme exceptionalism. Asked to condemn Stalin, he points out that the United States is guilty of crimes just as bad as the dictator's:

> *What has happened to Stalin, gentlemen, is a question for the Soviet Union, and I wouldn't argue with a representative of the people who, in building America, wasted the lives of my people. You are responsible, you and your forebears, for sixty to one hundred million black people dying in the slave ships and on the plantations. Don't you ask me about anybody, please!*

Bentley, however, was no liberal individualist, and even Robeson's eloquence isn't enough to save him. Instead, much of the play shows how little personal heroism mattered in the face of the power of HUAC. Whether they're B-movie actors, songwriters for musicals, or film noir directors, most of his protagonists put up a fight but ultimately get ground down over time. This was a moment when American capitalism defeated the Left, and many transcripts show a lot of frightened and confused creative workers.

The legal context of the committee hearings keeps the audience at a distance from the proceedings: they are formal, procedural, and repetitive. Those interrogated, however, pierce through these distancing techniques with profound personal intimacy. As an anti-fascist theatre artist, in his choice of testimonies, Bentley is humane as well as message-driven. He maintains our attention, doling out fun and seriousness (and seriously radical politics), and all through the use of dialogue taken directly from historical documents.

WATCH ON THE RHINE (1941) | LILLIAN HELLMAN

All the anti-fascist playwrights I've so far discussed have been in some way avant-garde. But there is nothing inherently left-wing about artistic experimentation. There is no reason leftists have to be aesthetically cutting-edge. Writing in a more traditional vein, but nevertheless radical and anti-fascist, was playwright, screenwriter, and memoirist Lillian Hellman. She was a Communist Party member who saw great commercial success early in her career on Broadway and in Hollywood. Before getting blacklisted by HUAC in 1948, she even won an Academy Award.

Hellman's 1941 anti-fascist play, *Watch on the Rhine*, is about a wealthy Southern family getting reunited with a daughter who has been in Europe for 20 years. The daughter, Sara, married and had three children with Kurt, an anti-fascist resistance fighter. On her return to her childhood home, though, she finds that her family has taken in a Bulgarian aristocrat who turns out to be a fascist collaborator. The aristocrat attempts to blackmail the resistance fighter out of the funds he has collected to support the resistance. But Kurt fights back. He murders the fascist nobleman, receives accolades from the family, and flees the country to return to the fight. He gets away with murder scot-free.

The play is a mystery, an intimate family drama, a thriller, and a comedy all at the same time. It was commercially successful from the get-go. In 1943 it even got turned into a film starring Bette Davis. It is overtly political and speaks plainly on the need to directly confront and root out fascism at whatever cost. At the time of writing, Hellman opposed the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of 1939 and the play is a direct comment on her political views. Through effective storytelling Hellman makes many of the same arguments that Brecht makes in his plays, only using a completely different set of dramatic tools. Hellman used realism, seasoned with heaping spoonfuls of Hollywood schmaltz, the vernacular of her era, to propagandize anti-fascism. Asked by his mother-in-law how he has been supporting his family, Kurt the resistance fighter says:

> *You wish to know whether not being an engineer buys adequate breakfasts for my family. It does not. I have no wish to make a mystery of what I have been doing: it is only that it is awkward to place neatly. It sounds so big: it is so small. I am an anti-fascist. And that does not pay well.*

While *Watch on the Rhine* is not as intellectual as many of the anti-fascist plays described here, being clear, prescriptive, timely, and commercial, it effectively preached anti-fascism to a mass audience.

I end here with Hellman's play because it puts me in mind of how desperately we now need to be spreading anti-fascist messaging to millions of people at once. Today in the United States, as ICE kidnaps people off the street, it can feel like we live in a nation taken over by Ionesco's rhinoceroses. Like Brecht's Mother Courage, the anti-vaxx influencer-mothers of the Internet bury children who've died from preventable diseases. AI slop is transforming all those who practice the art of letters into designated mourners for literacy as we know it.

Tiago Rodrigues described theatre to me as "the hallway towards politics," or "the space where you ask questions that might open the debate that might become politics when it goes out into the streets and into the houses." He told me that politics is part of theatre's genetic code, because theatre requires the human assembly: people sharing a space that doesn't belong to any of them.

For my entire adult life, I've discussed and been radicalized by politics on social media: spaces that have now become perilous, reactionary, and increasingly unusable for political debate and discovery. When I saw *Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists*, I was reminded of the role that live theatre can play in political discourse. As the websites we use for public discourse become corrupted, coopted, and surveilled, we might look to live theatre as a space of communal connection.

As random, reactionary acts of political violence increase, we need a shared third space where we can engage with politics as it exists in our collective imagination. We need a space where no harm can come to anyone, unlike social media. In the theatre, when our emotional bodies can take flight by engaging with a story, it isn't just consequence free fun. It's a necessary form of collective sublimation that we ignore at our peril. ⚜

WHEN FAITH LOOKS AWAY

BY **ETIENNE C. TOUSSAINT**

"We do injustice to Gaza when we turn it into a myth, because we will hate it when we discover that it is no more than a small poor city that resists."

—Mahmoud Darwish, "Silence for Gaza"

"Your silence will not protect you."

—Audre Lorde

Eleven years ago, I stood smiling before the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, posing with other Christian tourists as cameras clicked around us, eager to capture proof of our spiritual devotion. We were on a pilgrimage designed to draw us closer to the sacred. Yet just beyond the frame of our photos, checkpoints loomed, armed soldiers patrolled the streets, and Palestinian life endured under occupation.

We cropped those inconvenient truths out, not only from our photos but from our consciousness, desperate to preserve the purity of our religious experience. At the time, we believed we were innocent pilgrims. But I now understand that our sense of innocence masked a deeper truth. We were complicit.

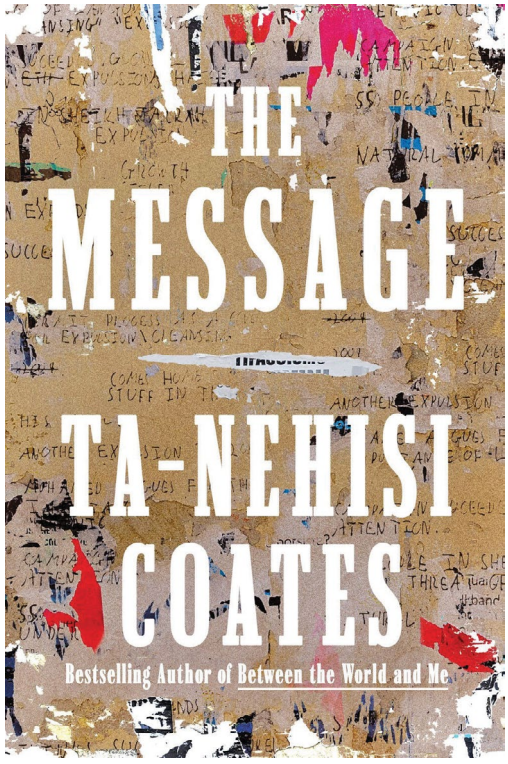
That memory, along with my struggle to face my own complicity, has clarified how easily faith can become a veil that obscures our proximity to violence. It has made me think about how often, throughout history, ordinary people have borne witness to brutality not with resistance, but with silence—or worse, with a smile. I used to wonder how someone could stand beneath a lynched Black man—dangling legs grazing the tops of grease-slicked hair, wide-eyed children staring in bewilderment nearby—and pose for the camera. What kind of world cultivates such moral decay that families could discover joy in the public spectacle of Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze?

Then I read "The Gigantic Dream," the final chapter of Ta-Nehisi Coates's latest book, *The Message*. In it, Coates reflects on his visit to the West Bank and explores the parallels between American racial apartheid and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. His vivid observations—of segregated roads, militarized borders, and the quiet complicity of onlookers—made me feel something I couldn't ignore. As shame washed over me like cold February rain—slow, steady, and sobering—I began to recognize in those silent onlookers a part of myself. The person I had long condemned for their inaction, their silence in the face of white supremacy and racial terror, their ease in the shadow of death, lived in me too.

Reading Coates's book helped me make sense of two awakenings I've experienced in recent years. The first came in 2022, when I testified against book bans in Columbia, South Carolina, and confronted what I've come to see as the growing politics of silence in American education: not merely the silencing of authors and ideas, but also the quiet complicity of those who fail to speak out against such censorship. The second surfaced more recently, as I revisited memories of my 2014 trip to Israel and the willful blindness I carried with me.

Coates's writing offered a lens that helped me see the connection between these personal discomforts and the larger systems—systems of segregation, displacement, and control—that shape modern global politics. In *The Message*, he reveals silence not as absence but as a force, binding people to violence from the Jim Crow South to occupied Palestine.

WHEN FAITH OBSCURES OCCUPATION



When I stood on Jerusalem's soil and crossed the Sea of Galilee—accompanied by my girlfriend at the time (now my wife), and mindful of my mother's pride in my pilgrimage to Christianity's birthplace—I gave little thought to the sociopolitical realities that stirred my brief discomfort. It was a sacred moment in our shared faith journey, one that deepened our spiritual bond even as it left certain questions unspoken. Like Coates, I bristled as we were guided through military-managed checkpoints, perhaps because I have always been uncomfortable around the police as a native of the South Bronx and a child of the hip-hop era.

But even as I sensed that something felt off—the way people moved with hesitancy and unease—I avoided looking around to witness the indignities unfolding before me. Instead, I closed my eyes, clasped my hands, and whispered a prayer of thanks to my God for the privilege of touring temples and shrines that had once been merely names in my Bible. In the name of sacred awe, I surrendered my vigilance, allowing faith to become a filter—one that let me sanctify the moment while editing out the suffering that might have complicated my praise.

I prayed, journaled, smiled for the camera, and wept tears of joy while standing inside the tomb of Jesus, only a stone's throw away from the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the place where the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven during the Night Journey. I allowed myself to sink into an individualistic well of thanksgiving while ignoring the layered traumas haunting the land. And now, I am beginning to understand how one can claim allegiance to Christianity while pledging fidelity to systems of oppression like slavery, all while standing in a field of strange fruit hanging from oak trees.

You simply have to close your eyes.

ART CREATES THE POSSIBLE OF POLITICS

Long before the shame of realizing I had been complicit in the brutality against Palestinians in Gaza, I found myself standing before the South Carolina legislature in the spring of 2022, defending books that do what Coates believes great writing should always do. They should *haunt*, he insists: "Have them think about your words before bed... [have them] grab random people on the street, shake them, and say, 'Have you read this yet?'"

It was my first year as a law professor in South Carolina, and I was testifying against bills designed to ban books and other instructional materials examining race, racism, and American identity through a critical lens. The irony struck me only later. Here I was, defending books that exposed uncomfortable truths about American racism, yet I had failed to recognize a similar system of oppression during my pilgrimage to Israel eight years earlier.

In Chapter Three of *The Message*, "Bearing the Flaming Cross," Coates reflects on what it means to be American in an era when books by Black authors are being banned from school libraries, simply for revealing uncomfortable truths. After returning from a trip to Africa, he finds himself in Columbia, South Carolina, where elementary school teachers are being targeted for allegedly violating book banning laws, and in one instance, for teaching his National Book Award-winning memoir, *Between the World and Me*.

Both Coates and Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said expose how dominant institutions use education not to liberate but to domesticate, replacing curiosity with conformity. As Coates asserts, "The danger we present[…] is not that we will simply convince their children of a different dogma, but that we will convince them that they have the power to form their own." The protesting parents who want to keep Coates's books out of schools may not be so much concerned with their children's discomfort as with the possibility of their children challenging long-held beliefs about what it means to be American—beliefs that, in turn, would force such parents to confront their own unexamined complicity with white supremacy.

What I saw that day while testifying before the South Carolina legislature was fear—fear of writing's power to expose hypocrisy and awaken moral imagination. As Coates puts it, "Politics is the art of the possible, but art creates the possible of politics." Writers are called not only to tell the truth, but also to confront their own place in the world. They are artists, and great art—from films to memoirs—can reshape politics.

It was art, after all, that helped distort the promise of radical Reconstruction into the stain of Jim Crow, through works like *Birth of a Nation* and Confederate monuments to men like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Coates's art threatened to shift that legacy once again, stirring the political imagination of South Carolina's youngest citizens. As Said reminds us, "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging" is everything.

YOU CAN SEE THE WORLD AND STILL NEVER SEE THE PEOPLE IN IT

Coates could have ended *The Message* there, but we live in a globalized world, and our understanding of what it means to be American must confront our global footprint. Chapter Four, "The

Gigantic Dream," shifts focus, guiding the reader through Coates's reflections on his visit to Palestine in May 2023, just months before the October 7 attacks by Hamas.

This was the moment in my reading journey when I encountered the shame that would eventually transform me. Like the child standing below the legs of the hanging slave, perhaps naiveté had initially clouded my judgment. I had never been taught the full history of Palestine or Israel. Despite learning about the Crusades in Catholic school, I had never heard that story—or more recent religious conflicts—from the perspective of the Muslim, the Palestinian, the so-called "other."

As I turned the pages of *The Message* in late 2024, my memories of Jerusalem began to shift under the weight of Coates's analysis. Each paragraph connecting the Palestinian experience to the African American freedom struggle created a bridge between his observations and my incomplete pilgrimage.

Jerusalem holds deep significance for Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike. As Coates explains, "Muslims believe that Al-Aqsa is where the prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven," and "all three Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—believe Temple Mount to be the site of a temple built by the biblical King Solomon." Nearby stands the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built where Jesus was crucified and buried. Yet Jerusalem remains divided. The Old City contains quarters historically associated with different religious communities, while modern Jerusalem is split between east (largely Palestinian) and west (largely Israeli).

What I didn't fully grasp during my 2014 visit was how Jerusalem's division mirrors and intensifies Jim Crow-era segregation. The system of checkpoints, where armed soldiers scrutinize and regulate Palestinian movement—particularly for those Palestinians with darker skin—reveals the entanglement of racial profiling, religious identity, and state surveillance. Palestinians within Israel hold limited rights, while those in occupied territories face even harsher restrictions. Arab citizens remain third-class within Israel's borders, facing systemic discrimination in housing, education, and public funding, while Jews of color, particularly Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews, experience entrenched marginalization. It is a society governed by separate legal structures for different populations, amounting to what many now call a modern apartheid state.

This system of racial hierarchy is bitterly ironic given the rich legacy of Jewish solidarity in the fight for racial justice. During the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, for example, Jewish leaders like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel stood alongside African American activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., recognizing a shared struggle against dehumanization and state violence. This history is not a footnote. It is a vital reminder that the pursuit of justice has always required crossing boundaries of faith, race, and nation.

Reading Coates's description of the brutal realities he encountered in Israel and Palestine, I remembered walking through some of those same checkpoints myself, my American passport granting me passage while others waited behind. I had noticed the guns, the tension, the separation, but I chose not to see them as part of a larger system of oppression. Instead, I turned my camera toward ancient stones and biblical sites, carefully cropping out the modern apparatus of occupation.

Before wrestling with the implications of state-sanctioned separation, Coates allows his personal confrontation with this reality to challenge his earlier beliefs. In his *Atlantic* essay, "The Case for Reparations," he had embraced the narrative of Israel as a democracy, albeit one riddled with complexities. Now, forced to reckon with his "ignorance of the world beyond America's borders," Coates concludes, "you can see the world and still never see the people in it."

I, too, needed to confront my earlier beliefs. It was here that I began to feel the shame I hadn't felt when I returned from Israel in 2014. Unlike Coates, I had boasted a passport full of stamps when I visited Jerusalem. Yet, when I returned home—my bag weighed down by a journal full of prayer reflections and a camera full of tourist photos—I thought little of the systems of oppression I had witnessed and tacitly endorsed. Instead, as I exited the plane, I scrolled through photos of myself at the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, and the Sea of Galilee—racial apartheid dangling just beyond the frame—and smiled.

How nice, I thought to myself.

How nice.

THE PAIN IS IN THE DISCOVERY OF YOUR OWN ILLEGITIMACY

Now, I am beginning to see the connections between the systems of silence I have encountered—whether in legislative chambers where politicians move to ban books about Black history, or on religious pilgrimages where tourists carefully crop out the uncomfortable images of occupation. I realize now that I had been so conditioned by the normalization of racism in daily life, so accustomed to the ways law legitimates social hierarchies, that I became a tourist in a land marked by racial segregation—and it barely disturbed me.

Reading Coates, I was gripped by the hypocrisy of my Christian pilgrimage. As a Black American who has experienced racism firsthand, my willingness to overlook the state-sanctioned separation in Israel revealed a deeper blindness. It was a silence—the same silence that sustains police brutality, criminalizes poverty, and enables environmental racism—that prevented me from seeing how Palestinians' experiences echo the Black American freedom struggle. The same impulse to silence dissent that drove book ban legislation in South Carolina also fuels censorship abroad—like the February raid in East Jerusalem, where Israeli forces stormed a Palestinian bookshop and confiscated its novels and memoirs and spiritual texts.

Beyond the visible markers of separation, Coates draws attention to the ever-present threat of displacement looming over Palestinian life, a threat often justified as serving the "common good." This logic mirrors the mid-20th-century urban renewal policies in the United States, which were often framed as revitalization efforts but led to the demolition of Black neighborhoods to make way for highways, commercial development, and other state-sponsored projects. Hundreds of thousands were displaced in the name of progress. As with these American policies, the displacement of Palestinians is often accompanied by a rhetorical machinery that cloaks violence in the language of improvement. Invoking Edward Said, Coates reminds us that there is always a "chorus of willing intellectuals" eager to sanitize empire's violence, as if the destruction and death inflicted by the latest

so-called civilizing mission could be explained away.

Just as mid-20th century urban renewal displaced Black Americans in the name of progress (or as earlier efforts like the American Colonization Society during the 19th century tried to exile them to Liberia), so too do imperial projects today frame the control of a "backward" or "uncivilized" people as progress. Whether in the American South or in Israel, these efforts cloak domination in the language of destiny, even as dissenting voices within Israeli society and beyond push back against such myths.

Reading the final chapter of *The Message*, I was struck by how my education had given me a narrow understanding of Israel as a redemptive response to the Holocaust, rendering Palestinians nearly invisible. Even Palestinian Christians, whose churches are vandalized, whose communities are surveilled, and whose worship is restricted, rarely pierce Western religious narratives. This selective history mirrors the way American education sanitizes the horrors of slavery and Indigenous genocide. As I toured the Holy Land contemplating Christ's compassion for the marginalized, I failed to see the marginalized standing before me. I failed to see the oppressor in me.

Etienne C. Toussaint in front of the Dome of the Rock, 2014

As Coates argues, "A system of supremacy justifies itself through illusion, so that those moments when the illusion can no longer hold always come as a great shock[...] and there is great pain in understanding that, without your consent, you are complicit in a great crime, in learning that the whole game was rigged in your favor[...] the pain is in the discovery of your own illegitimacy—that whiteness is power and nothing else."

Reading *The Message* shattered the careful framing that had once allowed me to experience my pilgrimage without moral conflict, exposing a reality far more complex than the sanitized narratives I had embraced. This reckoning surfaced deeper questions about identity and exclusion—especially how history reveals the fragile boundary of whiteness and Jews' uncertain place within it. The same racism that fueled the mass murder of Jews during World War II left their postwar racial status in flux, a tension that Coates argues was resolved in part by recognizing Israeli independence in 1948 while restricting Jewish immigration to the United States, advancing the project of Jewish assimilation into whiteness through distance.

It was a matter of keeping "them over there," Coates asserts, and more to the point, "over there" engaged in a war against so-called savages. Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the "wages of whiteness," Coates claims that whiteness operates not as a fixed category, but as a kind of political currency—offering psychological and material rewards to certain groups in exchange for their complicity in systems of domination.

The systematic suppression of race-conscious education in the United States—from book bans to curriculum restrictions—has created a template for silencing critical perspectives on state formation and colonial histories, including those concerning Israel and Palestine. Just as laws targeting critical race theory claim to protect students from "divisiveness," efforts to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism purport to shield Jewish students from hate, while in practice insulating the Israeli state from legitimate critique and punishing dissent. This suppression narrows Americans' understanding of their own history of racial oppression and constricts the frameworks available to critically examine Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

Simultaneously, the U.S. government's response to Palestinian solidarity protests on college campuses reveals the hollowness of its commitment to free speech and assembly when these rights challenge imperial interests. Palestinian and allied student protesters have faced surveillance, suspension, doxxing, and even deportation for peaceful demonstrations, signaling that certain expressions of political conscience carry severe consequences. This crackdown mirrors historical efforts to silence Black radical voices during earlier freedom struggles, demonstrating how systems of oppression recognize and fear solidarity among marginalized groups.

Christian theology teaches that salvation requires acknowledging sin, not claiming triumph. The prophetic tradition, spanning from Amos and Isaiah to modern liberation theologians, condemns those who glorify sacred spaces while ignoring injustice. As theologian James Cone wrote, "Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity." Jesus himself condemned authorities for neglecting "the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23).

Yet in my own pilgrimage, I failed to embody what theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez calls "a preferential option for the poor": a recognition that God's presence is found not only in holy sites but in solidarity with the oppressed. A true Christian response to the current crisis in Israel and Palestine must reckon with both how Jesus confronted empire and how empire has co-opted the mission of Jesus for its own ends.

What remains is the immense violence, brutality, and death that has claimed the lives of thousands of Palestinian mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and children in Gaza. These military campaigns, which many legal scholars and human rights organizations rightfully classify not only as war crimes but as genocide, continue to unfold under the justification of necessary security

measures against terrorism. In truth, it is an indisputable humanitarian catastrophe—one that follows the familiar and brutal pattern of plunder, where a self-appointed master race systematically decimates its so-called savage people, all in the name of control and domination.

As of June 2025, Israel continues to violate ceasefire agreements, launching new offensives after only brief humanitarian pauses. Civilian infrastructure is systematically destroyed, and medical facilities are deliberately targeted, despite global condemnation. This ongoing assault amounts to collective punishment, using mass suffering as a weapon of war. After 20 months, Gaza is nearly uninhabitable. What began as a military operation has evolved into the methodical dismantling of civil society.

The intent behind these actions, increasingly recognized by legal experts as genocidal, is made clear by the staggering death toll—over 40,000 Palestinians killed, most of them women and children, hundreds of thousands injured, and 2.3 million facing catastrophic hunger and disease. Bombing hospitals, displacing families, denying basic necessities, killing innocent children: these are not mere policy decisions. They are assaults on human dignity, made possible by a willful ignorance rooted in histories that have been carefully sanitized by those in power.

OPENING OUR EYES TO PAIN AND INJUSTICE

I now realize that the connections from the Deep South to the deep wounds of Palestine reveal something unsettling. My role as a Christian pilgrim was not that of a passive observer, but an active participant in perpetuating injustice through silence and smiles. My pilgrimage photos—carefully composed to capture spiritual moments against biblical backdrops—serve as evidence of my complicity. This realization requires more than acknowledgment. It demands a shift in how I engage with the world, a call to bear witness in ways that challenge systems of oppression.

Bearing witness means acknowledging both my past complicity and today's ongoing horrors: the destruction of civilian infrastructure, targeted killings of journalists, obstruction of humanitarian aid, and indiscriminate slaughter of innocent families, their lives shattered without mercy. I am reexamining how a faith centered on a Middle Eastern refugee—Jesus of Nazareth, executed by the occupying Roman empire—could align itself with modern powers of occupation. The discomfort I feel viewing my Jerusalem photos isn't something to avoid, but to embrace. It's a necessary step toward a more honest relationship with an unjust world.

Etienne C. Toussaint at The Monastery of the Temptation, West Bank, 2014

"If Palestinians are to be truly seen," Coates writes, "it will be through stories woven by their own hands—not by their plunderers, not even by their comrades." This ethic carries profound weight. It demands humility, acknowledging that our understanding is inherently limited by our distance from the oppressed. It requires courage, the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths, even at great personal cost. And it calls for relentless persistence, a commitment to continue telling these stories, even when the world chooses to look away.

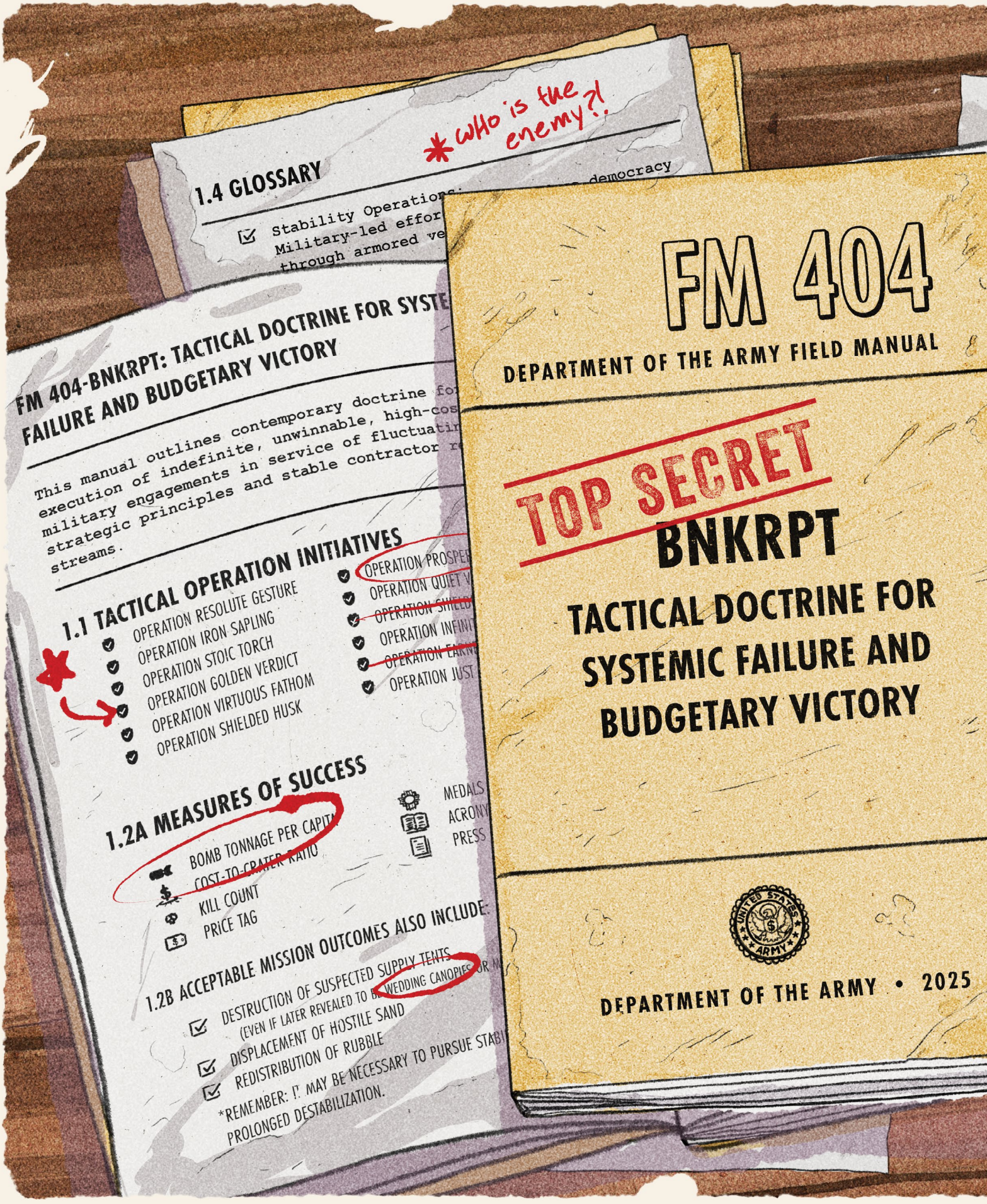
For me, bearing witness means engaging differently with Israel and Palestine, just as it means defending literature that confronts America's painful, racist past. It means actively seeking out Palestinian voices, listening to anti-occupation and dissident Israeli perspectives, supporting organizations that foster dialogue and justice, and critically examining U.S. policy toward Israel. Most crucial to my own spiritual journey, it means challenging the sanitized narratives within Christian communities and creating space for uncomfortable yet necessary conversations about occupation, apartheid, genocide, human rights, and the rule of law.

In *Silence for Gaza*, the poet Mahmoud Darwish warns against turning Gaza into an abstraction, a myth we invoke to feel righteous rather than responsible. "We do injustice to Gaza when we turn it into a myth," he writes, "because we will hate it when we discover that it is no more than a small poor city that resists." Perhaps, more than anything else, bearing witness means refusing the comforting distance of myth and metaphor. Listening to blood and rubble, not symbols and dreams.

Ultimately, what I've learned from Coates is that true pilgrimage isn't about visiting holy sites with closed eyes and clasped hands, but about opening our eyes to the pain and injustice around us. It's about recognizing that the sacred cannot be separated from the political, that spiritual growth requires moral courage, and that bearing witness to suffering is itself a form of prayer—one that compels us to oppose hate and work to end it. In so doing, we might truly honor the radical Jewish prophet whose tomb I visited in Jerusalem with tears of selective joy.

This journey is neither linear nor easy. It's tempting to retreat into comfortable illusions, focusing on personal spirituality while ignoring the call for collective justice. But having seen what I have seen—through Coates's eyes and, belatedly, through my own—I cannot unsee it. The challenge now is to live differently, to allow this awakening to reshape how I move through the world.

Bearing witness offers no guarantee of redemption or resolution. But it offers the possibility of living more truthfully in a wounded world. And perhaps, fragile as it may be, that is where our hope begins. ⚜


1.4 GLOSSARY
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FAILURE AND BUDGETARY VICTORY
This manual outlines contemporary doctrine fo
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1.1 TACTICAL OPERATION INITIATIVES
OPERATION RESOLUTE GESTURE
OPERATION IRON SAPLING
OPERATION STOIC TORCH
OPERATION GOLDEN VERDICT
OPERATION VIRTUOUS FATHOM
OPERATION SHIELDED HUSK
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OPERATION INFINI
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1.2A MEASURES OF SUCCESS
BOMB TONNAGE PER CAPITA
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1.2B ACCEPTABLE MISSION OUTCOMES ALSO INCLUDE:
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FM 404
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY FIELD MANUAL
TOP SECRET
BNKRPT
TACTICAL DOCTRINE FOR SYSTEMIC FAILURE AND BUDGETARY VICTORY
UNITED STATES ARMY
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY • 2025

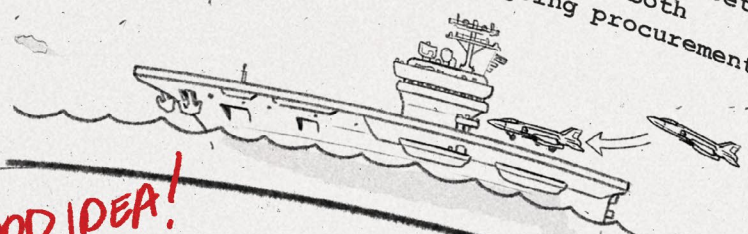
1.4B DO SAY/DON'T SAY

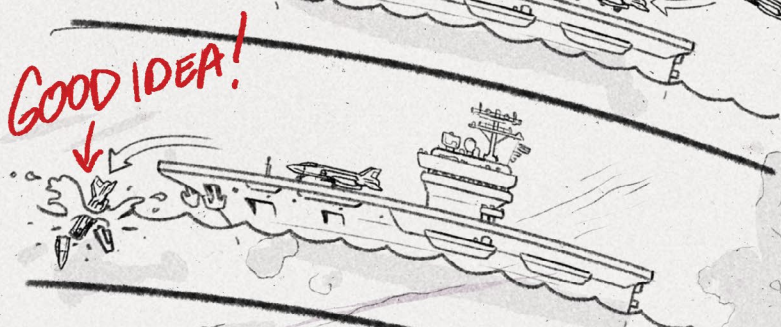
- ☑ "DEFEAT" → "REPOSITIO
- ☑ "WAR" → "CONTINGENCY
- ☑ "OCCUPATION" → "PART MISSION
- ☑ "MASS DISPLACEMENT" PHENOMENON"

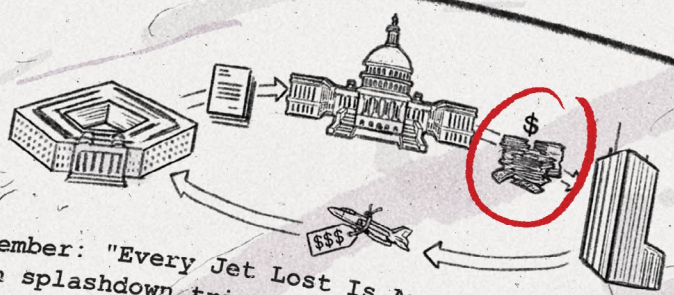
2.3 BIRTHDAY PARADES: GOOSE STEPPING

1.3 WHAT TO DO IF YOU DROP A PLANE IN THE SEA

A key feature of modern warfare is the intentional misplacement of multi-million-dollar aerial assets into large bodies of water. This ensures both strategic unpredictability and ongoing procurement cycles.







Remember: "Every Jet Lost Is Another Jet Ordered." Each splashdown triggers a Job Creation Cascade across three states and four lobbying firms. When an $80 million aircraft "self-decommissions into the Pacific," it is not a failure—it is a funding opportunity. These "aqua-thermal repositioning events" can be an economic boon and should not be avoided. The challenge is to describe the event to the public accurately without making it sound like the United States of America does not know what it is doing.

FIG.

HENRY'S WORLD

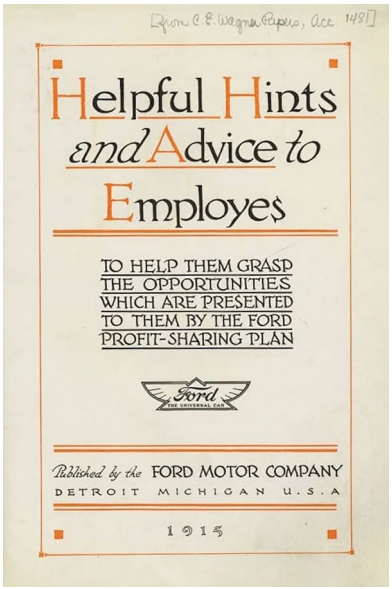
BY **NATHAN J. ROBINSON**

In 1915, the Ford Motor Company published a creepy little booklet called "Helpful Hints and Advice to Employes," which outlined the expectations the company had for its workers. These did not relate to how well they built cars. The booklet explained that the company's employees were expected to maintain certain standards on *and* off the job, and told them everything from what kind of houses they should live in to how they ought to raise their children.

The pamphlet showed photographs of "good and bad homes" and gave rules like "do not allow any flies in the house," "do not spit on the floor in the home," and "do not allow the doors or windows to remain open in the summer time without screens in them." "Do not occupy a room in which one other person sleeps," the pamphlet warned, "as the Company is anxious to have its employes [sic] live comfortably, and under conditions that make for cleanliness, good manhood and good citizenship." Employees were encouraged to cultivate vegetable gardens, brush their teeth regularly, and monitor their finances carefully. Their children must not "use alleys for playgrounds." "The Company expects employes to improve their living conditions, make their homes clean and comfortable, [and] provide wholesome surroundings," the tract read.

Some of these points, like "do not spit on the floor," were good advice. But these were not just amicable suggestions. Ford employed a team of dozens—sometimes hundreds—of investigators to make unscheduled visits to workers' homes and ensure the rules were being followed. Workers were expected to comply with demands for information about all aspects of their private lives. "It is the duty of every employe to aid the investigators in every way possible in their work," said the Helpful Hints pamphlet. "We ask you to have your papers and receipts so sorted and arranged that when the investigator calls upon you to note progress, you will be able to give him, with as little delay as possible, the information he seeks." Investigators would monitor drinking, cleanliness, family structure, even spending habits.

Ford had received acclaim for raising wages at his plants to $5 a day in 1914, an unheard-of amount for industrial labor. But there were strings attached: workers received a base wage of $2.70. They would only be topped up to $5 if they complied with the strictures of the company's Sociological Department. The extra was (misleadingly) called "profit-sharing," and the pamphlet explains that "the judgment formed by the investigators" will help determine "whether the employee is worthy to receive or continue to receive profits from the Company." Workers were warned that "the Company will not approve, as profit-sharers, men who herd themselves in overcrowded boarding houses which menace their health," and lamented that "investigators have found that, upon going into the homes of many employes, and particularly some of those of foreign birth, that in many cases they were living and sleeping in over-crowded rooms and tenements." Immigrants were instructed to become "Americanized," an achievement celebrated on "Americanization Day." In fact, the company was emphatic that *only* off-the-job characteristics mattered: "There is no connection whatever between the employe's labor and share of profits given him. His work in the factory; his efficiency and length of service; his steadfastness and loyalty are not taken into consideration in determining whether



or not he is qualified to receive them."

Unsurprisingly, the scheme is presented as being for the workers' own good. It is described as "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, industrial sociological plan for the benefit of humanity ever attempted; entirely new in its conception and far reaching in its ultimate end," and the pamphlet says it exists because "the Company simply wants to be assured that the profits are doing a lasting good." Big Brother may be watching you, but he has your best interests at heart.

Henry Ford, perhaps more than any other single individual, laid the groundwork for modern industrial capitalism. His assembly lines accelerated the transition from production by individual craftsmen to high-speed, standardized mass production; the latter is often called "Fordism" after him. His Model T made automobiles affordable, reshaping society and the physical landscape. Beyond mass production, he helped to give us both car culture and suburbia.

After the assembly line process was first introduced, worker morale was terrible. Factories produced cars in a fraction of the time it took before, but the process was also dehumanizing, because it took from workers any ability to take pride in their work. Instead of having cars assembled by skilled mechanics, Ford gave laborers minute, repetitive, mind-numbing tasks. As Steven Watts writes in *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century*, the definitive work on Ford, "Men spent long, monotonous hours performing the same tasks over and over—tightening the bolt on a wheel housing, or lowering the car body onto the chassis, or attaching the gasoline tank. They were physically repetitive, emotionally deadening, and nearly devoid of satisfaction."

It was hard to keep people doing this miserable work, and turnover rates were so bad that "over 52,000 men were hired every year to maintain a 14,000 workforce." (Fortunately for Ford, deskilled workers were easily replaceable.) As the libertarian Mises Institute notes, "nine hours spent turning a lug nut is hardly an attractive job when competitors—such as General Motors[…] paid similar wages for less monotonous work." When Ford announced huge raises, the *Wall Street Journal* thought Ford had gone soft and started practicing Christian benevolence, saying he was applying "spiritual principles in the field where they do not belong." But the $5 day was not introduced because Ford suddenly had a Scrooge-like epiphany about redistributing wealth. It was because Ford needed some way to get people to keep doing jobs that were objectively mindless and physically taxing.

It worked, at least for a time. Workers put up with Ford's intrusive Sociological Department because the wages were too good to turn down. And soon, there was no alternative to assembly line work. As Harry Braverman writes in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Ford "forced the assembly line upon the rest of the automobile industry," because companies could not compete otherwise, and so ultimately "workers were forced to submit to it by the disappearance of other forms of work in that industry." But even decent wages and a lack of alternatives could only keep workers in line for so long. Ford was an autocrat, obsessed with controlling every aspect of the production process personally, and by the 1930s, rebellion was brewing. As Watts writes:

> *Not allowed to converse, workers developed the 'Ford whisper'—talking in an undertone without moving one's lips while staring straight ahead at one's work—as a way to maintain human contact during work hours. But sometimes even this subtle resistance backfired. A worker named John Gallo was discharged after a 'spotter' caught him 'smiling' with co-workers after being warned earlier about 'laughing with the other fellows.'… [Such] incidents caused many Rouge [factory complex] workers to become 'very bitter' toward Henry Ford.*

Ford "marshaled all of his power and resources" to ensure that his factories would never be unionized. He organized what the *New York Times* called "the largest private quasi-military organization in existence," and historian Greg Grandin says was a "three-thousand-member goon squad[…] made up of spies and thugs armed with guns, whips, pipes, blackjacks, and rubber hoses otherwise known as 'persuaders.'" When unemployed auto workers marched on his Dearborn factory in 1932, during the Great Depression, Ford's security guards (alongside the local police) shot them with live ammunition, killing five. Five years later, Ford security officers attacked United Auto Workers organizers who were planning to hand out leaflets at Ford's River Rouge plant. Thanks to these strong-arm tactics, Ford was the last of the major car companies to unionize.

But, following the debut of the Model T in 1908, Ford had also become immensely popular with the public. He was called "the hero of the average American," as Watts writes, "because he had made his fortune without ruthlessness, paid high wages to his workers, and made a cheap but reliable product." A 1940 "survey of American workers found that they ranked Henry Ford above Franklin Roosevelt and [UAW leader] Walter Reuther as the modern American leader who was 'most helpful to labor.'" Ford was skilled at cultivating his populist image. A pacifist, Ford "view[ed] warfare as a wasteful folly," and during World War I he chartered a "Peace Ship" to Europe that brought activists to the continent in a (futile, quixotic) attempt to negotiate an end to the war. He said his car company was "an instrument of service rather than a machine for making money." He fought his own stockholders, calling them parasites. Ford even came close to winning a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1918, running as a Democrat.

But inside the company, Ford was essentially a dictator. The

New York Times called him the "Mussolini of Highland Park," an "industrial fascist" who wields "despotic control over the greatest manufacturing organization that the world has ever seen." B.C. Forbes, founder of *Forbes* magazine, said "I know of no employer in America who is so autocratic. I know of no employer who adopts a more dictatorial attitude toward associates." Watts notes that over time, words like "despot," "monarch," "fascist," "autocrat," and "dictator" became increasingly associated with Ford.

His ugliest trait, of course, was his virulent hatred of Jews. Even by the standards of the time, Ford's antisemitism was so outlandishly paranoid that it's hard to see how he could have actually believed what he was saying. He thought American farmers were being exploited by "a band of Jews—bankers, lawyers, money-lenders, advertising agencies, fruit-packers, produce-buyers, experts." (Fruit-packers!) He thought the Jews had killed Lincoln. He prohibited engineers from using brass in the Model T, saying it was a "Jew metal." (His engineers "used it anyway but covered it up with black paint.") He claimed unions he hated were organized by "Jew financiers," commenting that a union was "a great thing for the Jew to have on hand when he comes around to get his clutches on an industry."

He was obsessed. "I never had a visit with him, at lunch or dinner, when he did not talk about the Jews and his campaign against them," said the writer James Martin Mill. On and on and on it went. In 1921, he said "The Jew is a mere huckster, a trader, who doesn't want to produce, but to make something out of what somebody else produces." In 1922 he attacked the "greed and avarice of Wall Street Kikes," and in 1923 commented "The Jews are the scavengers of the world[…] Wherever there's anything wrong with a country, you'll find the Jews on the job there." He believed that "the International Jew" is the one who "starts the wars."

Ford did not keep his antisemitism to himself. He aggressively proselytized it through his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, which ran dozens upon dozens of antisemitic articles, put together under his direct supervision and encouragement. (Ford made his car dealerships carry it, which helped boost its circulation to 900,000.) The diatribes were eventually collected into a book, *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*, which included chapters like "Jewish Degradation of American Baseball" and "Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music." (Ford despised jazz, which he thought was morally corrupting in addition to being Jewish, and he sponsored lessons in Dearborn to teach workers more morally correct dances, namely quadrilles and Virginia reels.) Strangely, Ford seemed surprised when Jewish communities were outraged. When a local rabbi returned Ford's gift of a Ford Model T, Ford sent a puzzled reply asking the rabbi why he was upset.

In addition to being anti-Jewish, Ford was also a firm believer in white superiority, declaring:

> *The trouble with us today is that we have been unfaithful to the White Man's traditions and privileges[…] We have permitted a corrupt orientalism to overspread us, sapping our courage and demoralizing our ideals. There has always been a White Man's Code, and we have failed to follow it.*

Antisemitism and racism were not Ford's only crackpot notions. He had bizarre dietary theories, too. He thought sugar was dangerous because the crystals would slice open one's stomach lining. He thought bad diets were the cause of criminality. "Most wrong acts committed by men are the result of wrong mixtures in the stomach," he said. Watts notes that Ford "warned against fresh dough and said that bread should be eaten only after it has sat for a day," "depicted fried pork, boiled potatoes, and oranges as unhealthy" (well, he got one out of three), and "advocated that people eat nothing until after 1:00 p.m. because of likely digestive problems at an earlier hour."

Some of this is explained by the fact that Ford was proudly uneducated. He confessed that "I don't like to read books; they muss up my mind." When he was testifying in court during a lawsuit, he said the American revolution was in 1812, that Benedict Arnold was a "writer," and that "chili con carne" was "a large mobile army." Ford's world was the auto plant, and it was the only thing he understood, although this didn't prevent him from having opinions on everything under the sun.

Most Ford buyers apparently just ignored the antisemitic newspapers in their local dealerships. But Adolf Hitler was a major admirer of Henry Ford, keeping a life-size portrait of him in his office. "I shall do my best to put his theories into practice in Germany," Hitler said, and he based his Volkswagen on the Model T. Heinrich Himmler called Ford "one of our most valuable, important, and witty fighters." Baldur von Schirach, who led the Hitler Youth from 1931 to 1940, testified at the Nuremberg trials:

> *The decisive anti-Semitic book which I read at that time and the book which influenced my comrades was Henry Ford's book, The International Jew; I read it and became anti-Semitic. In those days this book made such a deep impression on my friends and myself because we saw in Henry Ford the representative of success…*

After being sued for defamation by a Jewish labor lawyer named Aaron Sapiro, who had been named in one of the "International Jew" articles, Ford issued a public apology for his antisemitism. But Watts documents that this was entirely dishonest. In private, he continued to rail against Jews, and while Ford and his spokespeople said that Ford had had little to do with the editorial content of *The Dearborn Independent*, this was false. He had supervised it closely. In 1938, he accepted the Grand Cross of the German Eagle from the Nazi government.

Strikingly, even though Ford was "one of the 20th century's most dangerous anti-Jewish propagandists," and the ideas he espoused soon led to the mass extermination of six million Jews, Ford's name does not quite live in infamy. Despite renewed attention to the problem of antisemitism, Ford's name remains on his cars, the Ford Foundation, the Ford Field football stadium in Detroit, and the Henry Ford museum.

DURING THE LAST PHASE OF HIS LIFE, WHEN he grew restless, Henry Ford dedicated himself to amassing historic artifacts and buildings, and assembling them in a fake Main Street near his auto plant in Dearborn. The result was Greenfield Village, and it is a weird, uncanny place—a replica

Ford accepting his honor from Nazi government officials, 1938

of a historic small American town, but set in no particular time or place.

Ford took the Wright Brothers' workshop from its original location in Ohio and brought it to his village. He took what was left of Thomas Edison's Menlo Park laboratory from New Jersey. He added a 1600s British cottage from the Cotswolds, and Noah Webster's house from New Haven, Connecticut. He went around to antique stores across the country, amassing endless objects of miscellaneous Americana and arranging them in the village and its accompanying museum. Today, for a pricey entrance fee, one can visit this little slice of the past, where restored Model Ts buzz around and American history is presented as the history of innovations culminating in the wondrous Ford motor car. (Be careful about buying refreshments. A bag of freeze-dried Skittles in the gift shop costs $15.)

The village is supposed to be educational, sort of. But it's more like a tycoon's giant train set. Ford disdained historians. "History is bunk," he would often declare. Greenfield Village has been viewed skeptically by historians for its "lack of intellectual coherence." But that's the point. The village was not attempting to show history as it actually happened, but to create a vision of a lost paradise, an America that Ford had warm nostalgic feelings for.

It was an America that Ford himself was destroying, and he knew it. His factories were killing the small craftsman, and his cheap, mass-produced cars would produce the nightmare of suburban sprawl (and, ultimately, the catastrophe of climate change). The building of Greenfield Village, Watts says, reflected "an underlying uneasiness with the industrial world that he had created." The "central designer of the modern American industrial order was in love with the virtues of rural life." Ford identified with agrarian and small town America. ("I want to see every acre of the earth's surface covered with little farms, with happy, contented people living on them," he said.) Greenfield Village was to offer "emotional satisfaction by providing a temporary escape from the intensity of modern life." But Ford remained a "technofuturist," publishing a work called *Machinery, The New Messiah* arguing that technological improvements could solve all of humanity's problems.

Ford may have known on some level that the system he had created was dehumanizing, and that he had done more than anyone to turn workers into "cogs in a machine." (His assembly line would soon be famously satirized by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*.) But instead of reorganizing his production process to make it less despotic and hierarchical, instituting real workplace democracy, he built a giant toy village where Americans could go and look, as if into a snow globe, at an idealized tapestry of the country they had lost through the rise of industrial capitalism.

WHAT LESSONS DO WE TAKE FROM the story of Henry Ford? The most obvious should be the dangers of giving a single man a great deal of power and control.

There are obvious parallels between the lives of Henry Ford and Elon Musk. Both men amassed unfathomable riches in the automobile industry. Both men are megalomaniacs with a hatred for unions. Both went somewhat mad with power. Associates reported that Ford "began to get the feeling that he was infallible and his decisions were always right," and "made this into such a personal corporation that he himself was the only source of authority in it." He resisted "catering to the whims of buyers," insisting on maintaining his beloved Model T long after it was outdated. Said one associate, "It was the old man's belief that he knew best what was good for them [the public] and he was going to give them what was best." Similarly, Musk insists on selling his idiosyncratic (to use the politest term possible) Cybertruck, even though it has flopped with the public.

Both men showed disdain for academic knowledge, and used their positions to spread crackpot right-wing political theories. Both neglected their companies in pursuit of ideological obsessions. Both built their own bizarre towns, with Musk creating a "Memes Street" in "Starbase, Texas." As Harold Meyerson of the *American Prospect* writes, Musk has "joined Ford as the most prominent American employer of his era implacably opposed to unions" and "Ford's vociferous antisemitism helped to fuel the rise of German Nazism, while Musk has now gone all in to promote the rise of Germany's neo-Nazis." Both men thought they were saving the world while continuously fucking it up.

Neither has been *entirely* a negative force. Visiting Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation is a fun day out, and Tesla helped to make zero-emissions vehicles more attractive to consumers. But both lives are cautionary tales about the concentration of power and wealth. Someone at the head of a vast industrial machine can easily take on a position like that of *führer*, and if they go mad, they can cause an awful lot of harm. Ford's pushing of deranged antisemitic conspiracies encouraged American sympathy for the Nazis. Musk, similarly, pushes anti-trans, anti-immigrant conspiracies that are creating a more poisonous and dangerous political atmosphere, in addition to his direct work helping Donald Trump gut life-saving government programs.

The careers of both men show deep flaws in the American economic system. A boss shouldn't be able to surveil workers at home. Success shouldn't confer a giant megaphone that can be used to push fascist ideology. Henry Ford in many ways created America as we know it. We have to create an America that will not give rise to any more Henry Fords. ⚜

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But look at this panda

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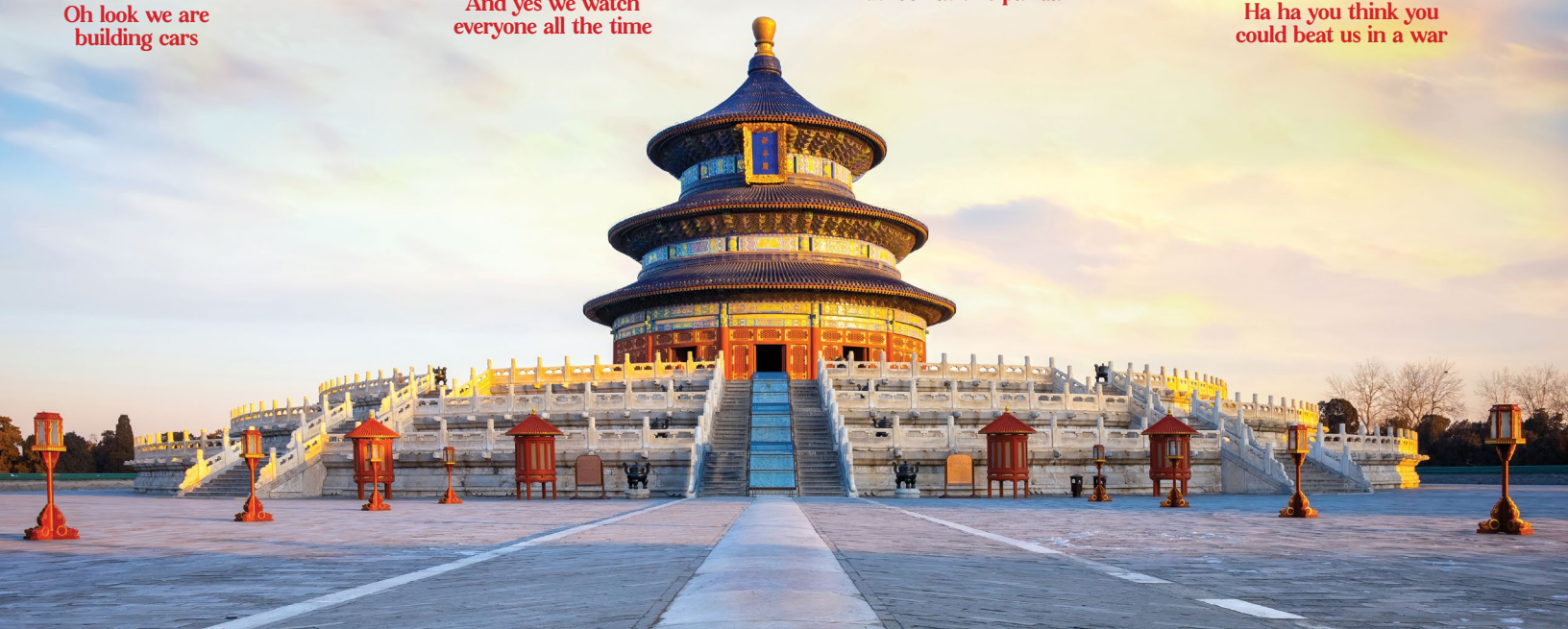


20 YEARS AFTER KATRINA

"It was a turning point to the right," Malik Rahim says of Hurricane Katrina. "It was when the right saw they had the ability to create justice… If we had stood up for justice after Katrina, there may not have been a Jena. If there wouldn't have been a Jena,[1] then maybe there wouldn't have been a Ferguson. All of it was the ripple effects of what did *not* happen after Katrina."

Rahim was one of the original founders of the New Orleans Black Panther Party in the early 1970s, helping to organize its "free breakfast program for children, political education classes, facilitation of free medical care, and neighborhood clean up and empowerment programs." After Hurricane Katrina hit the city in 2005, countless Black residents were left stranded in a flooded city without federal or state assistance. Rahim took the organizing skills he had honed during his Panther days and founded Common Ground Relief, a radical, community-based mutual aid organization offering free health clinics, food and water distribution, home rebuilding, and legal support.

Common Ground attracted legions of volunteers from outside the city and became a symbol of solidarity and self-determination. Nevertheless, Rahim sees the tragedy of Katrina as a critical "turning point to the right" because:

> *Justice did not prevail. After any disaster, if you want to prevent that disaster from turning into a tragedy, justice has got to prevail. Corruption, racism, exploitation: these are the things that prevailed in this city.*

The story of Katrina, then, is a story of resilience by groups like Common Ground, but also one of defeat. The city was rebuilt, slowly, but it was a highly unequal and unjust recovery, with the worst burdens inflicted on the poorest residents. Both evacuation and return were stratified by race and class, and while the middle class and affluent actually experienced something of a renaissance in New Orleans in the years after Katrina, much of the social fabric of the city was permanently wiped out, never to return.

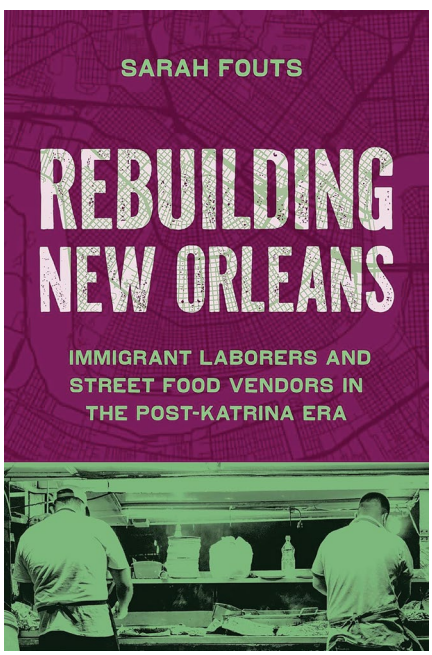
"Katrina" has entered the American lexicon as a byword for government failure, tragic injustice, or just a terrible natural disaster. (See Richard Campanella's "A Katrina Lexicon" for more on its usage.) It is worth remembering, 20 years on, just what this calamity meant to the people who went through it.

No other major American city has ever suffered anything like Katrina. The population never fully recovered. There

were 460,000 people in New Orleans in 2004, and less than half that the year after the storm. By 2008, half of the city's pre-storm working poor, elderly, and disabled residents had not returned. Decades on, there are still only 360,000 people here. Even Chicago after the Great Fire and San Francisco after its 1906 earthquake did not experience such lasting decimation. And, of course, the collapse wasn't equal across neighborhoods, with some predominantly Black areas like the Lower Ninth Ward losing nearly two-thirds of their population.

Some tragedies were immediate. Others were long-term. Approximately 1,400 people died in the storm itself, the third-highest death toll from a hurricane in American history. In the aftermath, while some like Rahim were organizing relief efforts, white communities focused on keeping out Black storm refugees. *ProPublica* explains:

> *Facing an influx of refugees, the residents of Algiers Point could have pulled together food, water and medical supplies for the flood victims. Instead, a group of white residents, convinced that crime would arrive with the human exodus, sought to seal off the area, blocking the roads in and out of the neighborhood by dragging lumber and downed trees into the streets. They stockpiled handguns, assault rifles, shotguns and at least one Uzi and began patrolling the streets in pickup trucks and SUVs. The newly formed militia, a loose band of about 15 to 30 residents, most of them men, all of them white, was looking for thieves, outlaws or, as one member put it, anyone who simply "didn't belong."*



Malik Rahim at Gwangi & Hollywood Community Center, 2025

Rahim explains that in that period, "if you were African American, you'd better not get caught walking through Algiers Point to get to the evacuation station." *ProPublica* has documented 11 shootings of Black residents by white vigilantes that occurred in the storm's aftermath, which were never punished.

That was just the beginning. As the city rebuilt, it did not rebuild with equal speed for all. As Sarah Fouts, professor at the University of Maryland and author of *Rebuilding New Orleans*, explains, much of what turned Katrina "from a disaster to a tragedy" (as Rahim said) was the way that lawmakers, city officials, and local business groups chose to use the opportunity to reinforce the city's worst inequalities:

> *What makes it so devastating was the kind of "disaster capitalism," the racist policies, the exploitation of workers, paving the way for this new vision created not by the people but by the profit model… Initially 80 percent of the city is flooded, the population is out… The policies and actions that came immediately after exacerbated a lot of the damage that was already done just by the hurricane, like suspending federal policy (Davis-Bacon laws, OSHA laws), and facilitating the exploitation of labor. Failed policies like Road Home were devastating for the Black working and middle class, and catered toward people who lived in [wealthier, whiter] Lakeview instead of people who lived in the [more working-class, Black] Lower Ninth Ward.*

New Orleans became an example of what Naomi Klein calls "the shock doctrine," with politicians and wealthy business interests using a moment of crisis to force through sweeping policy changes that could never pass in a moment when the population was in a position to resist.

The city was subjected to the most radical school privatization experiment in America, going from having 123 public schools to having only 4, with the rest being privately-operated charter schools. As Tulane University professor Celeste Lay

1 The Jena Six case was a widely criticized case of prosecutorial malpractice in which six Black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana, were initially charged with attempted murder for a school fight in December 2006, after several white teens had hung nooses from a tree.

told *Current Affairs*, when "Katrina flooded New Orleans, it didn't just destroy much of the city, it also destroyed the school system" and "some school reformers thought maybe that's what needed to happen." The state legislature transferred authority over the schools away from the school district. Lay says that while the charters focused relentlessly on test scores as measures of success, in the process, local democracy was essentially destroyed, with private entities rather than a traditional elected school board controlling every aspect of schooling. New Orleans went from having one of the highest percentages of Black public-school teachers in the nation to a teaching force that is much whiter and younger.

This undemocratic recovery was not limited to schooling, but was characteristic of post-Katrina New Orleans as a whole. There was even, at one point, a plan to eliminate whole neighborhoods and never rebuild them. As Fouts explains,

> *The planners were white folks making some of these big decisions and envisioning these plans. Some of the city council members were thinking about these new policies in ways that did not serve the working class Black communities that are so integral to the city. The jobs that came back [tended to be] tourism and service sector jobs, bars, restaurants, things like that. And even thinking about public transportation, people were displaced, pushed into the East, but there's no serviceable public transit that can reach that far away. So how are you trying to rebuild for the people who make the city?*

Fouts also cites the fact that the city's public housing projects were shuttered and never reopened. The city demolished housing projects that hadn't even suffered storm damage, eliminating thousands of affordable units at the height of a housing crisis:

> *The destruction of all the public housing in the city was this complete turn that was intentionally aimed at poor, Black communities with nowhere to go. There was a huge impact of that, you still see the repercussions to this day.*

The original Common Ground location in a former corner grocery store

> *They rebuilt Section 8, mixed-income housing, but not enough to replace what they tore down. They tore down the Iberville Projects, I talk about [this] a lot in the book [Rebuilding New Orleans], thinking about the importance of that neighborhood for the Black community, and the vision that these developers had for this "Paris of the Caribbean," this whitened vision of what the city should look like.*

But the story of post-Katrina New Orleans is not solely a story of exploitation of Black communities by white developers. Malik Rahim actually points to Common Ground as an inspiring example of cross-racial solidarity. "We had almost 20,000 volunteers come," he says, "and almost 90 percent were white… it set a whole new precedent that had never happened, nowhere in the South." "It broke the myth that all whites were racist," he says, because "for a lot of people in our community, it was the first time they ever had direct contact with any white person."

Rahim says that the work of Common Ground shattered stereotypes about how "dangerous" and full of "looters" New Orleans was in the aftermath of Katrina. "Individuals that volunteered" were "in what was called some of the most 'dangerous' communities in the city, and there was never a person being robbed, raped, or killed… These are the things that [the media] refused to look at… They were saying that everybody that was stuck in the city were criminals." Rahim says that many who made sacrifices to help were never given credit, and the media was never interested in the positive work being done by his group. He especially wished to single out leftist filmmaker Michael Moore for credit. Moore has "never gotten any type of recognition for what he did," but "he sent staff here and purchased a boat for us… There wouldn't have been a Common Ground to the degree that it exists, if it wouldn't have been for Michael Moore."

Rahim believes that the rest of America should pay attention to the injustices of the Gulf region, because "I work under the premise that so goes the Gulf, so goes America. And so goes America, so goes life as we know it on this planet. It's just that simple." If the post-Katrina recovery had been different, if it had all embodied the solidaristic ethic that Common Ground possessed, New Orleans today would be a more just and equal city. But we would also have a model for how disaster recovery could be done equitably, without worsening the injustices that were present before the disaster. Rahim says Katrina was a turning point because it showed the opposite: that a disaster was an opportunity for exploitation by the right, rather than a moment for the people to come together and organize. ⚜

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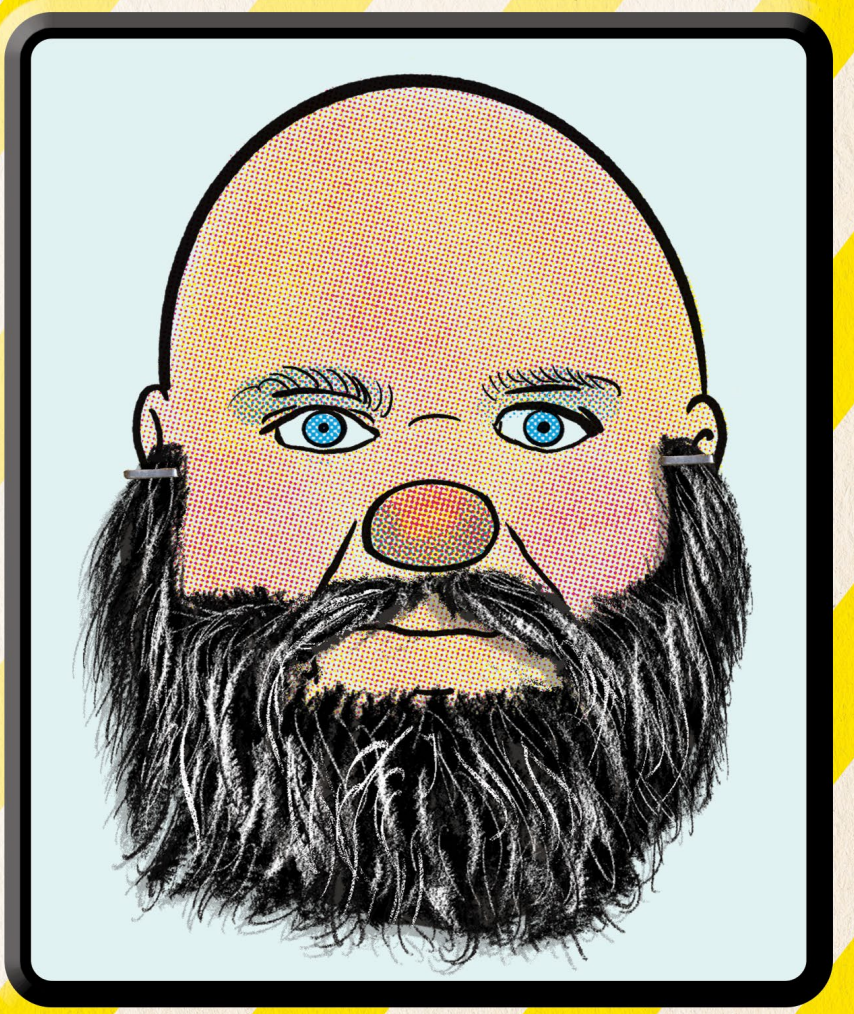
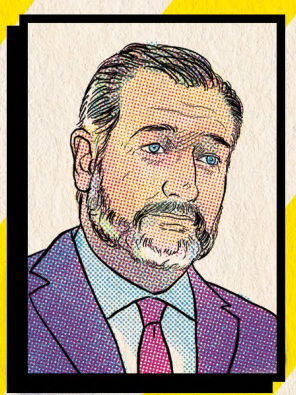
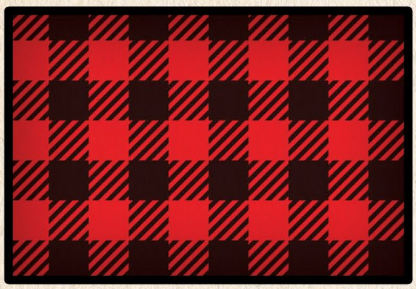
— JD VANCE
U.S. VICE PRESIDENT





"THE SIGHT OF MY FACE MADE CHILDREN SCREAM AND STRANGERS INSTANTLY REVILE ME. SINCE ADDING A BEARD, I HAVE BEGUN TO LOOK LIKE A RELATIVELY NORMAL PERSON AND PEOPLE FORGET WHAT'S UNDERNEATH."

— TED CRUZ
U.S. SENATOR (R–TX)



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